

Surprise!

"Hello Tower? This is Radar Control ... A civilian twin-engine aircraft with *Golf Tango Fox* call sign has just entered the approach area. Do you copy? Over..." "Hello Radar Control? This is Tower... Acknowledged. We have it on our screen. This is a special *Headquarters* flight picking up an executive returning to his posting. We're contacting it on the landing frequency..."

"Hello *Golf Tango Fox*? This is Tower. Landing at your convenience. Light to moderate SW winds that may produce eddies. QNH 1 013,25..."

"This is *Golf Tango Fox*. I am switching to landing configuration."

From the observation lounge where he waits, the professor observes the plane about to land and thinks: Lo? This is an *Osprey* type aircraft, but smaller than before. Here it is approaching and slowing down, but *Donder!* It is drifting towards the Tower; it will surely crash...

However, the aircraft quickly tilts its engines and adjusts the thrust to counter the effect of the wind and lands without damage, then comes to rest near the hangar.

Whew! I was scared, for a moment. It must be this woman who carried my equipment... That's her style. But how come she's now operating a civilian aircraft?

Meanwhile, the plane has been secured by the ground staff and the pilot quickly gets off, then takes off her helmet and enters the hangar where she spots the professor and gives him a smile... "You saw that, she said, what do you think of my programming?"

"Flawless, the professor replies, but this is a civilian aircraft. Is your contract with the Air Force over?"

"For now, yes, but I could be recalled. Currently, I'm working for *Headquarters*. I have been asked to test the modifications resulting from the conversion to hydrogen, but you certainly know more than I do, since it was your services that developed this new technology..."

"Only as far as the production of metallic hydrogen and the methods of reconversion to the gas phase are concerned, answered the professor. I don't know the details of the applications. The *CERN* in Geneva would be the better place to ask questions. I understand that miniaturized fuel cells are used to generate electricity for electric motors."

"True. This aircraft belongs to me, and I am its designer. It is equipped with the same *AI* as the one installed in the *Osprey* that you have already seen; its range is thus greatly improved, which is well suited to this sector of the Pacific where we often have to serve isolated places that can not accommodate conventional aircraft requiring long runways. Wait a minute, while I make sure that your belongings have been loaded, secured in the baggage compartment and the cabin restocked, then I'll be back."

"This flight should last just over an hour, so if you want to freshen up or eat something, you can go to the canteen. There are provisions and sanitary facilities on board; you can even work and sleep comfortably, if needed. This is not a luxury if you must land on a god-forsaken island in case of breakdown or bad weather."

"Agreed! So, I'll be waiting for you in the canteen when you are done."

Fifteen minutes later, the professor finishes his coffee and a croissant at the counter as the pilot returns and walks towards him. "Everything is ready, she says. As soon as you're done, we'll be able to leave. There is a seat for a radio operator, on board. If you don't have any paperwork to complete or other tasks to perform, I would be happy to enjoy your company in the cockpit. There are virtually no tasks to perform, but *AI* will never completely replace a pilot, no matter how refined it is. History is rife with fatal accidents that occurred because the crew failed to respond to unforeseen situations."

"Indeed, the professor replied. I hope nothing untoward happens to you during the flight."

"Don't worry, I'm wearing a monitor and the device will detect any failure on my part. If I were to faint, the *AI* would automatically go into standalone mode. You can then talk to her verbally and she will put you in touch with emergency services and take care of everything. In the event of an *AI* failure, a triple-redundant system continuously calculates the closest place to land and activates an emergency beacon... Let's go! You can call me *Jade*."

At the plane, she stops and hands the professor a small device looking like a wristwatch. "Put that on, she said. It allows the system to recognize you as a person authorized in the cockpit..."

As soon as they are on board, the ramp retracts and *Jade* gestures the professor to come into the cockpit, be seated in the radio operator's seat and fasten his seatbelt. The door closes behind them and locks. To get out, she says, just press the green plate to the left of the door. She puts on a headset and says: "Also put this one on she said, handing him another set, it's a bit noisy. As there is still some wind, we will take off with engines tilted at 45°, it is safer. I release the moorings by means of this button of the dashboard and we can go..."

"Hello Tower? This is *Golf Tango Fox* requesting short take-off clearance..."

"This is the Tower. Authorisation granted. Moderate westerly winds."

"Engine 1 started! Engine 2 started! Positioning face to the wind! Take-off thrust... Here we go! As you can see, it's almost as easy as driving a motor vehicle... I'll stay at the controls until we reach cruising altitude, and then we can talk a little." "Perfect, says the professor."

The aircraft regularly takes altitude, then *Jade* activates the autopilot and addressing the professor says: "Here we are. A few minutes of flight, again, and we shall already begin the descent... So, if I understand correctly, you are going back to your old posting are you not? Then we are, colleagues, so to speak." "Indeed, I had not thought about that."

"You said you were selected to test the conversion to hydrogen. Does this extend to spacecrafts?"

"No, my specialty is *AI* programming, especially for this type of aircraft and for this area where they are still frequently in use. I am unlikely to go to *Headquarters*, but I will be able to reach you there, if necessary. If you ever come back in this sector, *Headquarters* will be able to put you in touch with me as a former passenger. In return, you will shortly be asked for feedback on the quality and comfort of the flight. There you are, the subject of an experiment: it must be special for a scientist..."

"I don't do much *SR&ED* anymore, even though this is my specialty, the professor replies, I have instead reoriented myself in the management of scientific personnel and interaction with the political world. I am still interested in some particular topics (less engaging) but you never know, if the opportunity arises, I could dive back into it."

"I see that we are about to enter the *Guam*-controlled area where I have to drop you off for your next flight, *Jade* continued. We are already expected and, once on the ground, you will be taken care of by local agents for the continuation of your journey. For my part, I have to rest for a while, because I am almost reaching the limit for the number of flying hours. Good luck, professor! I will now deal exclusively with landing procedures..."

The transfer to his final flight having taken place smoothly, the professor boarded a suborbital device that brought him to his destination. He is now about to meet his contact at *Headquarters* and wonders what awaits him. Suddenly, he recognizes the figure of *Mr. Singh* walking towards him. Hem! There he is again, he said to himself; it is true that he is in charge of *Security*. I suppose I can't evade him, let's go. With that, he nods to the latter and waits patiently for the man's next move...

"Good afternoon, professor. New safety standards have been implemented, he says, we will be able to reduce formalities to a strict minimum. Please follow me..."

He goes to a room marked *STAFF ONLY* and gestures him to enter, then follows him in turn and closes the door behind them. The professor glances around and sees only a series of surveillance screens and a simple minimalist desk with a few metal cabinets on the wall... *Singh* opens one and grabs a box that the professor immediately recognizes as a container of *RFID* pills; He hands him one with a glass of water... "Swallow it, he said. Nowadays, *ID* cards are no longer needed, and we know where you are in the bargain, once you are within the complex. I wear one too... Come on, we can't stop progress, isn't it?"

The professor makes a face and complies, thinking privately ["Yeah, I would bet he doesn't hesitate to use it outside of the complex as well!"]. "Now, he says aloud, what's the plan?"

"As your belongings are being delivered to your temporary accommodation, you are not really adequately equipped, so I invite you to my new property. It's a top-notch restaurant that I now own as a franchisee... Surprised? I too am preparing my retirement from this job, like everyone else. Your colleague at *CERN* would say this is my next avatar, wouldn't she? In addition, tonight is a special grand opening and the President himself will be there with a line-up of special guests from *Headquarters*. I'm sure you'll like it!"

"It remains to be seen, said the professor, I am fussy as far as restaurants go."

"I'm quite sure of it, professor. Let's go, there is direct access to the administrative complex nearby and we will only need a short walk to get there."

At the entrance of the underground, no queue. People enter and exit through separate sensor-equipped gates and head to the boarding platform or exit according to their destination. The journey takes barely 20 minutes; then an electronic sign flashes *First Circle*.

"This is where we must get off, said *Singh*, come! It's not far on the left..." They walk through the corridor for a while and come to a turning point. At this moment *Singh*, looking amused, asks the professor to close his eyes and guides him a little further, into a rotunda where he then says: "Here we are... SURPRISE!"

The professor opens his eyes and remains stricken dumb, for a few seconds, finding himself at the entrance of an exact replica of the *Kraken* with *Antoine* awaiting them in ceremonial dress....

"*Door alle duivels!* he finally says."
