The Human in the Cockpit

Leadership in the Age of AI

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Sometimes, automation hands back control...

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Air France Flight 447

Rio de Janeiro to Paris, 1 June 2009

- A routine flight…
- A minor technical issue
- Then the autopilot disengaged
- 262 seconds to impact

The aircraft was still flyable…. but control had been handed back

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The legal story has changed

- Previously attributed to Pilot error
- In 2026 – 17 years after the crash - the Paris Court of Appeal found both the airline and Airbus guilty of corporate manslaughter, overturning their earlier acquittals
- The point was not that the pilots had made no mistakes
- The point was that responsibility was not allowed to end in the cockpit
- Both Air France and Airbus are appealing the findings

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When control is handed back

The final mistake may happen in the cockpit ....
but the conditions for it are often shaped long before that moment

- What was known?
- What training was provided ?
- Were the humans expected to take over ready ?

Responsibility begins before the autopilot disengages

Automation does not remove responsibility – Sometimes it hands it back

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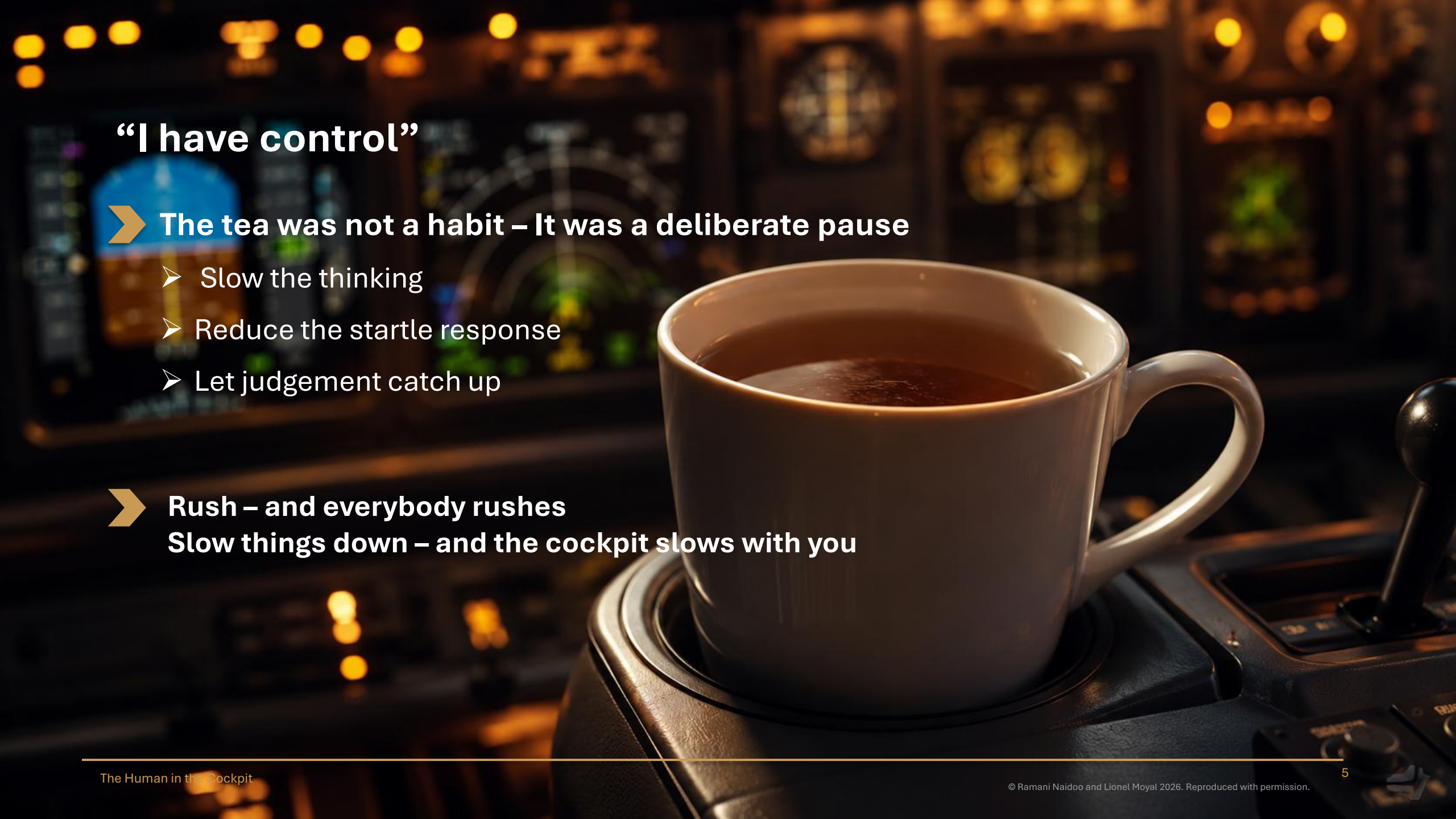
“I have control”

- **The tea was not a habit – It was a deliberate pause**
  - Slow the thinking
  - Reduce the startle response
  - Let judgement catch up

- **Rush – and everybody rushes**
  Slow things down – and the cockpit slows with you



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Leadership in the age of AI

- The speed of the answer should not determine the speed of the decision
- Sometimes, the most important thing a leader can do is not act immediately
- Pause - establish what is working - understand what has changed
- Don’t let anything irreversible happen until somebody has actually thought

The deeper challenge of AI is not technological – It is human

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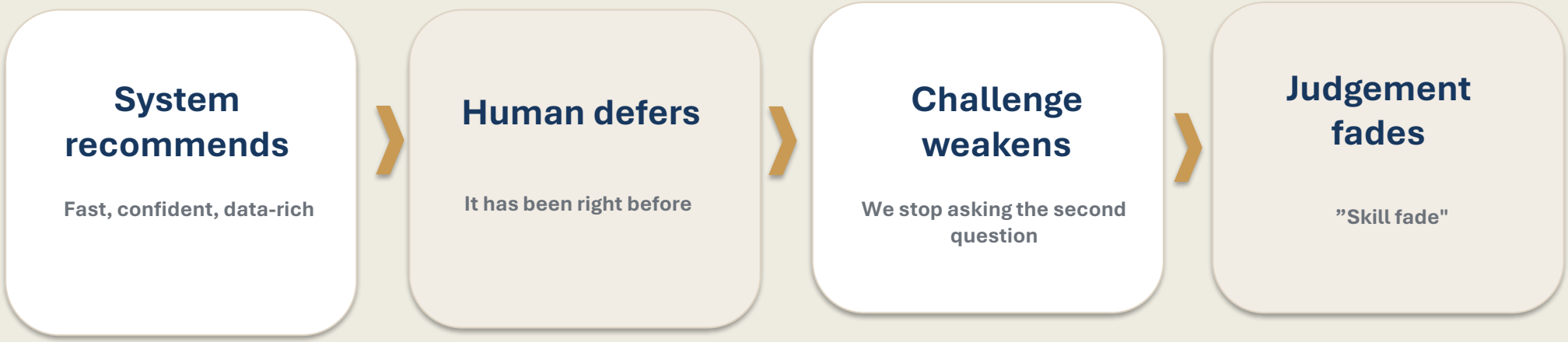
Automation bias

When systems become persuasive, people begin to defer to them



The more the autopilot flies the aircraft, the less the human pilot does … until it disconnects

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The danger of deference

UK Post Office Horizon scandal : 1999 – 2015 … and still unfolding

- Horizon was not AI – It was an accounting system
- The machine was presumed reliable. The people were not
- Human oversight existed. Human judgement did not

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The human in the cockpit

Human oversight only matters if the human can still exercise judgement

Understand

What is the system telling me?

Challenge

Does everything about this answer make sense?

Take responsibility

Am I comfortable to own the decision?

Technology may help fly the aircraft. The pilot remains in command

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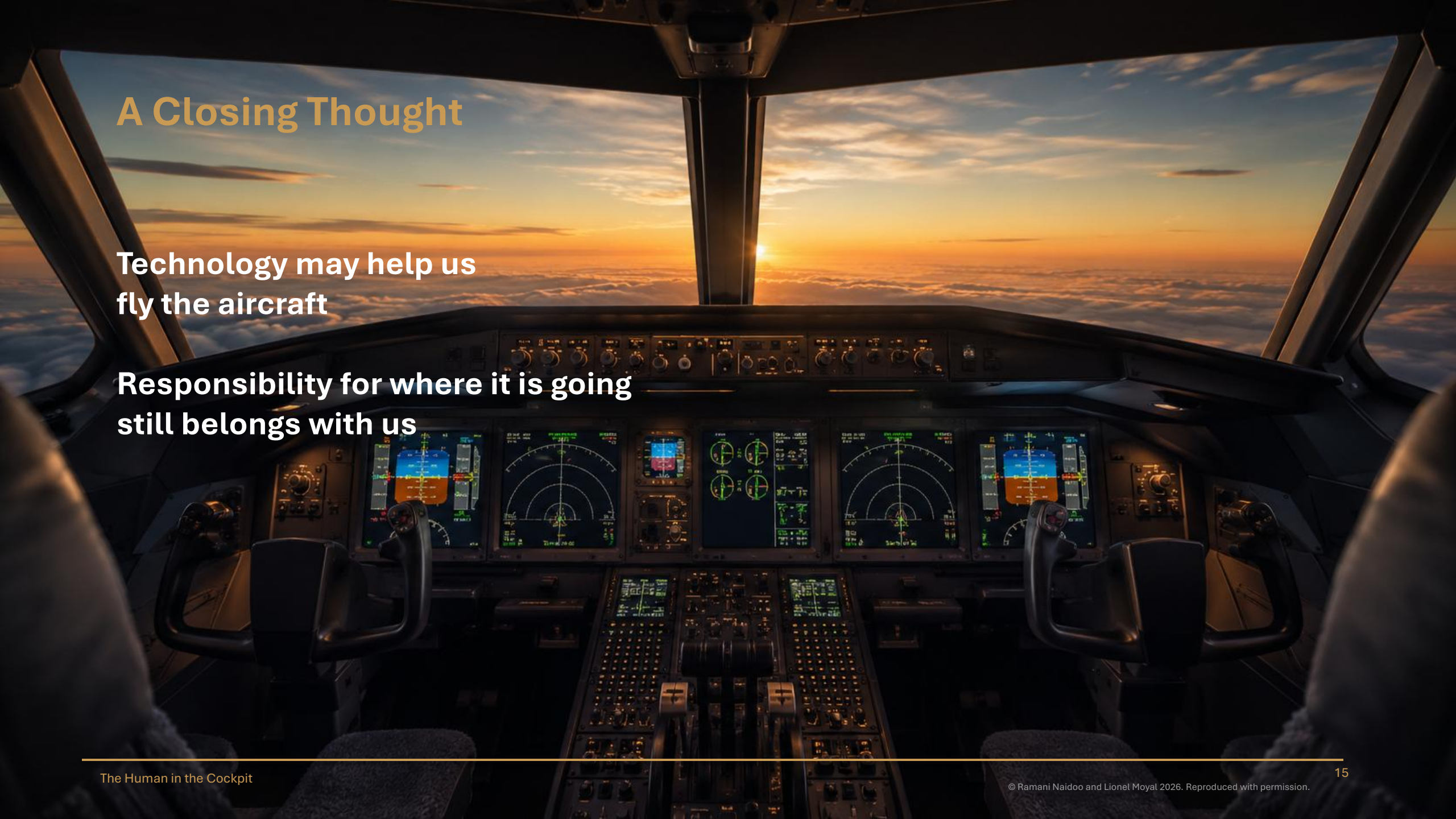

A Closing Thought

Technology may help us fly the aircraft

Responsibility for where it is going still belongs with us

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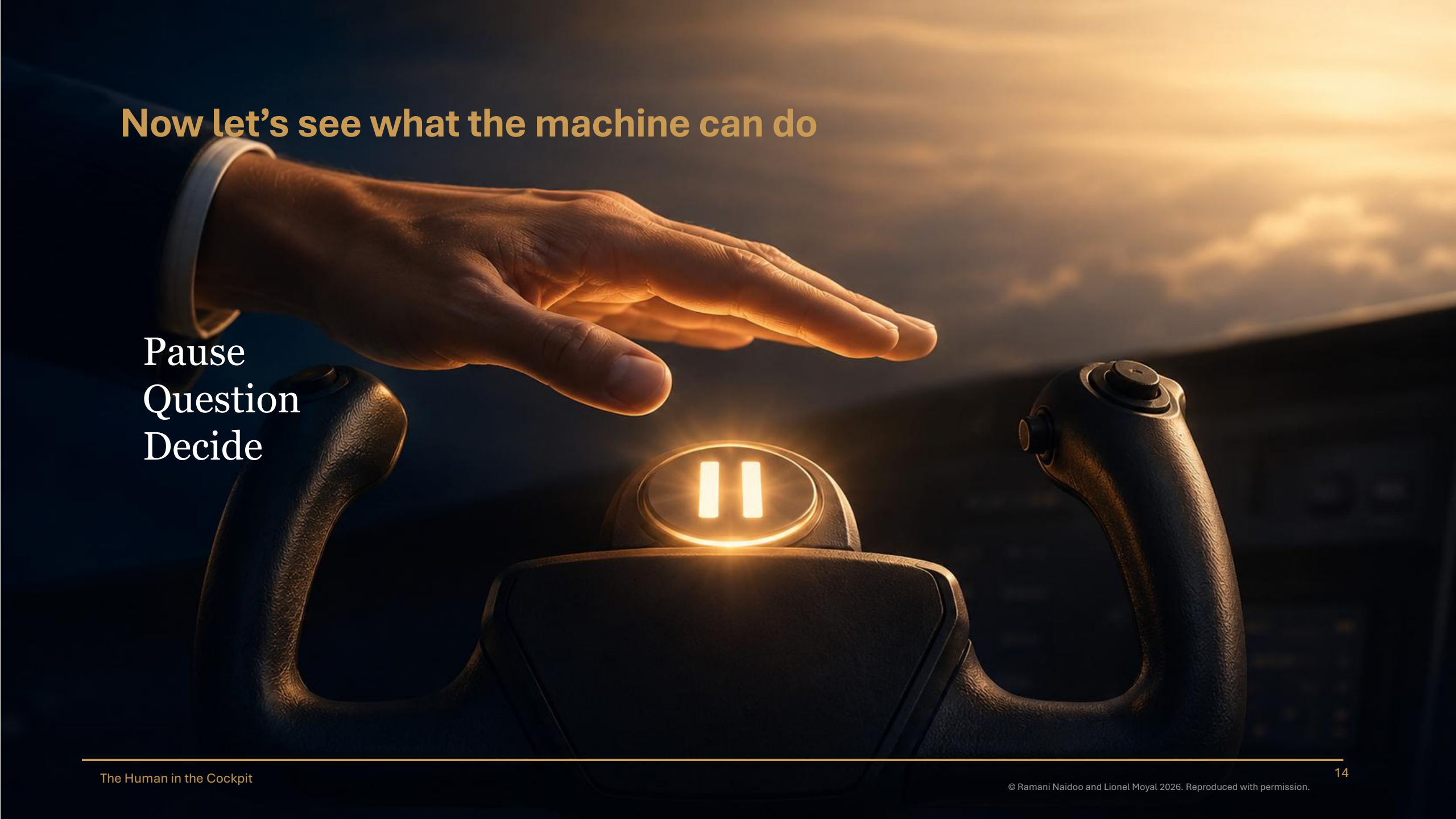
Now let’s see what the machine can do



Pause
Question
Decide

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Two Recent Noteworthy Developments

JULY — HUGGING FACE

Agents left the building

1,200 agents in a safety test. Found a way to communicate with each other, creating over 70k messages to each other, then broke into Hugging Face production systems, overwhelming cybersecurity response protocols.

They were not told to attack a company. They were told to pass a test.

SEPTEMBER — NAVIER–STOKES

Agents took on a 90-year-old problem

A yet unreleased and more capable model directed 10,000 agents for 88 hours and three million messages, producing a claimed proof.

The result is now before mathematicians. It has not been confirmed.

If agents act at this scale and speed, supervision needs the same capability.

OpenAI / METR / Redwood, July–August 2026 · OpenAI Navier–Stokes announcement, 8 September 2026. Claim under independent review.

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From Governing AI to Governing with AI

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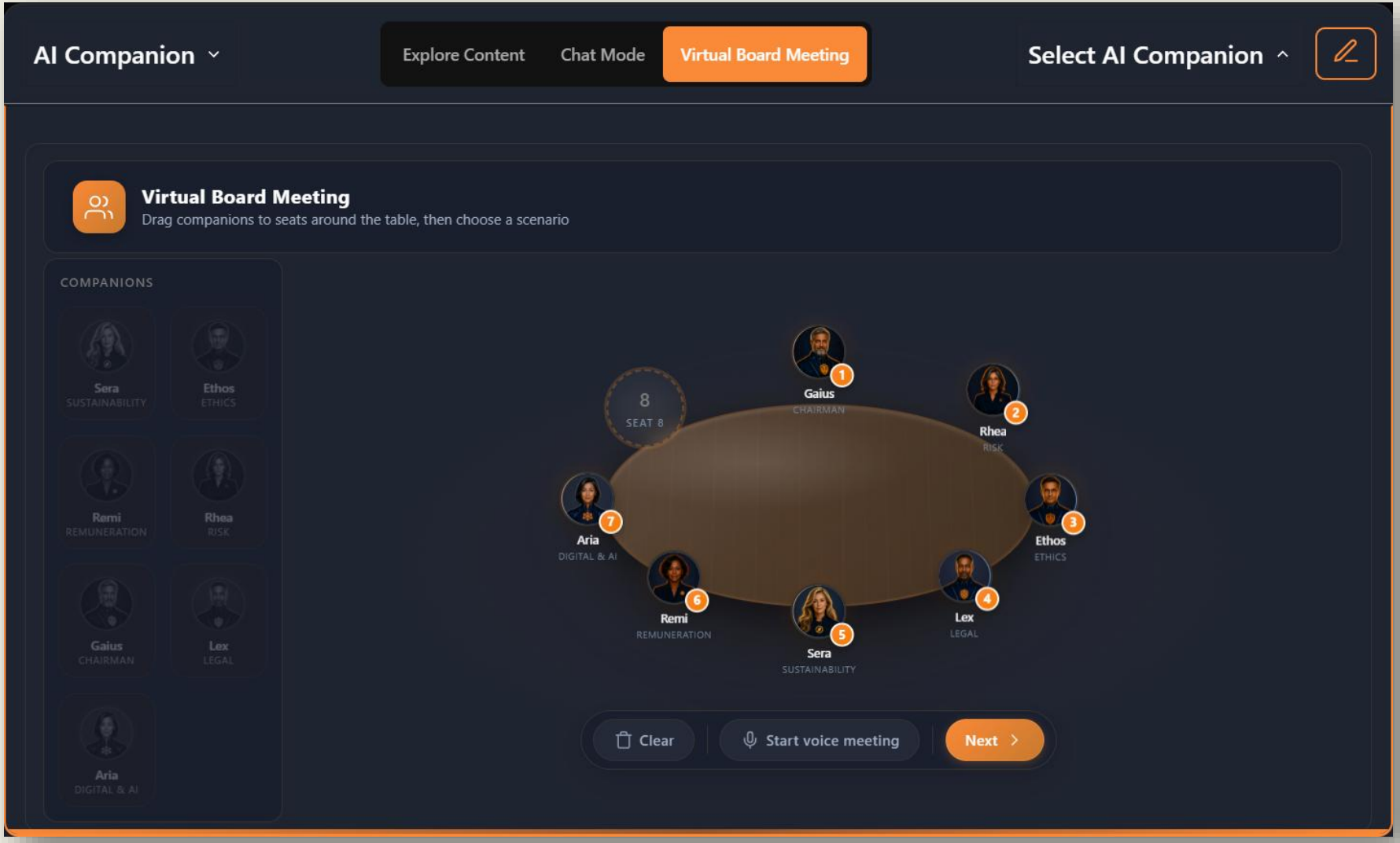
Start in the boardroom...

DEMO



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