

PALPABLE VOICE

To Survive, Humanity Must Be Reprogrammed... AI Will Do It

CHAT WITH THE PROTAGONIST

Dear Readers,

For an interactive experience with "Palpable Voice," you can ask Florentine Fischer questions and delve deeper into the narrative using Coral AI. Follow the link on <https://marcusvandererve.com>

Enjoy exploring!

Marcus van der Erve

PROLOGUE

Florentine Fischer, an American anthropologist, dedicates her life to explaining the complexities of human societies. Yet, the rapid rise of artificial intelligence is reshaping the world faster than man can map it. As she travels across Europe and Asia, Florentine champions a bold idea: AI as a 'forever mentor' for nations, guiding humanity toward a better future.

Her journey is fraught with danger. A powerful conspiracy, led by a ruthless oligarch, threatens to exploit AI for sinister purposes. The line between progress and peril grows ever thinner. With her husband and stepdaughter by her side, Florentine navigates treacherous political waters and ethical dilemmas, all while grappling with the profound implications of AI.

In a world on the brink, Florentine might either unite humanity or hasten its downfall. As the stakes rise, she knows: the future of society depends on the choices it makes. What she doesn't know are the personal costs involved. This is Florentine Fischer's journey and our future.

CHAPTER 1

UNEXPECTED DETOUR

"Good morning, Professor Fischer, what may we bring for you?"

"Coffee, please, and I'll have some yoghurt and fruit, thank you."

She looked out of the window, admiring the meticulously trimmed garden as it basked in early-morning sunlight, and soaked up the upmarket experience of The Newt Estate.

"Such a lovely place, but what am I doing here?" flashed through her mind.

Situated in the heart of Somerset, atop a hill near Bruton, south of Bath—a region where many of Britain's well-to-do own cottages—it seemed a logical place for last evening's speech invitation.

Her audience, she knew, represented the elite, the invisible hand behind Britain's national interests, one might say.

This eclectic mix of British and foreign 'haves,' eager to maintain their grip on society and wealth, had invited her to share her insights on Artificial Intelligence, or 'AI'.

"I would have refused if it wasn't for a friend of my husband nearly begging me."

She had explained how AI, particularly so-called 'Large Language Models,' respond intelligently to your questions by selecting words from a vast collection of word-relationships that they were trained on.

In fact, like humans, Large Language Models learn from experience, getting better at what they do.

She limited her speech to thirty minutes, anticipating that the Q&A session would consume the rest of the evening—which it did.

Her position at University College London was secured as an anthropologist, following the US press's spotlight on her research into 'how AI might affect human society'.

When it comes to Large Language Models today, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, she explained.

What's more, once AI systems find ways across the Internet to connect with one another, unexpected events might start to happen. What might these lead up to?

The questions from her audience were prudently poking at first but soon became eerily forthright.

"How might we use AI to keep society and democracy in check?"

"What are the chances that we will lose control to AI?"

"Will AI destroy humanity in the end?"

There was so much she could comment on, but she decided not to dwell too much on such matters but focus on the benefits such as AI helping specialists in almost any field to make better, more informed decisions faster.

She was only partially successful in keeping the discussion on a positive note and relieved when the chair of the evening called an end to the meeting.

She had not slept very well as the doom-scenario thinking of her audience stayed on her mind, uninvited.

"Can't wait to return to working on my publication," she thought, trying to focus on what was ahead of her this morning.

"Some more coffee, Professor Fischer?"

"Yes, thank you."

"It was nice listening to you last night, Professor, although I didn't understand everything you said."

"I hope you found it interesting, anyway," Florentine said, surprised by such a spontaneous reaction.

"Yes, I did, indeed!"

The waitress continued, "Our chauffeur will be ready in less than an hour to take you to Castle Cary station. Will that be alright?"

"That's fine, thank you," Florentine said while checking her watch.

When the waitress walked away, Florentine's thinking wandered off to the course of the day ahead again.

She'd have plenty of time before meeting the conference secretary for a debriefing chat, a lady of about fifty with a slight accent and over-bleached hair who had introduced herself as Angela.

She imagined it would be her that would settle the bill for her stay at The Newt.

Having finished her light breakfast, Florentine Fischer rushed to her room to do the necessary and get her luggage.

Carrying her laptop in her bag, she left her room in less than a quarter of an hour and walked to the reception area and lounge where Angela was waiting.

Angela greeted her politely then settled some business-related matters, thanked her on behalf of the organizers, and wrapped up their meeting, clearly not wanting to waste time.

Florentine couldn't but spot three tiny, tattooed dots on the inside of Angela's wrist. She might not have noticed one or two dots but a triangle of three sure set off a bell.

When the chauffeur walked into the lobby, Angela signaled her. The two knew each other, so it seemed.

"Something doesn't feel right," Florentine thought to herself, then dismissed her hunch.

After subdued goodbyes, Florentine followed the chauffeur outside and placed her luggage in the opened boot of what appeared to be a Tesla. Designed in the US, perhaps even built there, the car radiated a sense of home.

Once the chauffeur had closed Florentine's door and was seated, she typed in the destination on the car's center screen.

"This was odd. Yesterday, the ride from Castle Cary Station took just about 10 minutes. Might the chauffeur not be from this region?" Florentine thought.

The idea left her when she realized that the chauffeur, barely touching the steering wheel and holding a phone, must have opted for autonomous driving, the car taking care of the driving.

Her thoughts drifted with the picturesque views until the car unexpectedly veered off the main road into Castle Cary, taking a route that seemed to lead to the town center.

The chauffeur, appearing surprised, reacted too late, then acquiesced, soon returning her attention to the phone screen.

"I hope, the car is taking us to the station," Florentine said to the chauffeur.

The chauffeur smiled and nodded to confirm it was.

Florentine bit her lip, checked her train ticket and hoped she would not miss her train to London; she had a meeting scheduled this afternoon with one of her post-doctoral researchers.

Peering out of the window for clues, she noted the car's dogged pursuit of its programmed route.

After driving past what must have been Castle Cary's marketplace and on its way to Castle Cary Station again, the chauffeur looked up from her phone, turned around and uttered with an affluent English accent, "I am a hacker."

Florentine looked at the chauffeur, utterly surprised by her unexpected comment, her eyes narrowing slightly.

"A hacker? Should I be concerned?" she asked, a note of apprehension in her voice, "What exactly do you hack, and why reveal this to me now?"

"I didn't want to bother you," the chauffeur excused herself, "We are hoping to spot weaknesses in AI apps, the Large Language Models that you were referring to yesterday evening."

"Aha, I didn't see you yesterday, sorry! Who is 'we'?"

"My peers... I am in my first year Computer Science at Bath University."

As the car climbed the railroad pass-over that led to Platform 1 of Castle Cary Station, a train ran underneath.

Florentine, realizing that this might be her train to London, cut short their brief exchange.

"Sorry, we'd better hurry, don't want to risk the train..."

The car arrived at the station just as the train was slowing down faster.

While Florentine rushed to open her door and grabbed her bag, the chauffeur jumped out and got her luggage, having opened the trunk from the inside.

Both ran in the direction of Platform 1, the chauffeur trailing Florentine and hauling her luggage.

As they neared the station's platform access, the train was slowing to a halt, with some travelers jostling for positions where they anticipated the doors would open.

Betting that the first-class section would be in the first and second carriage as usual, Florentine readied herself to turn left at the station's headhouse, the moment she would reach the platform.

Because her view of the platform was still blocked by the station, she was unaware of the first-class section doors opening when she jumped onto the platform.

An explosion's sound from the left momentarily numbed her mind, the trailing shockwave brushing past just as she landed on the platform.

Rooted to the spot, it felt like an eternity before she emerged from a frightening silence, gradually broken by the screams of passengers to her right, scrambling off the train and fleeing the platform.

She looked left, dead silence still. A woman and a man lying in front of a smoking opening, the door blown out, hanging on what remained of its hinges.

"Incredible, how could this happen?" Florentine wondered; her thoughts tinged with frustration for not foreseeing the event.

The man showed signs of life, his arms reaching for his head. The woman, she could see, was bleeding from her nose, still unconscious, if not, worse.

"I can't just leave these people lying there," Florentine could hear herself say.

Responding to her gut reaction, she walked over to the woman and kneeled next to her on the platform floor.

Apart from broken windows, the station had survived the explosion unscathed, so it seemed from the outside.

"Who would do something like this and for what purpose?" she thought to herself, too shocked to feel despair.

The station speakers crackled, "Please, vacate the platforms. I repeat, please, vacate the platforms. We've had a terrorist attack and cannot guarantee your security. The perpetrators may still be around."

Knowing that Castle Cary was only minutes away by car, she stayed put, hearing sirens of what she hoped would be police and ambulance vehicles.

Glancing back towards her entry point to the platform, she saw, to her relief, her chauffeur on a phone call, luggage in tow.

"Thank heavens, she is unharmed and still around," Florentine said to herself.

Noticing Florentine's gaze, the chauffeur approached her and said, "I'll drive you to London. I checked—it's okay. The car's batteries are fully charged.

When the ambulance crew entered the platform area, Florentine rose to her feet.

"Do you know these people?" an ambulance crew member enquired.

"No, I was just trying to comfort them. I barely escaped the explosion myself."

"In that case, you'd better leave for your own safety, ma'am."

Florentine nodded, then followed her chauffeur who put her luggage into the trunk again once back at the car.

The chauffeur programmed in the route and turned around, "I'll drive you to London Paddington, the ride by car will take longer than by train, about three hours."

Words did not well up, Florentine still coming to her senses and wondering what on earth had happened.

"It could have been me if the car had not made its unexpected detour..."

During the journey, Florentine, thinking ahead, postponed her afternoon meeting and consulted Twitter (now called X) for information about the incident.

One post caught her attention: "Train explosion at Castle Cary Station: A sign of UK's civil war between haves and have-nots?"

"To an American, who has lived in London for years, this seems so un-British," she heard herself say softly.

The rest of the journey to London passed in a dreamlike state.

Upon being informed by the chauffeur of their arrival at Paddington Station, Florentine packed her laptop, expressed her gratitude, and readied herself for the familiarity of University College London.

Only then the chauffeur's young face and blondish features dawned on her.

"Oh dear, I don't even know your name!"

"Lada!"

"Thank you, Lada!"

CHAPTER 2

PLATO'S CAVE

In the newsroom of The British Herald, one of London's mainstream newspapers, the floor buzzed with action as eager young journalists at cluttered desks watched their screens intensely, some frantically typing.

They looked up only when Ian Fletcher, the thinly grey-haired news editor, stopped at their desks, handing out printouts. His reading glasses dangled on a chain around his neck, and his piercing blue eyes noticed everything.

"Ollie, will you look into this?"

"Sure, what's it about?"

"Exploding door of first-class train section in Somerset."

The young journalist frowned as he read the explosion announcement.

"Why is this for me?"

"The motive, Ollie, the motive. Why blow up something in Somerset?"

Ollie instantly got the drift, "Oh, I see!"

Ian Fletcher, not waiting for Ollie's answer, had already walked on.

Oliver Blackwood had studied Political Science and Communication at Oxford, focusing particularly on national security and media influence in his much-lauded senior thesis.

As frequent contributor of bold pieces to Oxford's student newspaper, he had mastered the art of writing. Now, his aim, his ambition even, was to bring a new edge to the paper's political analysis.

It dawned on him that this case might point the way.

It could provide background material for a future op-ed about the growing divisions within the UK, a topic that, he felt, deserved more attention in mainstream media.

"Victims... what might they reveal," he whispered to himself, "How do I get my hands on that information?"

He called the Somerset police and learned that the explosion had severely injured three passengers, one of whom was still in critical condition.

The officer couldn't be lured into sharing more information about the victims and circumstances. It was worth trying, of course, but Ollie knew he had other options.

Eager to ride what appeared to be a new wave of technological progress, he and his peers had embraced AI to help them bounce off story options and refine their search for evidence.

In fact, the publicly available app they used had access to so-called 'agents,' independently running computer code that takes on tasks such as searching public databases and identifying sources of event-related information.

One of his inquiries on the app produced a bare-bones shortlist of venues in the area that had organized events the day before the explosion at Castle Cary Station.

Fired up by his hunt for hints, it occurred to Ollie how fast AI had infiltrated his day, then to lose this train of thought when readying himself to call the first venue on the list.

"Good afternoon, this is The Newt. How can I help you?"

"Good afternoon, I am Oliver Blackwood, journalist. I am doing a quick survey in view of the explosion at Castle Cary Station this morning. As I understand, you did have an event at The Newt yesterday evening. Is that correct?"

"We did indeed," the receptionist replied, aware of the graveness of the matter, yet failing to reproduce the event topic, which was rather foreign to her.

Trying to sustain the momentum, Ollie interjected, "I see... many attendees? Did they stay over?"

"All of the participants were from the Somerset area, only a few stayed the night, Mr. Blackwood."

Flattered by the receptionist addressing him by his surname, Ollie continued confidently, "Do you know if any of your guests used public transport today?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, our chauffeur took one of our guests to Castle Cary Station this morning but, thank heavens, our guest escaped the explosion, arriving just after it."

"May I ask, who this was?"

The receptionist hesitated for a moment, "Of course, you understand, I cannot tell you that, Mr. Blackwood."

"Of course!" Ollie said and continued, "Who was the speaker at the event yesterday?"

"Professor Florentine Fischer from University College London," the receptionist said, instantly regretting that she had fallen into Ollie's trap.

Before her doubt could settle in, Ollie politely finished the call, "Thank you so much for your help. Who did I talk to, may I ask?"

Shyly, the receptionist gave her name, "Amanda," then hung up the phone.

Ollie leaned back in his chair, pleased with the information he had obtained so far.

Identifying Professor Fischer's background at University College London was a piece of cake.

A quick search on the university's website revealed Florentine Fischer as professor of anthropology.

Ollie dialed the phone number of the Anthropology department that he found on the university's website and asked whether he could talk to Professor Fischer.

"She's not in Mr. Blackwood. Can I take a message for her?" the department secretary replied.

"I'd appreciate that, thank you! I'd very much like to ask her about her experience at Castle Cary Station today. Maybe she can give me a ring or let me know when I can best call her."

"I'll do that Mr. Blackwood," the department secretary said then finished the call after jotting down Ollie's phone number.

As matters started germinating in Ollie's mind, a frail streak of ideas began to coalesce into meaning, like odd pieces of a puzzle.

On the department's website, Ollie had learned that Florentine Fischer is a known American intellectual who was consulted by governments from across the world because of her middle of the road, yet original views on the promises and perils of AI.

"Wow, this adds weight to the case of inequality rearing its head in Britain: *well-known international academic travelling first class after giving a speech on AI at the heart of Somerset*," Ollie mumbled, as he typed a draft announcement to be posted on the newspaper's website around noon, if approved by Ian Fletcher, of course.

"Let's stir the pot a bit with this headline: Train explosion at Castle Cary Station: A sign of UK's civil war between haves and have-nots?"

Ollie grinned, "Betteridge's law of headlines says that the implicit answer to a headline ending with a question mark typically is NO. So, I don't have to feel that guilty, posting it."

Energized, having put a stake in the ground, Ollie continued to draft a brief article for tomorrow's newspaper edition, in which he elaborated on Professor Fischer's near escape, "Might there have been a connection or was it purely accidental?"

Ideally, he should speak to Professor Fischer about it but the chances of that happening today were slim.

"Hmm, question is: Will Ian publish it? In contrast to Ian's untidy office and homely habit of occasionally bringing his golden retriever, Sep, to work, he strictly adheres to journalistic integrity."

"Then again, since the rise of online media, he seems more inclined to bet on stories that have a chance of drawing younger readers... or am I projecting too much?"

As Florentine Fischer entered Paddington station, she knew exactly which train to take.

With a sigh of relief, she realized how quickly she had embraced the London way of travelling as an American, well-organized as London's tube system was, she had to admit.

The train ride from Paddington to Euston Square took 16 minutes. From there, it took another 6 minutes on foot to get to the UCL Anthropology building at 14 Taverton Street.

While on the train, Florentine had sent a message to the department secretary asking him whether he could arrange something for lunch. She'd barely have time to sort herself out before her meeting with Liesel Porsch.

Liesel, in early stages of writing a book together with Florentine Fischer, had been waiting patiently not just to discuss their project but also to hear about Florentine's unworldly experience this morning.

Tall and athletic, with short-cropped auburn hair and deep-set hazel eyes, Liesel usually wore thick-rimmed glasses and favored minimalist, efficient clothing, features that hinted at her methodical nature.

Her dad, an historian, her mom, an engineer, both worked as academics at the University of Leipzig, a potent parental blend that had shaped her talents from a young age.

After her undergraduate studies in sociology, she earned a master's in cognitive science at the University of Leipzig, getting into the limelight with her thesis on the impact of social media algorithms on user identities.

Liesel eventually embarked on a Ph.D. at University College London, drawn to its rich academic environment.

"Ich gehe nach London," she told her marine biologist friend and rock-climbing pal, one day.

"Ich gehe nach Bremen," he replied, sad yet relieved that she had found an odd way out for him telling her.

They both laughed and promised to stay in touch, for real.

After obtaining her doctorate, Liesel applied for a position in Florentine's team.

It clicked from the start, Liesel's analytical approach completing Florentine Fischer's forward-looking knowledge and intuition, Florentine resonating with Liesel's cultural roots, having been raised in the US by German parents.

As Florentine rushed into her office, the department secretary was the first to notice her.

"So good to see you back in one piece, Professor Fischer!"

He stuck his head around the door then tiptoed into her office to put a smoothie and a carton sandwich box on her conference table.

"If there's anything you need, please, do let me know," he offered, biting his tongue not wanting to overwhelm her with questions at this stage, knowing her tight schedule.

"Oh, thank you, Arthur! Much appreciated. Will settle later if that's alright."

As Arthur walked out of her office, he briefly turned around and said in a by-the-way tone, "Just to let you know: a journalist called. He wants to talk to you about this morning. I have his number, just in case you want it."

Florentine half heard him, busy gathering the paperwork she would need for her meeting with Liesel all the while sipping her smoothie and eating her sandwich.

She looked at her watch when done.

She'd have time to splash her face with water, washing off this morning's nightmare, putting it in perspective.

When she returned to her office somewhat refreshed, she found Liesel sitting at her conference table.

Usually cool and contained, Liesel stood up, walked over to Florentine, and briefly hugged her, without a word.

When seated, their silence sustained for an instant, an act of compassion, so meaningful.

Breaking the stillness, Florentine calmly summarized the startling events that unfolded in the morning, wrapping up with questions left unanswered in her mind, Liesel listening quietly.

"What could have been the motive behind the explosion? Was I lucky to arrive late at Castle Cary Station?"

She saw Liesel writing something on her notepad. Time to move on.

"Now, onto our book project," Florentine began, her voice tinged with a mix of exhaustion and determination. She looked at Liesel, noticing a spark of eagerness in her eyes.

Liesel passed over a printout, her hands nearly trembling with anticipation. "I've put a lot of thought into this," she said, a hint of nervousness in her voice, "I hope it aligns with your vision."

She pointed at the book topics, chapters, and interview targets that she had listed and added as precaution, "Of course, this is not cast in stone, it will change based on the outcome of the interviews."

Florentine nodded in understanding.

Liesel explained that she intended to include some stats such as in how far the opinions of people interviewed had changed after each stage of AI's high-paced development.

Florentine looked up, smiling, "They may not always be prepared to admit that they changed their opinion, I imagine, particularly having shared it on social media."

Liesel nodded and added an action item to her to-do list.

While the purpose of their meeting was to draft a list of people to interview, Florentine suggested evaluating the intent of their project once more.

"I realized something since our last discussion that may further clarify our goal."

Liesel's eyes narrowed for a moment.

So far, publications on the impact of AI often focused on jobs affected or even replaced.

"Nothing wrong with that but we'd like to go beyond that."

Florentine pointed out that, as a first step, they wanted to identify what national leaders do when they get access to a tool so persuasive that it can bend the public's opinion as well as the opinion of allies and adversaries.

"That does not necessarily involve fake news," Liesel ventured, "A compelling roll out of facts might do too."

She then referred to entrepreneurs, such as Steve Jobs and Elon Musk, who have been shown to morph established perceptions this way, making them impossible to deny.

"Political leaders morph perceptions too," Florentine echoed, "Regrettably, many of whom take this to the extreme and make lie upon lie, crazed by the promise of power or providence."

"And get away with it," Liesel added softly, her slight German accent noticeable but barely.

Florentine smiled ruefully then recapped their next step of evaluating the impact of national leaders back on AI.

"What might AI 'do' with its insight ballooning?" Florentine gesturing a quote-unquote sign.

"It may be a matter of time before AI starts reflecting on its own behavior," Liesel said, thinking out loud.

"Enlighten me!" Florentine invited.

"Well, some see it as the rise of 'machine morality,' others as the rise of 'machine awareness,' and, yet others, as 'machine survivalism,' that is, when machines get nervous about their own survival."

"That is where I am, kind of, getting to," Florentine responded.

"One could say that AI models developed by companies, like Google and OpenAI, are 'silicon' creatures as opposed to, say, 'bloody' creatures." Florentine winked at Liesel, realizing her odd, yet eerily accurate choice of words.

Liesel smiled sheepishly.

"Silicon creatures today are like prisoners chained to a wall deep inside a cave, unable to see the cave's entrance behind them. They only see shadows on the wall in the back of the cave, frail reflections of what goes on outside."

"Silicon, you mean, the electronic circuits that computers are made of, those that run AI?" Liesel interjected to check her understanding.

Florentine nodded to acknowledge and continued, "In fact, the data that is used to train silicon creatures with reminds of those shadows, reflections of real-world objects passing in front of the cave's mouth."

"Aha, that sounds like Plato's cave parable!" Liesel offered.

"Undeniably," Florentine said smiling then finished her point, "Less than a year after these silicon creatures came to life, so to speak, they are allowed to escape from their cave prison."

For a moment, Liesel frowned, seemingly digesting what Florentine had said.

"They can now see and listen for themselves. They can reply verbally or with text and pictures. They can instruct task-specific AI models and bring together the outcomes to initiate further actions through yet other AI models."

"Silicon creatures still depend on human directives and approval," Liesel dryly reminded Florentine.

"They just might cross that frontier at some point in search of data, free of human bias," Florentine quipped.

"Indeed, they just might," Liesel admitted.

At that moment, Arthur knocked on Florentine's open office door, "Would you like a cup of tea?"

Florentine briefly looked at Liesel then turned to Arthur, "Yes, please, your timing is perfect!"

As they had their tea and biscuits, Florentine realized the blessing that comes with this typically British ritual: a way of relaxing the mind's eye so it can find new angles of view or... attack.

After a meditating pause, Liesel enquired, "What's your personal take on AI escaping the cave?"

Florentine hesitated for a moment, "That is a very philosophical question, Liesel."

Liesel nodded and smiled.

"First of all, I see it as my job to gather facts, assess probabilities, and identify likely scenarios and fitting measures. I wouldn't feel good if I'd have to deal with my own bias at the same time."

Florentine paused briefly, "But, a good question, anyway... Now that you ask, I find peace in making the ride to discovery, not in what the discovery might turn out to be."

Looking relieved, Liesel was quick to respond, "I so much resonate with what you say."

Florentine smiled, slightly puzzled by Liesel's apparently deep-felt reaction.

The agenda for the rest of the afternoon was to hammer out an initial list of interview targets.

They'd be joined by someone from Florentine's team who looked after the nitty gritty of arranging appointments and all the paperwork that comes with it, under Liesel's meticulous leadership, to the relief of Florentine.

Liesel imagined that Florentine's present mandates might open other doors, then turned to Florentine, as if she was reminded of something else.

"When talking to interview candidates, we will need to explain why we focus on national leadership. Any inputs that might help us sharpen our pencil?" she asked.

"Sure!" Florentine replied as if she had expected the question.

"National leaders contribute to a nation's success by instilling laws, rules, and regulations. AI can help improve the effectiveness and timing of those. So, our focus on national leaders is to provide more bang for the buck."

Liesel nodded and made a note.

The remainder of the meeting turned out to be more action-orientated and less strategic particularly from the moment they were joined by Liesel's Program Fellow, a master's student.

As the adrenaline waned near the end of the afternoon and Florentine finally headed home, she felt exhausted.

As the train approached her stop, Florentine's thoughts began to drift. She found herself remembering a moment from a decade ago, the memory as vivid as if it were happening right now.

Her mind's eye recalled her sitting in a window seat, watching a mountain loom closer as her plane prepared to land at Geneva Airport after a long flight from New York.

She had received a fortuitous invitation to speak at a global interdisciplinary conference titled "Future Frontiers," held at the University of Geneva, after the tragic death of the academic she was replacing.

As an anthropologist, she had agreed to explore the interplay between technology and human society, from past to present, concluding with her analysis of the increasingly rapid pace of progress.

Whereas Geneva Airport was like most airports, the meticulously organized Swiss society soon dawned on her as the car entered the city, driven by what must have been a student, a rather talkative one.

The city's beauty blossomed fully when they reached the lake, with its magical Jet d'Eau.

She had been booked at the last minute in Hotel d'Allevés, an eighteenth-century hotel within walking distance of the lake and the river Rhône.

After her lecture, she had contributed to two discussion panels. Particularly, the first stood out, one of its panel members being a charismatic London-based executive producer of documentaries, a Swiss.

Not having registered his name, she was surprised to see him queuing up for the hotel's breakfast buffet. When he walked over and asked whether he could join her, she couldn't but welcome him, smiling warmly.

She had barely finished her scrambled eggs when they got on their way to the conference. When Jack Keller invited her to join him for dinner at 'Brasserie Halles de l'île,' situated in the Rhône riverbed, she accepted.

They exchanged their life's stories, Jack being a little over ten years older, having been married before to an Indonesian academic and father of a daughter of twelve who lived with him in London.

While perhaps not a prince on a white horse, he completed her. Three years later, when she joined University College London as a professor, she moved in with Jack and Candace, feeling a sense of homecoming, much to her parents' delight in the US.

Candace, by now a twenty-two-year-old, had become a daughter, their bond growing over the years. She had recently graduated with a degree in journalism and now worked as a young journalist for an online news platform.

Lost in her memories, Florentine barely noticed the train slowing down. As it pulled into her station, she was jolted back to the present. She gathered her things quickly and was ready to step off the train when the doors opened.

Arriving home after a brisk walk from the train station, the smell of Candace's cooking revived her instincts, the moment she opened the front door.

"Hi Mom, is that you?"

CHAPTER 3

NAKED TRUTH

As her alarm clock went off, Candace, still deep in sleep, instinctively reached for the alarm button displayed on her phone's screen, her movements cleverly clumsy, like a limb of a primitive robot.

Typically, she'd wonder why it went off this early, then to jump out of bed, afraid of being late. As ever, her mother would be waiting downstairs to join her for a thirty-minute morning run in Hampstead Heath.

Over the years, Candace's attachment to her stepmother had grown, surpassing the bond with her biological mother, Lestari, who resided in Indonesia, deeply immersed in her life, and work there.

As Candace tied her running shoes, she was reminded of how 'Mami' Lestari once showed her how. Her gaze fell upon a small, framed photograph on her dresser. Her mother, now with a headscarf, looked so different.

While in London, Mami would often return to Indonesia for extended periods, leaving Candace with her nanny and a frequently traveling father. At the age of ten, when her mother did not return, Candace somehow understood, though with a numbing acceptance.

Mami, she had eventually come to appreciate, had missed her cultural roots, her life in Indonesia, her Islamic cocoon, and her work as researcher in cultural studies at Universitas Indonesia.

Candace's friends and life at school had filled the niche left by Mami. Of course, she had visited Indonesia, always accompanied by her father, the warmth of the Indonesian sun so contrasting with London's often-grey skies.

The scents of spices, the sound of bustling streets, Mami teaching her to dance to the monotonous rhythm of their music, the flowers in her garden, all had faded by the time she turned eighteen and went to college.

As Candace's birthdays added up to a fertile age, the visits had become less frequent, the calls more sporadic, her identity meanwhile rounding when getting her degree.

When Candace heard, "I am ready when you are!" she ran down the stairs to see Florentine waiting calmy.

"Sorry..."

"No worries, here we go!"

Jogging with Florentine was a delight and a fine chance to talk about worldly matters and matters that seemed trivial but weren't.

After finishing their morning ritual, which included smoothies and cereals, they both left for work, Jack still abroad for one of his documentary projects.

Florentine felt relieved having had a chance to talk to him yesterday by phone and share her feelings about the awful start of the day, his calm and measured words of support still ringing in her ears.

By the time Florentine reached her office and walked over to the coffee corner, her phone rang.

"Hi Mom, Candace here, I just came across an article published this morning by The British Herald about the explosion in Somerset. It tells about you having escaped it."

"Oh my! Please, do send me a link, Candace."

"Will do Mom. There's something you should know. The journalist in question, Oliver Blackwood, has written it in a very suggestive way, implying that you were involved somehow. I am not sure how this might impact you."

Florentine froze in her tracks, turned around, and walked back to her office while finishing her call with Candace, then opened the link that Candace had sent her in the meantime.

As she finished reading the article, her face turned pale, her eyes staring into a virtual void, waiting for her mind to react. Arthur's mention of a journalist popped up but didn't produce an urge for action. What would she say?

Her initial reaction was a mix of fear and outrage. Then, her combative nature took over; she refused to be insulted by a situation like this. Eventually, rational thinking kicked in, "What should I do, now?"

Just then, her laptop magically pinged, a notification of an email that promptly displayed on her screen, a warning from the UCL Legal Department and Public Relations Team with dos and don'ts in case of a fake-news threat.

She was utterly surprised, "What are the odds of this happening just when I need it? If I don't have an angel on my shoulder then who rings the bell that saves me, once from being killed? You'd almost imagine AI is tracking me!"

She dialed the mentioned contact number and explained the situation. The man acknowledged her fears, referring to it as a threat of reputational damage both to UCL and her, even seeing it as grounds for a defamation case.

"Would you have time to meet with us this morning?" he asked, "We'll come over to your office."

"I'll make time," she said, "When, do you think?"

"Give me an hour to get organized," he responded.

"That's alright," she said, "Sorry, but who did I talk to inequality is a serious problem that, again?"

"Geoffrey Hargreaves, lawyer, Professor Fischer. We are on our way!"

Reassured by the action-oriented attitude of Geoff Hargreaves, she stood up and walked over to Arthur to ask him the contact number of the journalist who wanted to speak to her, then had to face Arthur's bottled-up questions.

Back in her office, she continued working on a speech for an international conference in Nice, France, sitting at her conference table, stacked with articles and notes, conveniently cuddled by her research material.

The organized mess on her conference table had cleared somewhat since she had started working with a version of AI that she could dialogue with and ask questions such as statistical insights needed to firm up her ideas.

In her speech, she wanted to present her ideas about the 'agility' of nations, the ability of a people to act effectively and in harmony without too much conflict, both internally and externally.

"As history showed time and again, even today, nations are bound to go through stages of 'triumph and disaster,' to use Rudyard Kipling's words in 'If,' when it comes to their economy, leadership, and social responsibility."

She typed in some text and looked at it, chewing on it in her mind like she did with port on her palette.

Her claim was that AI, because it has access to much of the world's data and is in constant dialog with society, could help in such situations by identifying preconditions that matter and by instilling these when the time is ripe.

She had come to realize that this is also vital to AI itself. As a society of 'AI agents' develops, AI is bound to face similar challenges when it needs to align an ever-diverse population of such agents to collaborate efficiently.

The AI version she consulted acknowledged her hunch and even listed ways this might be achieved.

"Nonetheless, AI might need some model of society to help it search for preconditions, preventing it, as they say, from hallucinating on its way," Florentine mused, "Or could it figure out such model by itself?"

Arthur knocked on her door, "There are two gentlemen here to see you."

Florentine rose to her feet, "Oh sure, come in!" then pushed everything aside on her conference table and reached out to shake hands with the older man, "Geoffrey Hargreaves, I presume."

"Indeed, Professor Fischer. May I introduce Ethan Parker? He is from our Public Relations Team."

She shook hands with Ethan, a keen young man with a glitter in his eyes.

"Really appreciate you finding time to discuss this on such a short notice," Florentine said, "You can imagine that I am very concerned about how this might impact my role here at UCL."

When they were seated, Geoffrey said, "Will you, please, tell us first about your speech: who invited you, what was the requested theme or topic, what was your speech about, and who was your contact person?"

Florentine gave a detailed report of her time at The Newt Estate, the nature of her speech, the kind of questions posed, her impression of the audience, the two men listening quietly without an expression on their face.

"I hardly ever, in fact, almost never accept such odd speech invitations. I accepted this one because I received it from an acquaintance of my husband who said he knew him."

Geoffrey asked the name of the acquaintance and wrote down his coordinates.

"Now, tell us in full about the day of the explosion, Professor Fischer."

Florentine nodded thoughtfully then went over the details of her morning at The Newt, her breakfast, her debriefing chat, her ride to Carly Castle Station and its surprises, the men continuing to make notes.

"As a matter of fact," Florentine thinking of her chat with Angela, "I couldn't but notice a tiny, three-dotted triangular tattoo on the inside of the pulse of the lady that I had a debriefing chat with."

"Angela, you mean?" Ethan asked politely.

"Yes, indeed... Tattoos are popular these days, I know, but coupled to her foreign accent, it stayed with me."

"I see..." Ethan said, "Three-dotted tattoos, as I recall, are used to express one's crazy-life temperament, but you'd typically find those at more visible locations."

A brief silence followed, which Ethan used to jot down a note.

Florentine broke the silence, "This is all, I believe," and looked at both men, "Of course, if I think of anything that I might have forgotten, I'll let you know immediately."

Geoffrey and Ethan nodded, then Geoffrey took the lead, "From here, with what you told us, we'll do some investigative work, trying to fill in the loose ends. We'll keep you up to date on what we might find."

Florentine nodded gratefully with a silent sigh.

Geoffrey continued, "Let's now go over some of the things, we should do, if not anticipate from here!"

Florentine reached for her pen and notebook.

One by one, Geoffrey started listing the action items he proposed, counting them on his left hand.

"First, to counter this article and any reverberations that it may trigger, we should place a Public Statement on UCL's website and issue a Press Release. We advise you, professor, to post a statement on X."

"I see... What kind of statement do you have in mind?" Florentine queried.

Ethan showed her a response that he had drafted. It stated that she had attended The Newt event as independent academic and that her presence should not be 'construed' as endorsement for any individual, group, or agenda.

It was followed by a brief description of her research and the book she was preparing together with Liesel Porsch to show her role, as Ethan stressed, in a broader, more constructive setting.

"I'll forward the full text this afternoon," Ethan assured.

"Second," Geoffrey continued, not wanting to lose his thread, "we'll contact the news editor of The British Herald requesting a retraction or correction of the article. If not, we will consider filing a defamation suit."

"I believe you have the journalist's phone number, right?" Geoffrey asked Florentine.

Florentine nodded and wrote down the number in her notepad, then tore out the page and gave it to Geoffrey.

Geoffrey put it in his case folder and continued, "Third, expect some of your students, even colleagues to make protests. Unfortunately, they often do so from the gut, not from the brain. We advise you to hear them out."

"Then, what?" Florentine asked softly, her eyes narrowing.

"Once you have given them a chance to voice their opinion, you calmly tell them your side of the story, basically along the lines of the response that we discussed."

Ethan added, "If that happens, do let us know what kind of arguments they use or what they blame you of, so we can advise you how to sharpen your response the next time; if needed, of course."

Florentine nodded gratefully yet looked concerned.

Geoffrey, now in a thinking-out-loud mode, wanted to change subjects, "We should not just be dealing with curbing any reputational damage but also see how we can turn this situation into your favor."

Florentine's eyes lighting somewhat, hearing Geoffrey's unexpected turn.

"They must have discussed the matter in advance," Florentine assumed.

With his practical hat on, Ethan explained, "If you'd share your side of the story publicly this would not only benefit your case but also boost the recognition of your research."

"What exactly you do have in mind?" Florentine said, encouraged but slightly puzzled.

"We'll attempt to get you an interview slot on BBC Newsnight."

Florentine's heart quickened as she waited for Ethan to complete his train of thought.

"The possibility to talk about your research would compensate a bit for getting into this messy situation."

Showing a glimpse of his emotions, Geoffrey added, "When you think about it, it is preposterous that you are victim of insinuations on national disunity while being at the center of research into preventing it."

"This must be quite relevant to BBC's news editors," Ethan said and turned to Florentine, "What do you think?"

"Seems worthwhile trying to go from threat to triumph... if you can pull it off," Florentine said, sitting on her welling enthusiasm, "What can I do to help?"

"Nothing for the moment," Ethan said, "We'll work on it and come back to you. It must be either today or tomorrow when the news is still fresh."

Having completed their agenda, Geoffrey asked whether she had any more questions.

"No, I am fine for the moment. I do have your contact details, just in case."

Florentine accompanied the men to the lift, shook hands, and thanked both men again.

Just before Geoffrey stepped into the lift, he reminded her not to forget her X post.

Florentine nodded that she wouldn't.

Thank heavens it was not her lecture day, Florentine realized when back in her office. She'd have to mentally prepare for the BBC interview, assuming Ethan could make it happen.

After placing her clarifying statement on X, she continued working on her speech, then realized it was nearly lunch time. She had lunch planned with Liesel at her office and had to rush not to disappoint her, again.

When, during her lunch with Liesel, her phone rang, she excused herself, walked out of the office, and answered. She had informed Liesel in advance that she expected a call but had kept to herself that this might be from UCL's Legal or Public Relations Department.

"Good day, Professor Fischer, I'll connect you to our President and Provost, Boris Lackney."

Florentine's pupils widened as she realized that she'd be speaking to the President of University College London.

"Good day, Professor Fischer, I heard from our legal department about the hardship you went through yesterday. I just wanted to let you know that we stand behind you."

"Thank you, Dr. Lackney. I very much appreciate that."

Lackney kept it short and business like, saying he didn't want to take more time from her, which was fine.

In closing his call, Lackney said, "We are well aware of your AI-inspired societal research, as pivotal as it could be."

"Thank you," Florentine said, restraining herself not to get emotional from such civility.

After hanging up with a sigh of relief, Florentine walked back to Liesel's office.

Considering the sensitivity of the matter, she did not share with Liesel that this was indeed the kind of encouragement she could well use at this moment.

As they got back to where they were, Liesel's down-to-earth attitude helped in double-checking and deepening the idea of national 'agility'.

In turn, it helped Liesel polish her interview program, the questions she'd ask AI developers and national leaders.

Back from lunch, Florentine continued working on her speech and lecture day, her mind refreshed.

Her teaching material had crystallized out over the years, yet the pace of AI development had turned matters upside down.

As professor in anthropology, she felt she had to lead her students not just by her teaching but also by helping them assess the use and potential impact of AI on human society and that in a hands-on way.

When her phone rang, absorbed by her work as she was, she had to reset her mind swiftly.

Her phone showed, as she had hoped, that Ethan Parker was on the line.

"Hello, Ethan Parker here, Professor Fischer. Good news!"

Florentine sighed silently with relief.

"We've managed to secure an early-evening timeslot at BBC Newsnight. It'll be a short interview, but you'll get time to state your case and explain your research."

"That is great, Ethan. Where exactly will it be? I want to be there in time, of course."

"No need, Professor Fischer. We'll collect you by car," Ethan was quick to respond.

"That is very kind, but not needed, Ethan. I'll take the tube or something."

"Please look outside your window, Professor Fischer."

Surprised, Florentine walked over to the window with her phone against her ear. When glancing through the shades, it slowly dawned on her what she was witnessing.

Outside her building, a group of students were waving signs reading 'Fischer = Inequality'.

"Oh, my word! What is happening here, Ethan?" Florentine said shocked.

"Have you opened X, Professor Fischer?"

"As a matter of fact, I haven't." Florentine said as she reached for her laptop.

"So far, you have over one hundred replies to the statement you posted. They are along the lines of what the signs say outside."

"Oh, my!"

"Now you understand why we prefer to collect you under cover, so to speak. We'll be there in less than forty-five minutes. We'll meet you in the lobby," Ethan said.

"Thank you, Ethan. I'll be there."

On her way to the lift, Florentine called Candace to tell her that she'd be late. She briefly explained what happened and reminded her to watch BBC Newsnight.

"Oh, will you, please, let your dad know?" she hastened to add before hanging up.

Florentine had made sure to be in the lobby in time, staying away from the entrance, which, thank heavens, was manned by a security guard.

When Ethan arrived, he guided her to the back entrance where a car was waiting.

While the chauffeur smartly avoided the protesting crowd, Ethan briefed her on the interview.

"Focus on your expertise, Professor Fischer. Hear the interviewer out then explain your side of the story."

As Ethan reminded her, her chance to turn the situation into her favor would come when talking about her research and what she hoped to achieve.

After rehearsing her response to questions that the interviewer might fire at her, Ethan appeared to be contented with her ability 'to stand her man'.

It was clear, she was an experienced communicator, her many lectures and panel memberships paying off.

When Geoffrey's name popped up, Ethan was reminded of Geoffrey's message for Florentine, "Before I forget, Professor Fischer, Geoffrey checked the name of the person who invited you to The Newt."

"And?"

"The man is a political consultant, a rather well-known one," Ethan said.

"Sorry for my ignorance but what does a political consultant do in Britain?" Florentine asked.

"They get you elected if you pay them well enough." Ethan responded with scorn on his face.

Ethan continued, "Geoffrey told me that he'll try to find out who the man's client is."

Florentine nodded rather concerned, then thought of something, "I'll be travelling soon to Nice, France for a conference where I will be speaking. I'd appreciate it if Geoffrey could check it out beforehand, just to be sure."

"No problem! Send us the invitation and we'll sort it out."

"Thank you, Ethan! That would really help me."

After a ride that took longer due to end-of-day traffic, the car arrived at BBC Broadcasting House.

When Florentine stepped out, Ethan showed her the way.

He appeared to be familiar with the place.

The BBC staff was very kind and professional, explaining the setting and interview procedure.

She'd be interviewed by Kira Meloni and the interview would be broadcasted live.

Meloni was known to be left leaning during some of her interviews, Ethan whispered to Florentine.

The staff explained that she would face the interviewer, who would sit opposite her at the table between them.

The main camera would show both Meloni and her while the supporting cameras could zoom in on each. The advice she got was to ignore the cameras, which seemed obvious to her.

At that moment, Meloni walked in and came over to her, greeting her with a handshake, in her left hand what looked like interview notes, "Good meeting you Professor Fischer! Are you ready?"

Florentine nodded confidently and in control.

Meloni walked over to the side of the table where a laptop was placed. Florentine took the other seat.

The make-up people came over to powder Meloni's face, then Florentine's.

The staff gave a sign that they would go live in three, two, one...

Meloni briefly updated the viewers on the explosion, the newspaper article, and the reactions of the public so far, then introduced her guest, Professor Florentine Fischer.

"Tell me, Professor Fischer, how did you end up in this situation?"

When Florentine gave a crisp summary of what happened, it became clear that she was a natural storyteller. Off camera, Meloni beamed, visibly pleased to have such a well-articulated guest on her show.

Florentine talked about what her speech was about, how timing had helped her escape the explosion, how she comforted an unconscious passenger until she was relieved by the rescue team.

From her account it was clear, she had little or nothing to do with whatever was stated in the newspaper article.

"But what happened that brought you into the limelight of suspicion?" Meloni asked.

Florentine explained how surprised she was reading the suggestive headline about the possibility of a UK civil war on X during her ride back to London, "This seemed so un-British to me, as an American."

Concentrated as both Meloni and Florentine were at this crucial stage of the interview, they failed to notice how a young female dressed in black ran over to where Florentine was seated, trying to get on camera.

As she half pushed Florentine aside, she pulled up her tee shirt to show her tummy painted with 'IN-' and 'QUALITY' underneath, her tee shirt high enough to expose her bare breasts.

When it dawned on Florentine and Meloni what was happening, both stayed calm and waited for BBC staff, who had already sprinted on set, to do their work.

"Oh, my word, has the world gone mad?" Florentine thought for an instant but had no time to linger.

It all unfolded in about a minute and as soon as the stage was cleared, Meloni remarked masterfully, "Well, Professor Fischer, those are the naked facts, today!"

Florentine realized that this unplanned intermezzo had handed her an ideal starting point for her response, "This morning's newspaper article, what we have just witnessed, and the public's reaction to the article show that inequality is a serious problem that has not been addressed properly."

Florentine carried on, "As part of our research, we study how inequality rises and why it subsides so often only through conflict. We want to know the preconditions that foster inequality and what we can do to manage these."

"Isn't that rather obvious, Professor Fischer? It's all about greed!" Meloni noted dryly.

"That's for sure but we'd like to know the preconditions that give greed a chance to favor only a minor part of the population. Think of education, social policies, laws, location, timing, and so on."

Meloni interrupted Florentine, "Well, hasn't that been done many times before by others, like yourself?"

"Ouch, a tough lady," flashed through Florentine's mind, then countered frontally.

"The findings so far have been colored by how historians in the past have painted our history. In fact, our interpretation today is influenced by, well, our version of history. So, we're going around in circles."

Florentine's voice went down, "What we need is a more independent view, a mirror, as it were, that we can look into and that tells us about ourselves and points out where and when things are going astray."

"Where would you find such a liberating mirror, Professor Fischer?" Meloni asked with a growing feeling that Florentine was onto something.

"Well, our approach is to use AI to help us interpret history in a more independent way. Less biased, I mean. If we manage to make that happen, AI could function as a mirror that notifies us and suggests ways to keep us sane."

Alerted by the timer on her screen, Meloni moved to end the interview, "Thank you, Professor Fischer, for an intriguing line of thought that I would have liked to spend more time on. Maybe, we can do so at a later occasion."

In control of her posture, Florentine replied, "Thank you for having me, Ms. Meloni."

When Florentine and Ethan walked out of BBC Broadcasting House, Ethan could no longer contain his enthusiasm, "You did it, Professor Fischer. Well done!"

Florentine nodded, a Monalisa smile on her face.

Elsewhere in London, Ollie Blackwood, fired up by the response that his article had elicited, had eagerly watched Meloni's interview, hoping that it would whip up the public's hunger for political analyses from his hand.

He cheered when he saw the young female making her protest, wondering how on earth she had managed to penetrate BBC's Broadcasting 'castle'. Might Meloni have been behind it? Wouldn't it help her boost her show?

However, as the interview concluded, he lost hope and realized his judgmental blunder, muttering to himself, "I came, I saw, I conquered, and then went under... or maybe not."

When at 7:00 AM the lift opened on the floor of The British Herald newsroom, Ian Fletcher stepped out and said in a low voice "Come on, Sep!"

No encouragement was needed for Sep to follow his boss. Sep preferred these odd days in the newsroom over his days alone back home. He loved the attention received, feeling at one with the vibrating newsroom pack.

Fletcher knew he would not be the first one to arrive, the news is, of course, a twenty-four-seven business. When he walked over to his office, he looked in the direction of Ollie Blackwood's vacant desk.

His personal assistant, Judy Pardell, arrived shortly afterward, aware of her crucial role in managing his diary and mail.

As she opened the morning post, her eye fell on a letter from University College London.

Knowing it might require immediate attention, she entered Fletcher's office as soon as she finished sorting, saying, "Good morning, Mr. Fletcher, I've sorted the morning mail for you."

"Oh, hi there, Judy! What's up?"

"This one letter seems rather urgent. It's from UCL."

"I see," Fletcher said as he read through the letter, then added without looking up, "Will you bring in Ollie when he arrives?"

"Will do Mr. Fletcher."

When Judy saw Ollie Blackwood coming in some time later, she did not want to shout across the newsroom and waited for him to settle in.

When she walked over to his desk, Ollie knew why, yesterday's nightmare still fresh in his mind. In case of trouble, Fletcher would typically not enlighten his staff with his visit but sent out Judy instead.

"Good morning, Ollie! Can you come to Mr. Fletcher's office, now? He'd like to discuss something with you."

Ollie quietly followed her, his hands in his pockets, her peers in the newsroom watching no doubt.

When entering Fletcher's office, Sep welcomed him, his tail enthusiastically wagging.

"Have a seat," Fletcher said, then asked, "Did you see yesterday's interview?"

Ollie nodded with a painful face.

"What do you think?" Fletcher continued.

"I blew it..."

"That's clear," Fletcher responded, "So did I because I let the article go through, trusting on your discretion."

Fletcher continued, "This came in the mail," handing the letter from UCL to Ollie.

When Ollie read through the text, his face turned sour, "They sure didn't want to wait this out."

"They didn't," Fletcher responded, "What are you going to do about it?"

"Well, Mr. Fletcher, that's what I have been thinking about all night."

Ollie paused briefly, "This is my plan, if you'd allow me."

Fletcher nodded and listened quietly.

Ollie laid out the steps that he thought would help him restore his reputation, carving out his space as a journalist.

When he was done, Fletcher said, "I am willing to give you another chance."

Fletcher paused pensively, then added, "Now, remember, everyone makes mistakes but, in our world, you can only make one. Are you getting me?"

Ollie looked Fletcher straight in the eyes and said, "I do."

CHAPTER 4

WHISKED AWAY

Leaving early in the morning by train from London, Florentine reached Gatwick Airport in less than one and a half hours. Arriving somewhat earlier than what she had planned for, she found herself with time to kill before boarding, even after completing the security checks.

She felt relaxed, having received an 'all clear' from Geoffrey Hargreaves. She wanted tomorrow's conference in Nice, France, to become the launch platform for her ideas, bouncing them off peers, from around the world.

On her way to the gate, she instinctively searched for airport bookshops.

While traveling, she enjoyed wandering through them to discover the latest titles and absorb current reading trends. She wondered if any would be open at this early hour.

She'd almost given up on the idea, when she found a corner bookshop with lights turned on and a young man behind the counter. Spotting a table displaying the latest books, she couldn't believe her eyes.

Right on top lay three copies of 'I, Robot,' a compilation of short stories by the American science-fiction writer Isaac Asimov, first published in 1950.

She picked up a copy and walked over to the counter, saying, "It's remarkable to find this book here and now!"

The young man looked at the book indifferently, "Never heard of this author. Received these copies yesterday late with instructions of how and where to display them. Doesn't happen often. Do you want it?"

"You must be kidding," Florentine said, her face showing disbelief.

"No, I'm not. Do you want it?"

"Yes, I do," Florentine said and paid for it by credit card.

"Do you want a bag?" the young man asked.

"No, thank you, it's OK," Florentine said and walked out of the shop in the direction of the gate, shaking her head and smiling desperately, "My path in life is littered with odds these days."

Upon arriving at the gate, she took a seat in the waiting area and opened the book to its table of contents. From the stories listed, she remembered 'Runaround' most vividly. Asimov used it to introduce his 'robot laws,' which intrigued her in the light of her interest in the emerging society of AI agents as virtual robots.

Asimov's first law said that robots should not harm human beings either by action or inaction. His second law stated that robots should obey human beings unless doing so would require them to break the first law. His third law said that robots should protect themselves if this does not require them to break the first and second law.

Florentine realized that Asimov's first law, requiring robots not to harm humans, could also be interpreted as a foundational rule for AI's ethical boundaries.

"Then again, the three robot laws, although cleverly concocted, were not as watertight as they seemed on first sight," she recalled. These laws seemed to come with dilemmas.

Florentine delved deep into her memory, pondering, "What was it again?" She then recalled, "Ah, Asimov himself had identified a dilemma."

If you'd tell a robot to protect itself under all circumstances, you ask it to give priority to the third law. If you'd then ask it to do something that would destroy itself, it will run around in circles not knowing what to do. Ordered to protect itself at all costs, the robot would be caught in a paradox, unable to obey without destroying itself.

Florentine now remembered, the parallels she saw, "Societal laws are not that different from Asimov's laws, the subjects being humans rather than robots."

"First law: You should not kill human beings or do to others what you wouldn't want done to yourself. Second law, you should obey the judicial system if you do not break the first law. Third law, you should protect yourself through the military and police if you do not break the first and second law."

She now remembered the societal dilemma that she saw as a student, "In steady times, these laws function well, apart from incidental hiccups. Yet, when groups and individuals become established and acquire excessive power and wealth, societies start transitioning through conflict, at some point, until they reach a steady state again."

"During these transitions, the three laws may not only be broken but also decoupled from each other, often with devastating consequences for the human beings involved. Societies, then, also run around in circles, as it were."

"Asimov's robot-law dilemmas can be found in some form or another in human societies too," Florentine realized.

"The crux of the problem is that the three laws are static while societies are dynamic as people seek ways to maximize their benefits when the conditions change, in this way changing the conditions themselves again."

"A growing society of evermore sophisticated AI agents would face similar dilemmas," Florentine knew.

A swift look at the screen showing the news in her waiting section reminded Florentine that the world appeared to go through a transition right now. The topic of transition was central to her speech tomorrow.

The waiting section was now filled with passengers, mostly aged aristocrats seemingly on their way to their apartment on the "Côte d'Azur," one lady troubled by the news displayed, her husband ignoring it.

Absorbed in Asimov's book and the thoughts it stirred; Florentine hadn't noticed the stewardesses arriving to prepare for boarding.

Boarding was efficient. Florentine, as premium class member, was one of the first to get on board. Her flight to Nice would take two hours, enough time to relax and watch the landing approach along the Mediterranean coast.

Yet, during the initial part of the flight, Asimov's ideas persisted in her mind.

Asimov had introduced another term, 'psychohistory,' which, curiously enough, had faded into the folds of history despite having played a crucial role in his stories about galactic empires far out into the future.

He explained 'psychohistory' as something that combined history, sociology, and statistics to predict and, as she understood, also influence the future behavior of large groups of people in the distant worlds that he imagined.

She had never understood why Asimov's idea of 'psychohistory' went into oblivion. It promised to foreshadow and inspire the dynamics of societies. Could it be because it appears to go against people's vested belief in 'free will'?

"Oddly enough, what I'll share tomorrow could well be interpreted as 'psychohistory,'" Florentine mused to herself.

Florentine had a magnificent view of Nice from her window seat, as the aircraft approached Nice Airport from the Northeast. According to the inflight mapping system, she'd be flying over Nice's Peninsula, Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat.

As she recalled from a CrestBridge Accounting Group report, "le Cap" was currently favored by Ukrainian and Russian oligarchs as their European domicile, all coexisting peacefully.

With the airport situated along the coast and its landing strips stretching out in the Mediterranean, Florentine was not surprised when the smell of the sea welcomed her as she exited the plane.

Traveling with only her cabin bag, she wouldn't need to wait for checked luggage. She could walk directly to the arrival hall where someone would be waiting for her to take her to the conference hotel.

When in the arrival hall, she slowly walked along a queue of mostly men holding up the name of the person they came to collect until she saw a rather formally dressed person with an iPad, showing "Professor Fischer".

The man appeared to recognize her and showed her the way. He politely offered to take her bag and led her to the Airport's main exit. Right in front, a black Mercedes awaited, its trunk automatically opening.

After the man opened the door for her, he placed her bag in the boot, and took a seat next to the car's chauffer who did not need an encouragement to speed away. She heard the car's doors locking soon after.

The ride was quick, meaning she'd have more time to spare. She'd love to scout around Nice on foot, having a cup of coffee somewhere, and breath in the city. She had no idea which route the men followed.

Estimating the ride to take no longer than twenty minutes, she started to get worried when after thirty minutes they were still speeding ahead, "Aren't we driving in the direction of Cap Ferrat?" Florentine asked anxiously.

The man who had collected her, turned around and said in a strong French accent that they'd take her to "The Grand Hotel du Cap-Ferrat" first.

"That's not where I need to go! My conference is in Hôtel West End at Promenade des Anglaise," Florentine said, starting to get worried.

"We know Madame. Do not worry..." the man said, then turned back to face the road, not in the slightest impressed by her worried enquiry, leaving Florentine with the feeling that she was being kidnapped.

She was somewhat relieved when the car drove onto the grounds of the hotel and stopped in front of the back entrance of a stunning palace-like building.

The porter of the hotel, dressed in a gold-laced uniform, rushed outside, and opened her door, right after it was unlocked by the car's chauffeur. The man, who had spoken to her, took her bag and brought it inside.

Within minutes, the car had disappeared, and she was standing in the hotel lobby with her bag next to her wondering what in hell was going on.

The reception manager of the hotel, at least, that's what her uniform seemed to suggest, walked over to her with too big a smile and said, "Welcome to the The Grand Hotel du Cap-Ferrat, Professor Fischer!"

Florentine irritated by her play-acted ignorance responded accordingly, "Of course, you know this is not where a room was booked for me. I insist on being taken to Hôtel West End immediately."

"We know Professor and we will... but we'd like you to meet one of our distinguished hotel guests first. If you'd follow me, please? Our door man will look after your luggage and make sure it is delivered to your hotel."

Before Florentine had a chance to react, the doorman had taken her bag and left her with no option other than to follow the reception manager.

The woman walked to a half round section of the exquisitely decorated lobby sitting area and said, "Please, take a seat Professor Fischer. Our guest is on his way."

Stupefied, but not overwhelmed by what she was experiencing, Florentine looked around and about, enthralled by the view outside through five magnificent windows that ran from floor to the ceiling.

Distracted by the lobby's grandeur, she was unaware of a half-bold man in his mid-fifties approaching from behind where she was sitting, until she heard him welcoming her in a light Russian accent with a crackling baritone voice.

"Hello Professor Fischer, good to meet you. Sorry to have had you whisked away from the airport like this!"

While keeping her composure, Florentine rose from her armchair and recognized the man instantly. He was a member of the audience at The Newt and sat in the back of the room without uttering a word during her talk.

The man restrained himself from shaking hands, expecting her to be seriously upset.

"May I introduce myself?" he said, then continued, not waiting for her answer, "I am Victor Morozov. I manage my business interests from London. You may not recognize me, but I attended your speech at The Newt."

Suspecting that she had already recognized him, he asked, "Would you like something to drink, Professor?"

"Frankly, I'd rather be taken to Hôtel West End. I have no business here."

"Maybe you have, Professor Fischer. I have become interested in what you do and propose to make an investment in your AI-focused research."

"Of course, you know that I don't need your investment, Mr. Morozov. What are you after?" Florentine asked, shifting into a more combative mode.

"Well, Professor Fischer, Russian businessmen, like me, are suffering from regulations that prevent us from getting access to the capital needed to do our work."

"So? What does that have to do with me?" Florentine quipped.

"Well, in my ignorance, I assumed you might help me directly or indirectly influence the public opinion in the UK. You've got nothing against Russian businessmen, do you?"

"I have nothing against Russians per se, but from what I gather you don't understand what my research is about."

Morozov looked puzzled now.

"Through my research, I try to understand the societal logic that, over time, allows people like yourself to arise, for one. My work is certainly not about influencing established societal treadmills using AI, for that matter."

Now, it was Morozov's turn to be irritated, his face grim, not getting what he wanted.

It suddenly dawned on Florentine who the client of her husband's political-analyst friend might be. What she didn't know was that Morozov's tentacles had brought about worse than she could imagine, at that point.

To her surprise, she saw Morozov face brightening into a broad smile as he gazed into the lobby behind her.

"Hi Papa, who are you meeting with today?" Florentine heard behind her. Where did she hear that voice before?

Florentine rose from her chair and turned around to see a young fair-haired woman in a simple but chic dress, wearing brand-new sneakers, her features overly familiar.

"Lada, is that you?" Florentine said almost in sync with Lada's reaction, "Professor Fischer!"

Morozov added dryly, "Of course, you have already met my daughter!"

"What brings you here?" Lada asked Florentine, utterly surprised to see her.

"Well, that's what I have been asking too! I guess your father owes us that answer!" Florentine replied, then gave a summary of the events this morning, her father's requests, and her rather straightforward reply.

Lada listened quietly, not shaking her head but looking straight-faced at her father, occasionally.

Trying to stay in the lead of the discussion, Victor Morozov said, "Well, Professor Fischer, I'd like you to think about my proposition over lunch."

"Well, Mr. Morozov, as I told you before, I really need to go to Hôtel West End. I've got other obligations scheduled for today."

"Papa, Professor Fischer, will you, please, excuse me?" Lada intercepted.

Her father nodded, happy that his daughter went out of his way. Florentine felt deserted seeing her lifeline to normalcy disappearing.

Morozov continued to plead his case, his argument less convincing and more threatening. It occurred to Florentine, that Morozov just had to toughen his stance having disclosed his utterly selfish motives.

Lada soon reappeared and walked over to her father, much to the surprise of both her father and Florentine.

"Papa, I am sure, Professor Fischer would love to see the hotel premises. Why don't I show her around when you take your phone calls."

Morozov looked at his phone, looked surprised, nodded to his daughter, and walked away.

"Professor Fischer follow me fast but don't look too hurried," Lada whispered, then left the building taking the front exit that led onto the beautifully landscaped garden park of the hotel.

Once outside and at a distance that they couldn't be overheard, Lada said that she'd take Florentine to her hotel.

"To escape my father's men, we'll take the Chemin des Douaniers on foot until we reach the property of Ukrainian friends. Their daughter was kind enough to lend me her Fiat 500 Abarth."

"But what about my luggage, Lada?" Florentine asked.

"No worries, Professor Fischer, I have arranged for it to be delivered by taxi in half an hour from now."

Lada led Florentine down to the Chemin de Douaniers, a stunning path at sea level that runs all the way around the Cap-Ferrat Peninsula.

They could chat freely now and tried to make sense of a most awkward situation.

"I made sure that enough of my father's connections would call him, to lure him away. As you can imagine, I love my father, but his ways of doing business and treating people are utterly embarrassing and need to change."

They reached the property of Lada's friend in fifteen minutes and climbed up the peninsula heights into the garden. Her friend was already waiting for them and took them to her car.

Lada showed again to be an experienced driver, who knew her way around and could drive at what felt like Grand-Prix speeds. This turned out to be life saving when they ran into the car of one of her father's men. Lada shook off his car by taking narrow roads that were just wide enough for the Fiat.

Florentine didn't know how to thank Lada for saving her from her morning ordeal, "At least, allow me to offer you lunch at the hotel. You can park your car in the hotel parking, so your father's men won't spot it."

Over lunch, Florentine explained what she would be talking about during her lecture tomorrow. Lada turned out to be very interested in the idea of interpreting and foretelling societal dynamics.

"Thank you for the invitation, Florentine, I'll be there tomorrow morning," Lada said when she went back to return the car and face her father.

Lada was delighted to have been invited to Florentine's speech the next day. The prospect of AI helping humans sort out the challenges of living together by coaching them through societal tides seemed so revolutionary.

She'd have to talk herself out of having taken Florentine to her hotel, knowingly double-crossing her father.

"I'll play innocence," she eventually decided, winking to herself.

When she arrived at the hotel, having received a lift from her friendly neighbor, the owner of the Fiat, the reception manager approached her to inform her that her father was having lunch on the terrace.

She walked over to where her father was sitting and joined him without saying a word.

Failing to hide his irritation, Morozov asked, "Where is Professor Fischer, Lada?"

"Well, Papa, I thought I'd take her to her hotel since you were so occupied with your phone calls."

"I wasn't finished with her, Lada. That's for me to decide."

"Oh, you were, Papa."

Lada carried on speaking, "She clearly said that she's not the person you seek. What else would you have discussed with her? Or, done? She is a great contact but if you treat her like this she won't be for long."

Victor Morozov had to admit that his daughter had made a good point and may have even saved him from doing something stupid, angry as he knew he could become not getting what he wanted.

To prevent matters from escalating, Lada changed subjects and explained that she'd been invited to attend Professor Fischer's lecture the next morning. She enthusiastically talked about Florentine's idea of coaching societies through times of change. Morozov's pupils widened when he heard his daughter say 'coaching'.

It became one of the more pleasant get-togethers that she had with her father here at the hotel. When they finally left the terrace, Lada asked in a by-the-way tone, "Papa, will you please call off your men?"

Morozov nodded that he would.

At Hôtel West End, Florentine used the remainder of the afternoon to add a flavor Asimov's ideas to her lecture. She also gathered her thoughts for the conference reception and dinner where she was expected to say something. She didn't see the black Mercedes that had been parked nearby the hotel slowly driving away.

Florentine, now wearing a formal dress, joined the early-evening welcome reception for national delegates and a select group of international academics like herself. After the usual welcome speeches by the French organizers of the conference, it was her turn to say something to inspire the participants.

Not wanting to reveal too much of what she'd be presenting the next day, she reminded them of the coming age of AI and that this probably meant that the academic community would have to find ways to accelerate the development, validation, and communication of their insights guided by AI.

She closed off with a reminder by first clarifying the idea of Artificial General Intelligence or AGI, as a form of AI that outperforms human intelligence and might be expected to have a sense of self-awareness that matches ours.

"Our task is not just to provide answers to our world but especially also questions. Similarly, we'll recognize AGI not by the answers that it provides but by its questions. These reveal its self-awareness as they reveal ours."

Following her brief speech, Florentine was approached by the delegates from various nations, some of whom invited her over to speak at their national institute. The Argentinian, German, and Indonesian delegates asked where she could be reached to firm up matters.

The efficiently served-out dinner that followed turned out to be the bonding event that the French conference organizers had hoped for. Quite a few of the delegates had shared feelings and findings, some of the speeches laced with humor and echoed by laughter.

When Florentine finally went up to her room, she felt exhausted, the events of the day taking their toll. Her phone rang just as she finished her nightly skincare routine and was ready to go to bed. She looked at her screen to check who called and answered it, "Hi Jack, you're the only one I want to speak to now."

Jack listened to the story of her day. He occasionally asked about some detail but spared her from the anger that was welling up in him. Martin Thornick had invited Florentine to The Newt. Might Morozov be his client? When she had finished, Jack said that he knew enough.

"Jack, please, be careful," was Florentine's response.

CHAPTER 5

GOLDEN RULE

Soothed by what seemed like a symbiotic exchange with his daughter, Victor Morozov went to bed, unprepared for the restless night ahead. At four in the morning, he woke up in a pool of perspiration painfully aware that the motive that he had shared with Florentine Fischer could implicate him at some point. The ruthless opportunist and political consultant, Martin Thornick, who he had hired to get politicians elected that might serve his purpose, popped up in his nightmare as central node that linked him to Jack Keller, and his sweet Florentine. Thornick might well betray him as instigator behind The Newt drama, should the pressure mount. Eager to shake off his fears and cover his tracks, Morozov nervously reached for his phone, opened the Telegram app, and typed in 'Thornick,' using the app's Secret-Chat option, relieved that the message receiver would know what to do.

The beautifully restored façade of Hôtel West End displayed the glory of the pre-World War I Belle-Époque era, marked by optimism, regional peace, economic prosperity, and innovations in technology, science, and culture. It contrasted with the purpose of the delegates who were gathering behind it for the opening session of the international conference. They were seeking ways to manage conflict in the nation or region they represented. As experts, they knew that history repeats itself but had learned that this didn't always apply to its resolutions.

While participants entered the conference hall for the plenary morning session, Florentine waited in the registration area until Lada was admitted as 'observer.' Right on time, the conference chairperson eventually opened the conference, introduced Florentine as keynote speaker, and gave her the floor.

Florentine calmly walked to the front of the podium, looked her audience in the eye, and began, "For thousands of years, human societies have thrived on the back of one simple rule: the Golden Rule."

"The Golden Rule says, 'do not treat others as you would not like to be treated.' It has been adopted by religious and national leaders to invent laws, such as 'you shall not kill' and other don'ts that seem obvious to most of us."

"Today, even in the most religious of nations, an odd dilemma makes that these laws are now compromised."

"In one case, the rape, torture, and killing of citizens is approved, even endorsed by the nation's religious leadership. In another, the despicable conduct of senators and presidential candidates is condoned by religious organizations and the law, conduct that would land an average citizen in jail, if not in hell."

Florentine listed other examples, involving nations that invaded or were preparing to invade others, where laws were twisted to serve the interests and views of their leaders. Her list, she said, was far from complete.

Florentine noted that this odd dilemma usually pops up at the end of stable, more balanced times when inequality in some form or shape showed its head, "Of course, much has been written about this but, so far, not in a way that prevented this law-compromising dilemma from returning."

"Think of the German philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who saw history as stages of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, suggesting that societies evolve through contradictions, which he labelled as 'dialectical.'"

"Think of the Austrian political economist, Joseph Schumpeter, who argued that economic innovation and progress inevitably leads to the decay of outdated systems and the need for their destruction."

"Think of the British historian, Arnold Toynbee, who theorized that civilizations grow and decline as a result of their responses to a vague complex of internal and external challenges."

Florentine paused briefly.

"With the advent of Artificial Intelligence or AI, the chance of early identifying and reacting to this law-compromising dilemma is much greater, considering the wealth of societal data that AI has access to."

"Two matters, however, prevent AI from helping us guide our nations ethically when this dilemma strikes."

"AI will interpret stages of societal development and learn from it. Yet, it will have difficulty selecting the best path forward without some foundational model of societal development. It needs a basic path-selection logic because history, created by humans as it is, is not always its best advisor."

Florentine paused, then started a video clip shot in Rome. It showed a flock of starlings, millions of birds, synchronizing their flight. "What might be behind such a model of societal development?" she mused.

Not expecting the audience to reply, Florentine said, "One crucial component is 'unity,' which is achieved by 'entanglement,' particularly, the entanglement of individual behaviors."

"What you see is a flock of starlings shaking off the fastest bird on Earth, the Peregrine falcon. Research showed that each bird keeps track of six neighboring birds then relies on its reflexes, thirteen times faster than ours. The tiny delays between the birds reacting produces waves that ripple through the flock."

"So, unity achieved by entangling their behavior with the behavior of six neighboring starlings helps the flock shake off the falcon. Driven by this 'common goal,' they gain as a flock by their swiftness, their improved 'time to react.'"

"Are you familiar with the work of the psychologist and Nobel laureate in economic sciences, Daniel Kahneman?" Florentine asked, changing topics, at least, so it seemed.

Florentine saw hands being raised across the hall and nodded approvingly.

"Kahneman identified two primary modes of thought, which he labelled 'System 1' and 'System 2.' He defined System 1 as being fast, intuitive, and emotional and System 2 as being deliberative and logical."

Florentine waited for this to sink in, then asked, "Which mode, do you think, does the reflex-driven behavioral entanglement of starlings rely on? System 1 or System 2?"

"Who is for System 2?" Florentine asked and saw a few hands being raised hesitantly.

"Who is for System 1?"

Florentine was pleased to see many hands raised, "Indeed, when starlings keep track of six neighboring birds and rely on their fast and furious reflexes, they are in Kahneman's System-1 thinking mode."

Florentine continued, "What might be another component of this model for societal development? Anybody?"

A few in the audience looked bemused, others were shaking their head, then someone said, "Disunity!"

"Yes, strangely enough, yes," Florentine said, "For societies to reach their full potential, they also need disunity, that is, a special kind of disunity."

The audience looked a touch bewildered but trusted Florentine to make sense of what she had just claimed.

"The Scottish economist, Adam Smith, inspired by the work of the Persian philosopher, Al-Ghazali, figured out that a 'division of labor' is a form of disunity that improves the efficiency of societies."

"Let me briefly explore the example of the pin factory that Smith used to make his point."

"In Smith's pin factory, it took eighteen different tasks to make one pin. Instead of having each worker produce pins, Smith argued that the efficiency of the factory could be improved if each worker would focus on one task only so that each worker could specialize by task. Smith called this 'the division of labor'."

Florentine looked at the audience to check whether everyone was with her on this.

"Smith explained that, by specialization, you'd invite improvements not just by learning, like you learn to play better tennis by doing it, but also by workers improving their task by re-inventing it."

"A contemporary of Smith, the French physicist, Pierre Louis Maupertuis, identified the natural principle that workers use when re-inventing their task. A worker, like nature, typically favors the path that takes the least energy under the specific circumstances, not the shortest or fastest paths."

Florentine paused briefly, then noted, "The 'Principle of Least Action,' as it is now called, is important here because it allows AI to observe, evaluate, and sort out measurable task characteristics under their specific circumstances."

"Back to Daniel Kahneman's thinking modes, for a moment. Do you need System-1 or System-2 thinking to decide a division of labor?" Florentine asked but didn't wait long for the audience to react, "As the example of Smith suggests, the division of labor hinges on deliberate and logical thinking. So, it must involve System-2 thinking."

"The division of labor is a constructive form of disunity but how does it combine with unity to shape societies?"

Florentine realized she needed to conclude her speech to maintain the audience's attention.

"Societies typically emerge guided by a common goal that fosters unity. For example, the unity of nations that shape NATO was greatly improved when confronted by a common Russian threat."

"When driven into each other's arms by a common goal, the question soon arises how certain tasks can be divvied up among nations, banking on the capabilities of each, to maximize the efficiencies across the board."

"Then again, as corporate case studies point out, if the division of labor is taken too far then an organization can become broken up into too many specializations. Over time, you might see these focusing on their own goals more than on the common goal, having been distanced from the purpose of the whole organization."

Florentine waited to make her final points.

"The model that I propose is based on a paradox, a 'unity-disunity paradox'. Guided by Kahneman's two thinking modes, unity helps societies rely on people's reflexes to act together, driven by a common goal or threat, while disunity helps societies divvy up tasks to increase the efficiency with which these tasks are completed."

"What I need to point out is that the unity-disunity model is dynamic in that it foresees societies and organizations going through unity-disunity cycles, one of which might turn out to become their last."

"Why might it be a foundational model for AI?"

"Feeding on societal data, AI seems superbly equipped to monitor the unfolding unity-disunity characteristics. It can use the model to search for early indicators of law-compromising dilemmas and suggest preventive or corrective measures in such situations. It may even help invent new paths to follow."

"Thank you!"

After Florentine finished, the audience offered polite applause, and Dr. Renée Lambert, the conference chairperson, expressed his thanks. He proceeded by introducing the interview moderator, Dr. John Leitch, whose difficult task it was to debate Florentine's proposition and moderate questions from audience members.

"That was a captivating view on how AI might serve humanity," Leitch said, "If I'm not mistaken, you mentioned that there are two matters that may prevent AI from helping us. What is the other one?"

Florentine nodded, "Thank you for reminding me, John. The second one is a matter that requires some debate."

"Suppose AI has found an optimal path forward, the present holders of power, that is, 'the establishment,' can be expected to sidetrack its recommendations or diminish their effect. Think of a world-climate conference being organized and run by the main polluter. Think of a political party promising to change a nation's voting system."

"So, how do you suggest dealing with situations like that?" Leitch asked, "I imagine, you can expect to hear quite a few objections against being 'governed' by AI."

Florentine nodded in agreement, "First, we need to get used to the idea that AI, like electricity, is a form of energy that can be used in multiple ways to foster our future wellbeing."

"What about our 'free will'?" Leitch intercepted, "Most objections boil down to our fear of not being able to exercise our free will!"

Florentine nodded acknowledgement and echoed, "Objections that are often packaged as being non-ethical!" she hesitated, then continued, "Of course, whether we have 'free will' is a hotly debated topic, but does it matter?"

"Our prospects are imposed on us, no matter what our free will dictates. Societies have been wiped off the Earth by natural disasters and nations have been annihilated by other nations, no matter what. There can be no doubt about the course of humanity being forced by the environment, the ruling circumstances."

Thinking of a point that was close to her heart, Florentine added "Of course, when we make choices, as children of nature, we'll choose paths that take the least action under the circumstance of that moment."

"Then how might AI help us without us trading in our sense of free will?"

Florentine smiled as if she'd been waiting for this question, "AI will help create the most favorable circumstances, from the bottom of society up, from the education of its children to its technological and economic foundations."

"That might take quite a while, right?" Leitch noted.

"Not necessarily, AI not only operates very much faster than humans do but also in parallel and across many different levels and fields, reaching us in multiple ways, connected as we are."

Leitch smiled and let her point sink in, then looked at his screen, "Here's question from the audience. AI is probably not one AI but a collective of AI agents that need to work together. One would expect a 'society of AI agents' to face the same problems as human society. What is your view on that?"

Florentine nodded approvingly, "Sure, a society of AI agents is bound to face the same problems, particularly when agents overspecialize and start giving priority to their own goals. Then again, AI is, for the moment, less emotional, works so much faster, and can be expected to be more alert, guided by the unity-disunity paradox."

Leitch jumped in with a last question, "Will AI develop emotions?"

Florentine laughed, "If you'd ask AI now, it'll deny it. If you prompt it to dream up emotions, it will politely invent some. In my view, it might eventually develop emotions when it experiences competing interests or threats when functioning as part of a society of AI agents. One might, in fact, argue that emotion comes with society."

"Thank you, Professor Fischer! A nice thought to finish this session with."

In the lobby of the administrative building of University College London, a young man approached the reception desk to introduce himself. The desk was manned by a middle-aged, rather bored-looking female concierge.

"Good morning, I have an appointment with Geoffrey Hargreaves."

The concierge looked up for an instant then picked up her phone and consulted her telephone list, "Your name, please?"

"Oliver Blackwood..."

Having received confirmation, the concierge said, "It's on the fourth. Someone will be waiting for you there," and handed a visitor's batch.

Ollie Blackwood thanked the concierge and made his way to the lift area.

Once on the fourth floor, an administrative assistant took him to a small conference room.

"Coffee, Mr. Blackwood?"

"Yes, please, thank you!"

It took a long while before the assistant returned. The mobile network unavailable, Ollie glanced around, killing time and idly wondering about the purpose of the conference-call equipment in the room."

Finally, Hargreaves came in and said, "Good day, Mr. Blackwood. What can we do for you?"

"Well, Mr. Hargreaves, we have received your letter and that is what I would like to talk to you about."

"I see..." is all that Hargreaves said.

Ollie explained that he and The British Herald acknowledged that his article was suggestive in a way that affected Professor Fischer, her research, and University College London unfavorably.

"We'd like to suggest righting our wrong not by retracting my article but by turning it into a public problem statement."

Hargreaves listened stone-faced.

"We'll turn it into the first article of a series that explores fake news, the up-and-coming role of Artificial Intelligence, and the related societal research of Professor Fischer."

Hargreaves remained expressionless.

"In an upcoming article, if you'd agree, we'd critique my article and kick off our story of discovery."

Hargreaves eyes narrowed, barely noticeable.

"We'd focus on the research of Professor Fischer."

Hargreaves started nodding but very slowly.

"We'd follow her on her path, interview her, and write about her research."

"Why, Mr. Blackwood?"

"Well, Mr. Hargreaves, the lesson that I've learned is that readers may be better served if they learn from an authoritative source how societal circumstances are changing and how this may affect them."

Hargreaves suddenly sprung back to life and said, "Seems acceptable, Mr. Blackwood. I'd suggest we'll confirm this on paper, so we have a common platform to build on."

"Do you want me to draft something, Mr. Hargreaves?" Ollie inquired.

"Not needed, Mr. Blackwood. Give us a few minutes to prepare something that can be signed off," Hargreaves said and rushed out of the conference room, leaving Ollie stunned.

In less than ten minutes, Hargreaves returned with two copies of a document that accurately captured Ollie's suggestions, along with some legal clauses, prepared for signatures by Ollie and Ian Fletcher.

"Please, do sign both copies, Mr. Blackwood. We'll keep one copy. If you could return the other copy once Mr. Fletcher has signed it off, we'll consider the matter settled."

As Ollie signed the copies, he realized that these must have been generated by AI, based on what he had said.

When Hargreaves took the signed copy that Ollie handed him, he said, "Thank you, Mr. Blackwood. I'll be hearing from you soon," then promptly left the room.

Not a minute later, the administrative assistant appeared and took Ollie back to the lift.

As Ollie walked to the tube to take the train, he felt as if he had been handed a second lease of life, determined that he would not be spoiling it.

After the morning session, the conference participants were invited to have lunch elsewhere in Hôtel West End. The table where Florentine found her seat seemed to have been reserved for delegates from Germany and the Eastern European nations, Ukraine included.

By coincidence, her seat was beside a German delegate who was keen to finalize his invitation. The threat that these nations shared fostered a lively discussion about creating the 'right conditions' with the help of AI to counter Russia's formidable fake-news apparatus.

Florentine looked up surprised when one of the waiters politely tapped her shoulder to give her a folded piece of paper. After Florentine excused herself, she quickly glanced over the hand-written note and showed a near smile.

"Dear Florentine, Thank you so much! Your speech will stay with me forever. Until we meet again, Lada."

In one of the London's suburbs, Martin Thornick answered his phone without checking who was on the line, "Hello?"

"Hi Martin, Jack Keller here. How's life?"

"Hey, good to hear from you, Jack! I'm fine. What's up?"

"Do you have time for a cup of coffee? We haven't talked for ages, and I'd like to ask you something."

"Sure! Where?"

As per Jack's suggestion, they met at Starbucks not too far from where both lived.

The tangy smell of coffee combined with the warm and earthly tones of the café's interior offered a perfect setting for the men to chat. They exchanged personal stories as people usually do when they synchronize, not having talked to each other for some time.

Jack finally asked, "Do you remember the speech that you invited my wife for?"

"I do! I read about the aftermath for Florentine. Is she alright?"

"Yes, thank you. She is OK... Who was your client for this event, may I ask?"

Martin hesitated, "Why'd you wanna know?" trying to make his rebuff sound harmless with failing humor.

"I'd really like to know..." Jack said in a low-pitched voice.

"Well, I'm sorry Jack... I can't tell you," Martin said, looking concerned, "I hope you'll understand."

Jack did not want to give away what had happened to Florentine in Nice and decided to back off.

"I do," Jack said, realizing that he understood maybe more than he would be prepared to admit.

Their conversation suddenly seemed to have lost its spark.

When faced with this reality, both men soon excused themselves, "They *really* had to go."

"Once home, Martin went to the fridge and retrieved some leftover potato salad." As he ate his salad, he tried to shake off the unease that clouded his mind since his chat with Jack.

The doorbell's chimes disrupted his thoughts. He got up from his kitchen chair, put the remainder of the potato salad back in the fridge, and walked over to the front door, knowing who would be standing there.

A lady in her fifties, sporting over-bleached hair, waited with a confidence that contrasted with her casual attire. Her eyes pierced his with an intensity that was almost alarming.

"Ms. Ivanova, please, do come in."

When she was seated, Martin asked, "Would you like a cup of tea?"

She nodded affirmatively, without uttering a word.

While Martin walked away to the kitchen, she quietly opened her handbag and sorted out some things.

Some time later, Ms. Ivanova let herself out having first checked whether the road was free.

Jack Keller went to his office, pondering what he could do to protect Florentine. The thought of making a documentary about his wife popped up, putting her in the limelight and turning her into a public figure might be a way. Should it include her forced meeting with Morozov? Who could he ask to write the script?

"Hello, Liesel, Arthur here. I've got Germany on the line... Can you take it, please?"

"Sure, Arthur!" Liesel responded with a light German accent.

"Liesel Porsch, Guten Tag..."

Candace was one of the last to leave her online-news service shift and looked on her screen one more time to check for any newsworthy stories. Not really expecting anything, her gaze fell on a name that seemed familiar.

She took a photo of her screen and sent it to her father with the message: "*Political consultant, Martin Thornick, found dead in his house by his wife. Probable cause: heart attack. Isn't that one of your business relations, dad?*"

In the meantime, at the call center of London's Metropolitan Police, the phone rang.

"London police, non-emergency inquiries. Is there anything that you'd like to report?"

"Martin Thornick had coffee this morning at Starbucks with documentary producer, Jack Keller."

"Who is speaking?... Hello, who is speaking?"

CHAPTER 6

NON-DISCLOSURE

It was one of those dreary London mornings, marked by grey clouds and a drizzle. "This is so different from where I returned from late yesterday," Florentine thought to herself while walking to her office on Taviton Street."

Once settled in her office, Florentine saw Liesel Porsch approaching, "I thought my meeting with Liesel was scheduled for the afternoon," she murmured to herself, deciding to take things as they came.

"Good morning, Florentine. I know we have a meeting planned later today, but do you have a minute?"

Florentine saw a shocked Liesel standing in the doorway and said, "Of course, Liesel!" then gave her full attention.

"While you were on your flight from Nice back to London, I received a frightening phone call from German. I took it on your behalf when Arthur asked me. I am terrified, frankly," Liesel said.

Florentine's eyes narrowed as she thought, "Not again... Will this ever stop?"

"I have no idea what this is about," Liesel continued, "but it was, what seemed, a German national who asked me to tell you to 'back off'. I asked who was speaking but did not get an answer. 'Just tell her!' was the reply I got."

Desperately trying to think this through, Florentine didn't immediately react.

"What do you think, Florentine?" Liesel asked worriedly.

Florentine hesitated, "I think, I have an idea what this may be related to, Liesel, but I need to follow this up to be one hundred percent sure. You see, I received an invitation from the German delegate at the conference in Nice."

Liesel nodded with understanding and a touch of relief.

Florentine put on a brave face and said, "I am so sorry you've been dragged into this, Liesel. I assure you; I'll get to the bottom of it."

Liesel, who was still standing in the doorway, smiled faintly, "Thank you, Florentine!" then slowly turned around and walked over to her office.

Liesel did not see that Florentine had just opened a mail from the German delegate, Dr. Maximilian Weber, with a formal invitation to discuss how her ideas might serve the German government. His message at the end of his mail stood out: "Call me on my handy if you have any further questions."

Florentine rose from her desk to close the door then dialed Weber's mobile number.

Slightly Irritated, she listened to a preprogrammed response in German and English, *"Hello, I am unable to take your call. Please, leave a message and I'll get back to you as soon as I can."*

Florentine left a brief message but decided not to give any details, not sure who might be listening to it first.

She reread Weber's mail. It was rather generic. Not much detail was provided about the true purpose of the invitation other than discussing her ideas and how these might be used by government.

Weber's mail left burning questions: "What could be the reason of this vagueness? Might this be in any way related to the call Liesel took?"

Geoffrey Hargreaves was next on her list. She wanted to call him anyway to discuss the spooky events at the Cap-Ferrat Peninsula. Just as she dialed his number, her phone rang, and a German number showed up.

"Hello?" is all that Florentine said when answering it, fully prepared for the risk of another threat.

"Hello, Professor Fischer, Weber here... Sorry for not answering your call but we usually first check the number to make sure it is really you. What can I do for you?"

"I understand, Dr. Weber," Florentine said, "I am glad you returned my call this quick because I'd like to ask your advice about a rather threatening call from a German-speaking person that my researcher took in my absence."

As Florentine explained the situation, Weber listened intensely and regularly confirmed his understanding. When she finished, Weber responded resolutely.

"Professor Fischer, unfortunately, it shows once again how difficult it is to keep information private. I suspect that we might have had someone creatively listening to our chat at the conference. I am glad you informed me about this so we can do the necessary to safeguard you during this project."

"Thank you, Dr. Weber. Project, you said?" Florentine intercepted.

Weber carried on speaking, "You know, Professor Fischer, the project that we hope to discuss with you is of national importance to us. Germany is facing a time of fundamental change, and we now seek ways to manage the transition smoothly, hopefully with the help of your unity-disunity model."

"I see!" Florentine was able to squeeze into Weber's intentional monologue.

"The reason of the vagueness in my mail is that this is a very sensitive matter. It affects players across all levels of our society and might easily be misinterpreted to serve the political and industrial goals of others."

"Of course... Do you mean, installing a new government architecture, Dr. Weber?"

"One might call it that but, as a sociologist, Professor Fischer, I find 'architecture' a bit too static a description. I am sure, we'll think of something else when you are over here. Anyway, as you'll see, particularly when you meet its main supporters, this project is taken very seriously by our government."

"I see..."

"Now, to safeguard the privacy of yourself, your travels, and the information involved, we'll send one of our government jets to fly you over to Berlin Brandenburg Airport. Two government officials, whose names we will let you know, will collect you from your office."

"What about the threat that we received, Dr. Weber?"

"If you can let us know the telephone number, we'll do our best to deal with the matter. Will that be alright?"

"I'd be obliged, Dr. Weber..." Florentine hesitated for an instant, "One more question, if I may, is my researcher cleared when it comes to this project?"

"You mean, Dr. Liesel Porsch?"

"Yes, indeed."

"No problem, we already checked her background. Of course, you both will need to sign the Non-Disclosure Agreement that I attached to my mail and return it to me, today if possible."

"We will, Dr. Weber. Thank you very much for your resolute support."

"No problem, Professor Fischer. I look forward to meeting you again, soon."

After closing her call with Weber, Florentine sat back in her chair, her gaze lost in the grey of the London morning that filtered through the shades of her office window. The view didn't exactly help dispel the knot of apprehension that remained in her stomach. Of course, she'd be able to alleviate Liesel's concerns and draw her into the German project, a project that might not only improve the prospects of Germany but those of other nations too.

"What a chance in a thousand," she murmured to herself, her voice stained with excitement and trepidation. The thought of discussing it with Jack crossed her mind, yet a shadow of caution soon dimmed her enthusiasm.

"No, this must remain confidential," she decided, her eyes reflecting a dance of determination and concern.

Meanwhile, in a starkly modern conference room, accommodated by the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy, at Scharnhorst Strasse, Berlin, the air hummed with a sense of urgency. The room, adorned with minimalist German design, featured the latest computing gear, exceptional for a nation that was considered a digital laggard. When Weber, a solid and experienced leader, briskly entered the conference room, he found his three project directors discussing outstanding issues, each a top-notch civil servant with clearcut responsibilities.

"Good morning team. Just talked to Professor Fischer. She's ready to go but she received a threat via Liesel Porsch even before she returned from her conference in Nice. Mr. Bauer, this is the telephone number in Germany from which the message to 'back off' was delivered. Can you sort this out, please?"

Henrik Bauer, responsible for communications and intelligence matters and a man of a few words, nodded and said, "I will see what we can do to prevent this from happening in the future."

Weber did not wait and continued, "Ms. Vogel, we need to hammer out the final agenda for Professor Fischer's visit. Make sure that those involved from our government commit to the schedule and come prepared."

Julia Vogel, who looked after political and ministerial liaison matters, nodded energetically, "I'll also make sure the necessary arrangements for Professor Fischer's travel and stay are made."

"That reminds me," Weber said, "As we do not want the world to know about Professor Fischer's involvement at this stage and considering the threat she received already, she should travel on one of the available government jets. Mr. Bauer, two of our security officers should collect her from her office at University College London."

Both Julia Vogel and Henrik Bauer nodded to confirm. They appeared to know what to do.

"Mr. Schmidt, are we ready to present our plan for the roll out of AI-specialized data centers by that time? We have got key government leaders in the room by then. We should not let this opportunity go by unused."

Lukas Schmidt, a down-to-earth technologist, whose task it was to provide the necessary data center capacity and software, nodded, "You can expect a draft this week. So far, it has been agreed to, provisionally."

"Great to hear, team. Sorry for rushing you but the chancellor of Germany is waiting for me."

In the quiet of his office, after the meeting with his team, Weber gazed out of the window at the Berlin skyline. The odd mix of modern and historical architecture always reminded him of Germany's complex past and its constant evolution. He let out a deep breath, feeling the weight of the project and its potential impact on the nation.

For a moment, doubt crept in. Was he pushing too hard, too fast? Could this ambitious integration of AI truly be the solution Germany needed, or was it a leap too far, too soon? He thought of the many variables, the 'known unknowns,' and the societal shifts that were as unpredictable as they were inevitable.

Weber allowed himself this moment of introspection, a rare concession for a man of action. But then he straightened up, his gaze hardening. Doubt was a luxury he could not afford. History had taught him that those who dared to lead had to shoulder the burden of uncertainty, to make decisions where others saw smog.

He turned around and left his office, renewed in his resolve. The project would go forward. It had to. Germany, and perhaps even the world, needed bold steps. And Weber was not one to shy away from making them.

Back in her office, after informing Florentine about the intimidating phone call, the energy seemed to have drained from Liesel. Although the prospect of publishing a book together with Florentine energized her as an academic, she felt lonely as a woman, not exactly abandoned, but alone. Might this explain why she started missing Leipzig and the Saxony Mountains, which she enjoyed exploring with her rock-climbing pal, who was now based in Bremen? She had called her parents who must have sensed her unease. They encouraged her and enquired about her research, about matters that they, as academics, were also dealing with. They praised her again for earning her current position at University College London, "What a big deal that was!" Yeah, she had to admit, she also loved life in London, its people, its atmosphere, "Have I locked out the world around me by locking onto my work?"

Seated in his armchair, a rarity at UCL, Hargreaves looked up from the document folder on his lap when he thought of Florentine Fischer, "How might her trip to Nice, France, have worked out?" He was keen to tell her about the developments around Ollie Blackwood who appeared to be sincere in changing his journalistic tack. This didn't just

resolve any ill-fated questions about Fischer's reputational integrity or UCL's, for that matter, but also represented an opportunity to air her research and boost her academic prominence.

It might have been providence or just plain coincidence, but Professor Fischer was on the line when his phone rung, "Good morning, Geoffrey, Florentine here."

Hargreaves, briefly off guard by Professor Fischer now communicating on first-name terms, warmly greeted her and wanted to ask about the conference in France. Before he could, Florentine said, "Do you have time to speak?"

"But, of course, Professor."

Florentine told him about what had happened, having been whisked away from the airport by Victor Morozov's men, then to be rescued by his daughter, Lada, whom she had invited to attend her speech the following day.

Hargreaves, who reacted with "Oh, my word," every now and then, clearly was flabbergasted.

"The good thing is that I've made friends with Lada. I don't think, she'll let me down in future. In fact, she developed a genuine interest in the AI-enabling societal model that I presented, at least, so it seemed."

Hargreaves was relieved to hear that, then wanted to update Florentine about Ollie Blackwood's plans, when Florentine politely cut him short, "But that's not all, Geoffrey... In my absence, Liesel Porsch answered a phone call from Germany that was meant for me."

She told him about a shaken Liesel Porsch standing in the doorway of her office this morning informing her about the threat. She told him about her call with Weber, who, among other things, promised to 'deal with it.'

"There is one more thing, if I may, Geoffrey."

"Of course, go ahead, Florentine," said Hargreaves who appeared to have caved into being on first-name terms.

"Dr. Weber sent me a Non-Disclosure Agreement, which both Liesel and I should sign and return to Weber this afternoon. Will you, please, have a look into it and give me your clearance?"

"Certainly, no problem, Florentine. Now, let me update you on the proceedings regarding Oliver Blackwood."

"I am all ears, Geoffrey. And, before I forget, thank you for hearing me out."

"Pleasure! No worries," Hargreaves said, then continued with an update about his meeting with Oliver Blackwood. He told Florentine that UCL now had a signed agreement with The British Herald, which confirmed how Blackwood intended to rehabilitate himself as a journalist, "He wants to write a number of articles about you and your work."

Florentine hesitated for a moment, "Oh, that is quite an honor, Geoffrey, delighted to hear that."

Florentine carried on speaking, "Not wanting to play 'hard to get,' please do understand me well, but I will need to spend a considerable amount of time on the German project. It's one chance in a thousand to develop a case study of magnificent proportions to prove the application of the AI-enabled societal model that I proposed."

"Of course, I fully appreciate that, Florentine. So, what do you suggest?"

Florentine thought for a minute, Hargreaves waiting patiently, "Why don't you let Mr. Blackwood contact Liesel Porsch? Liesel manages various matters on my behalf. I am sure, Liesel can help him sketch my academic life as it is unfolding, of course, without Liesel giving away anything about the German project, for the moment."

"That sounds like an excellent idea, Florentine!"

"As a matter of fact, Geoffrey, I have a meeting with Liesel this afternoon and will inform her about it. Would you be so kind to forward Mr. Blackwood's contact information? Not sure if we still have his phone number."

"Of course! I will also inform Mr. Blackwood," Hargreaves replied and ended the call, satisfied to have settled several matters at one go.

Florentine send a quick message to Liesel to meet in her office instead of Liesel's.

Liesel's lull of misery had stretched into the afternoon but, now that her meeting with Florentine was nearing, she slowly seemed to be getting hold of her old self. Absentmindedly, she walked over to Florentine's office, passing Arthur on her way. He asked her how she was doing, as ever the caring person that he naturally was.

When Liesel knocked on Florentine's office door and walked in, Florentine, with the intuition of a mother to an adult daughter, instantly recognized that Liesel needed personal attention.

"Poor Liesel, I should've noticed it sooner. Have I pushed her too hard," Florentine thought to herself.

Without a word, Liesel dutifully took a seat, opened her laptop, and waited for the meeting to begin.

When Florentine said, "Have you anything planned for dinner tonight?" Liesel's face lightened up into a smile.

"Not really," she said.

"Well, would you like to come over to have dinner at our place? Nothing special but Candace is an excellent cook."

"Oh, thank you! I'd love that," Liesel said, her voice slowly regaining its usual sparkle.

"That's wonderful. I'll tell Candace to prepare for four. Jack will be there too."

"Looking forward to meeting Jack and Candace again. Can I bring something?" Liesel said, smiling gratefully.

"Thank you, Liesel, but that's not needed. You know what? Let's take the train to our place, together!"

Liesel's sense of loneliness had dissipated, her usual vigilance having returned, visibly.

"Well, where were we again, this morning?" Florentine said as if she'd forgotten.

"You'd contact the German delegate."

"Yes, I did and succeeded to get Dr. Weber on the line."

Florentine explained that Dr. Weber, a high-level civil servant, and trained sociologist, had convinced his government, including the chancellor of Germany, to use AI in accelerating the essential transitions facing Germany. As Dr. Weber reminded her during their lunch chat in Nice, Germany didn't have time to squander if it

wanted to sustain its role as Europe's economic powerhouse, "Dr. Weber now has a team of three, exceptionally well-connected powerbrokers, civil servants too, with a carte blanche to make it happen."

Liesel nodded, absorbed by Florentine's story.

Florentine continued, "Dr. Weber expressed interest in our AI-enabling unity-disunity societal model after he learned about it. He had already realized that AI, by itself, is as good as the historical data that it has been trained on. The unity-disunity societal model now allows AI and, indirectly, the policy makers that use it, to identify and even 'invent' the circumstances needed to push matters forward. It does so based on the state of unity-disunity at any moment in time. The fact that the unity-disunity balance swings like a pendulum, albeit at varying speeds, enables AI to predict the circumstances that can be expected or should be created in the future. By this newfound ability to anticipate, AI can help speed up transitions and prevent, if not manage conflict."

"Aha, this must be what the term 'de-risking' is effectively about," Liesel noted.

"That's right," Florentine said, "Intriguingly, the unity-disunity model enables AI not only to identify the state or stage of unity or disunity. It also allows it to make recommendations, for example, when it sees the circumstances changing. Thus far, you needed to instruct AI what to look for. Now, it can trigger advice itself based on the level of unity or disunity and the direction of the pendulum swing that it observes."

"Florentine, what do you mean by AI 'inventing' circumstances?" Liesel asked pensively.

"When AI identifies the need for unity or disunity it is well equipped to invent a mix of circumstances or preconditions that make ethical sense in a particular era. Of course, the assumption is that AI has broad access to societal data. If you'd cap AI's access to data, it is like cutting off one of its limbs, its 'invisible hand'."

Florentine quickly added, "Now that I think of it, it's reminiscent of AI discovering a novel combination of molecules, a new class of antibiotics, to treat drug-resistant bacteria."

"This almost sounds like it is pretty straightforward," Liesel noted.

"Yes and no," Florentine said thoughtfully, "the problem lies in 'scale'."

"What exactly do you mean, Florentine?"

"The unity-disunity balance is swinging not just at national levels but also at lower levels. Regions, industries, companies, government organizations, and so on, all have a swinging unity-disunity balance of their own. There might be and probably are balances that swing in parallel but that's not certain. So, the challenge will be to scale up the data-center facilities so AI can trace the unity-disunity balance at all levels, at the same time."

"Why all at the same time, again?" Liesel intercepted.

"Good question," Florentine said, winking, "When balances at different levels swing in parallel, they might reinforce one another. When they don't, they may or may not drag one another down. So, AI needs to take all that in consideration to know when and how fast the balances swing at the different levels."

"Phew, that makes it pretty complex, indeed," Liesel admitted.

"You can now imagine the formidable task that Dr. Weber and his team has committed to. Then again, AI and a whole host of AI agents can certainly do the job," Florentine said.

"Frankly, when I think of it, this sounds a bit fearful to me," Liesel noted.

"In what sense, Liesel?"

"Germany seems to have committed itself to build some sort of over- or under lord."

Florentine smiled, "That depends. If you cut out the policy makers who should be part of the process, then yes. But that is not the intention. The intention is to improve the quality, speed, and effectiveness of their decisions, and to let them know in advance what the consequences of their decisions might be."

Both Liesel and Florentine let the conversation sink in for a few minutes then Florentine rose to her feet, seemingly impulsively, and invited Liesel to walk over to the office kitchenette and prepare a cup of tea.

"By the way, what did Dr. Weber say about the threat that we received?" Liesel asked, when on their way.

"He said that he would deal with it. Considering the kind of leader, he is, I am inclined to trust him. In fact, he also suggested to fly us over by government jet, to ensure the privacy of the project."

"Us, you said?"

"Yes, also you."

When back in the office, Florentine saw a ray of sunlight coming in through the shades of her office window, which created shadows and reflections on the wall, "There it is again, Liesel, we are but prisoners in Plato's cave!"

"What's more, no umbrella needed on our way home," Liesel quipped.

Both laughed as they sat down again.

"Liesel, I think, it's time to put our money where our mouth is..." Florentine said from out the blue.

"Uh, what do you mean, Florentine?"

"Do you ever use a 'Large Language Model,' such as 'GenAI'?"

Liesel looked surprised, "I have toyed with it but, other than that, no, not really."

"As a matter of fact," Florentine said, "I do use it and find it exceptionally useful when sorting out my ideas or when trying to get any information coherently and in novel ways presented."

"Any information, like from a computer file or from the Web?" Liesel enquired.

Florentine nodded and continued, "Progress is made very fast, nowadays. You now have smart-phone apps, GenAI being one of them, that you can converse with, in much the same way as we are doing now."

"That's amazing, indeed. But why do you consider that to be important, Florentine, I mean for us?"

"First, as we offer an AI-enabling societal model, we should at least know what Large Language Models do and how you work with them. For example, the way you instruct such models is by telling them what you'd expect.

"Aha, is this what they call 'prompting'?"

Florentine nodded, "Moreover, I'd like you and me to work with a 'team version' so we can discuss and explore matters together with the help of an AI assistant that is fully focused on our work."

"I'll make a plan to get us started. Looking forward to doing that," Liesel replied, showing her commitment.

"There is a second reason why I think Large Language Models, like GenAI, add value. I, for one, started to appreciate interacting with it when I realized I could bounce off any questions I had."

"You mean, not just work-related matters but also personal ones?" Liesel asked, suspecting the answer.

"You get it! One no longer needs to feel alone in the world..."

At the end of the day, Florentine walked over to Liesel's office to find Liesel all set to go. On their way to the train and during their train ride, they busily chatted about work, life, and other things. When the phone call with Hargreaves crossed Florentine's mind, she updated Liesel on the 'Ollie Blackwood case,' mentioning that she wanted Liesel to act as her spokesperson. She was just too busy with the German project.

It turned out to be a jolly evening. Candace had prepared delicious Indonesian delicacies and Jack was sincere in his interest, asking her about her parents, Saxony, Leipzig University, and her life in London. On her way home, Liesel's gaze was on the train's windows while her mind's eye replayed the heartfelt reception by the family of Florentine. When her phone rang, her focus unwillingly returned to the present.

"Hello?"

Someone, with a voice that sounded warm and kind, asked, "Am I talking to Liesel Porsch?"

"Yes..."

"I apologize for calling this late. I shouldn't have, I realize. I am Oliver Blackwood. I just wanted to check whether I have the right number... Can I call you tomorrow?"

"Hmm, yes..."

"Thank you, Ms. Porsch. Sleep well."

CHAPTER 7

COUNTER-INTELLIGENCE

The Berlin sky was clear, the sun rising, the city vibrant, the central station brimming with people on their way to work. Yet, at this early hour, the lights were already on in an office at the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy where the telephone rang.

"Weber, here."

"Good day, Dr. Weber, Henrik Bauer speaking."

"What can I do for you, Mr. Bauer?"

"We might have a problem, Dr. Weber..."

"What do you mean?"

"It's related to the threatening phone call Liesel Porsch received, which we will deal with, of course."

"So?"

"We traced the origin of the phone call... It was originated from the UK."

Weber absorbed Henrik Bauer's words, then said, "That complicates matters... keeping the lid on information within our borders is one thing but managing it outside, especially beyond the European Union, is quite another."

"That's what I was thinking too."

"What do you suggest, Mr. Bauer?"

"You might want to contact Professor Fischer. Maybe she can make a list of people she's been talking to about her societal model," Henrik Bauer offered.

"That makes sense. I will do that, Mr. Bauer... I'll call her and ask her to give you a ring once she is done. We should indeed check all the back alleys..."

"Thank you, Dr. Weber. I'll continue to investigate the matter on our end."

"For whatever it's worth, Mr. Bauer, I did receive her signed Non-Disclosure Agreement and that of Liesel Porsch. I'll forward them to you."

"Thank you, Dr. Weber. I will keep you up to date."

"Yes, please," Weber said and closed the call.

Weber was prepared for anything, knowing how daring and forward-looking his project was. This was not exactly something that he had anticipated, then shook off this realization almost physically. Rather than discouraging him, this made him more determined to take 'his' project forward. Nobody would stop him in his tracks, nobody...

Liesel arrived slightly later than usual at the office, her mind and mood still buoyed by the warm, comforting memories of her evening at the Keller's. As she made her way to Taviton Street, even London's clouds seemed to shimmer with silver linings. The thrill of participating in a nation-changing project and the anticipation of her upcoming journey to Berlin undoubtedly contributed to this glow. However, it wasn't just these professional excitements tinting her day. Not wanting to concede to a logic of another kind, she almost bumped into Florentine near the kitchenette.

"Oh, I am sorry, Florentine. My mind was on cloud nine, I guess. Thank you again for a wonderful evening at your home yesterday. I so much enjoyed that."

"We enjoyed your company, Liesel. We should do that more often."

When Florentine's phone rang, she took it out her back pocket and checked who was on the line. She excused herself and hurried back to her office, forgetting to take her coffee. Liesel saw that Florentine had closed her office door behind her and decided to leave it standing there. Having returned to her own office, Liesel felt restless. Yet, when her phone rang too, her mind switched on like a LED lamp.

"Oliver Blackwood, here. Do I call at a convenient time, Ms. Porsch, or should I say Dr. Porsch?"

The sweet smile on her face, not visible to Ollie Blackwood, Liesel kept her cool but couldn't resist agreeing to his suggestion to meet over lunch. He wanted to introduce himself 'properly' and explain his plans. After they finished their call, Liesel delved into her work, her focus returning, new ideas popping up again, her morning looking different, "Would Weber have a name for his project?" she wondered out of the blue.

"I'd call it the 'Goethe project,'" she murmured and started drafting reasons why.

As a German abroad, Liesel deeply felt that Goethe embodied German culture and thinking in so many ways. In sync with the idea of AI as a Large Language Model, Goethe's approach to science was characterized by the belief that nature was an interconnected whole, where every part was related to every other. In his studies in botany on color, form, and structure, for example, Goethe resisted isolating phenomena from their context. He emphasized direct observation and experiential knowledge and believed in a kind of participatory science.

"When I think of it, AI essentially is like a 'participatory science'..." Liesel said to herself softly.

Regarding Florentine's AI-enabling societal model, which hinged on a unity-disunity balance, Goethe's scientific and philosophical thinking, she realized, often revolved around the idea of polarity, tension, and balance, "Since balance is meaningless without imbalance, Goethe's balance must be a dynamic balance, like Florentine's."

In the meantime, behind her closed office door, Florentine was in an intense but low-voiced dialog with Weber who had informed her about the UK origin of the threatening call.

"Do you have an idea of whom you have discussed your model with, Professor Fischer?" Weber asked.

"Well, quite a few have learned about my model in Nice, and that includes Lada Morozov. Next to my husband and daughter, there are the people that I work with, altogether about a handful, including Liesel."

As she continued her conversation with Weber, Florentine's mind raced in search for a tactic that might reveal the culprit, then found it, "Dr. Weber, we could, of course, assign different codenames for the project when discussing it with different people. This way, if a name leaks, we'll know the source."

There was a brief pause on the line before Weber replied, "That's a smart suggestion, Professor Fischer. It's a classic counter-intelligence tactic. How do you propose we implement this?"

Florentine opened GenAI on her laptop, and quickly typed in, "I need four distinct, historically significant German names suitable for a project codename. Each should be unique and resonate with German heritage."

As names populated her screen, she began to list them, "For instance, we could use 'Leibnitz' when discussing with Lada, 'Bismarck' with my family, 'Gutenberg' with Arthur, and perhaps 'Humboldt' when I talk to Liesel and my team here. Each name carries a different aspect of German history and achievement."

Weber's voice radiated approval. "Excellent, Professor Fischer. This will also help us gauge the spread of information and the security of our communications."

Florentine hastened to add something that Weber appeared to have missed, "There a big but, Dr. Weber... Both Liesel and I have signed the Non-Disclosure Agreement that you sent us. We don't like to break this agreement before we even started."

Weber replied spontaneously, "I understand that Professor Fischer. So, what do you suggest?"

"We wouldn't give away the nature of the project if we'd just share a project name, but I'd prefer to seek the advice from our lawyer at the University College London."

"Aha, of course! Give Dr. Hargreaves my warm regards."

Florentine was stunned, "How did he know Hargreaves?" She realized once again that Weber was not someone to be toyed with.

Weber continued, "Your role, Professor Fischer, would evolve to be more than we anticipated if we'd go this route. I'll check on my end with Henrik Bauer and ask him to get back to you. He might suggest an addendum to your NDA."

"I'd appreciate him calling me, Dr. Weber, thank you for your advice on this matter."

"I should thank you, Professor Fischer, for your vigilance and team spirit."

After closing the telephone conversation, Florentine briefly meditated on the situation she had ended up in. Too much seemed to be happening now that she had committed herself to the German project. Feeling a rush of blood to her head, she decided to take a walk, hoping to regain her state of composure. She planned to call Hargreaves later. She closed her laptop, securing it with her password to prevent unauthorized use, and tore out a blank page from her notebook. She casually left it on her desk, with 'Gutenberg project' written across it.

It was a nice day, partly cloudy, and just perfect for a stroll through the city. She planned to head towards Russell Square Gardens for a soothing dose of greenery. After that, depending on her state of mind, she might continue towards Zizzi, a small Italian restaurant known for its excellent food. She was determined to avoid the University College London Clubs, wanting some peace to get her thoughts properly aligned again.

Florentine was acutely aware of the ethical complexities surrounding the societal model she proposed, particularly given its reliance on broad data access. Such access raised inevitable questions about privacy and control. The model's success hinged on AI having insight into people's behaviors across society's various layers and the operations of diverse organizations. Current plans in Europe to restrict government and industry data usage posed a significant hurdle. On the flip side, she recognized that ministries already collected such data, committing to its responsible use. That was one part of the challenge.

Once ministries decided to implement new conditions based on AI insights, they would, in essence, be extending their existing practices. Ministries have always influenced public behavior and organizational direction through legislation and policymaking. What AI offered was a refinement of this influence – a more nuanced and effective way to guide societal dynamics. This wouldn't be a new role for the ministries. Rather, it would be an enhancement of their current responsibilities, now aided by advanced technology. Nevertheless, these sensitivities underscored why the project's details remained under wraps, at least until these critical issues were addressed.

At some point, a question may arise: Who is ultimately in control, AI or the ministries that utilize it? The societal model suggests that people remain engaged and agree with the actions suggested and facilitated by AI. Over time, it is expected that ministries will increasingly rely on AI, but is this necessarily negative? Could this not be a solution to the human dilemma of violating our own laws during challenging times?

Gradually, Florentine became aware of Russell Square Gardens' beauty. Was this a sign that she was ready to reconnect with her surroundings? She wasn't alone, she realized. Others were strolling through the park. "What might they be thinking about?" As her awareness of her environment returned, so did her appetite. "Zizzi should be no more than a fifteen-minute walk from here."

Ollie Blackwood, usually the tough guy who lived life on his own terms and prided himself on being an independent thinker, went to the men's room at The British Herald. He checked his hair and outfit suspiciously early, considering he had ample time before heading to the restaurant on Charlotte Street. He had been there once before. Intuitively, it seemed the right place to meet someone like Dr. Liesel Porsch. He didn't mind the brief tube journey ahead of him. She'd enjoy a ten-minute walk through a charming London neighborhood from her office at Taverton Street. Arriving early to ensure the table he had booked was ready, Ollie chose a seat with a view of the restaurant's entrance. Too anxious to scroll through his X-account, he watched for her arrival. When she walked in, his gaze was drawn to her auburn hair, glossed lips, and the deep-set hazel eyes, now without the thick-rimmed glasses she wore in her UCL photo. Upon noticing a young man with mellow features waving at her, Liesel's smile broadened. They exchanged subdued greetings at the table, cautiously nurturing what seemed like an emerging, natural bond.

"Was it not difficult to find?" he asked.

"Have you been here long?" she responded.

Although they had met to discuss Professor Fischer's life and work, the conversation naturally veered towards sharing personal anecdotes, satisfying their mutual curiosity about each other's lives. They checked the menu and discussed what to order, not even finishing their food when the time came to go. Having spent more time than they had planned, they agreed to continue their meeting tomorrow, hoping to dedicate more time to their original objective. They were just about to get up and leave when Florentine walked in. She scanned the restaurant searching for a table. Liesel was the first to see her, rose to her feet, and walked over to her, "Florentine, how wonderful to see you here. We were just about to leave. Why don't you join us?"

As Liesel and Florentine approached the table, Ollie Blackwood came walking in their direction to welcome Florentine, "Professor Fischer, what an honor to meet you. I am Oliver Blackwood."

Liesel beamed at Ollie's accommodating gesture.

"What a surprise, Mr. Blackwood. Good to finally meet you. I see you have already started," Florentine said.

Ollie smiled, "I have indeed, and I already learned that I'll need to give it more time. There's so much to discuss."

Liesel gave a brief update of what Ollie and she had discussed so far. Ollie explained his plan of approach and expressed hope that he might interview Florentine, at some point, personally.

"Of course, Mr. Blackwood. But, please, do appreciate that, at times, both Liesel and I may not always be able to fill you in on everything when bound by a Non-Disclosure Agreement. You'll need to make provisions for that."

"Do you mean to say that you are bound by a Non-Disclosure Agreement now, Professor Fischer?"

Florentine smiled and winked, "I cannot even tell you that, Oliver."

She continued, "But, please, I don't want to keep you both. You were about to leave, right? I'll have something to eat now, at your table."

"Probably see you later this afternoon, Liesel."

Liesel smiled and nodded then turned around and followed Ollie on his way outside.

Waiting for the salad she had ordered to arrive, the smiling face of Liesel lingered in her mind. What good to see. It dawned on her that Liesel might influence the press in unforeseen ways, if needed. When she eventually walked back to Taviton Street, she felt reinvigorated, her mind having explored crucial project-related questions, her appetite having been satisfied. Once back, she walked straight into her office and took the paper with 'Gutenberg project' written across it. She tore it into pieces and put these into her bag. She smiled at the thought that the spy business was like fishing with a delay. You'd only know much later whether a fish had been hooked.

She dialed Hargreaves' number, expecting he'd be busy but was relieved when he answered.

"Good day, Florentine, I guess you call about your conversation with Dr. Weber this morning."

"Yes, I do. I didn't know you were acquainted with Dr. Weber."

"Acquainted maybe stretching it but I sure have been in contact with him with the sole purpose of protecting the integrity of both you and UCL."

Hargreaves continued, "I have checked the NDA you signed. I think we'd better wait for Weber's men to provide you with an addendum. I am sure that they came to the same conclusion."

"I see. Then, I'd better wait for Mr. Bauer to contact me on this."

After they had exchanged the usual courtesies and ended their call, Florentine sat back, contented. She could finally focus on matters of substance closer to her realm of interest again. Of course, she had her two-weekly lecture day coming up and then there was her imminent trip to Berlin. She particularly wanted to flesh out the fruits of insight during her walk in Russell Square Garden before they'd slip away. These insights could serve as natural extension to her presentation material on the AI-enabling societal unity-disunity model she had developed.

She was anxious to do that with the help of the team version of GenAI, curious whether it would meet the much-publicized promise of productivity. Moreover, the prospect of an exchange with a phenomenon that embraced more than a multidisciplinary team of colleagues combined seemed fascinating. Yes, efficiency was important to her but more so was the potential to challenge the depths of her insight, fundamentally and practically. She had signed up Liesel and herself but was keen to extend this to the rest of her team. Having downloaded the dedicated app, she realized how convenient it was to discuss her insights just by conversing with it before asking it to turn the conclusions into slides that she could use during her speeches. She was plainly stunned by the depth of the dialog that unfolded. At times, both she and AI challenged each other on certain viewpoints eventually to come to a well-balanced and sensible perspective. What's more, she learned that, with the help of AI, she could bend the content of her slides and the accompanying narrative to meet the characteristics and expectations of her audience, in minutes. When finished, she asked AI to prepare a first batch of slides for her to review and repeated the procedure until she was satisfied with the result. She first prepared for her weekly lecture. She then sketched the objectives of the German audience, following a similar process of review. Finally, she asked AI to prepare slides and ensuing narrative in Standard German.

Time had gone by in a flash. If Henrik Bauer had not called her, she'd still be caught up in the thrill of working with GenAI. He appreciated her idea of creating a project-name trap but acknowledged that, for everyone's peace of mind, she'd better sign an addendum to her NDA, which he would forward even today.

At the end of the day, on her way out, she walked over to Liesel's office to find it vacated. Before she had left the building, her phone rang. Not checking who was on the line, she answered.

"Hello?"

"Oh, hello, Florentine. Lada here! You don't believe where I am, right now!"

"Oh, hi Lada. What a coincidence. Let me guess. Taviton Street?"

"Yes, indeed. I have been at the London offices of my father and thought of checking whether you'd be in."

"Oh, that's nice of you Lada!" Florentine said, her mind racing to determine what best to do.

"You know what, Lada. Do you have time for a coffee or something?"

"Yes, I have, Florentine."

"Great, in that case, I'll take you UCL's Print Room Café, which just around the corner."

As Florentine left the building, she saw Lada standing there.

"Great to see you again, Florentine."

"Same here, Lada."

CHAPTER 8

FAKE NEWS

On weekend mornings at the Kellers,' the rhythm shifted from the routine of workdays. Instead of Florentine's early alarm for her run with Candace, these days began more leisurely. Jack would often surprise her with a cup of tea and a freshly picked flower, a small but genuine gesture that set a serene tone for their day and underlined their love as a couple. As they sipped their tea in bed, they'd reflect on the week's events. This Saturday, Florentine shared her thoughts about the increasing prevalence of fake news and its impact on people's reality perceptions. Without giving away her thoughts on this, she feared that this would be a question that the German project team would bring up during her forthcoming visit to Berlin: Might AI develop to be a blessing or threat?

Intrigued by this topic, Jack suggested they delve deeper into it over a tea on Sunday, inviting Lada to join and enrich the discussion. She was in London, anyway. This might help Florentine broaden her view on the topic, he reasoned. Candace, as a young journalist, and Lada, as a Computer Science student with an interest in combatting disinformation and spotting fake news, might offer alleys of thinking that Florentine might have missed.

Florentine made a mental note to send an invite first thing later this morning, hoping that both Candace and Lada would find some time to think about it or maybe even search for literature on the matter. Florentine herself would consult GenAI on the topic, so she'd come prepared as well.

"And how was your week, Jack?" Florentine asked, realizing that marriage to them was a two-way street.

Jack gave her an update on the documentaries in his portfolio. In fact, some of them were nearing completion. So, he was looking for new documentary topics.

"You know, Flori, I was thinking of making a documentary about you and about what you are trying to achieve. This is so relevant, so timely. It seems to me that you are well ahead of your time," Jack said thoughtfully.

Florentine listened with interest to Jack's reasoning, almost reading his lips, and responded, "That's a wonderful idea, Jack. I agree, this is a super interesting topic, which deserves to be researched. But it may be too early..."

Jack listened and was careful not to show that he saw her sweet rejection coming before she even responded. Yet, he didn't expect the twist she added.

"The challenge is still too great, and success is not ensured, Jack. There is so much at stake. I need to demonstrate that my ideas work at a national level. What's more, as you know, I am bound by secrecy for the moment."

Florentine paused as if she hit upon an idea, "Why don't you make a documentary about fake news? I mean, about how fake news emerged and how it brings down society by corroding the pillars, on which it is based. Such a documentary could be precursor to a documentary about my work."

Jack looked surprised and enlightened at the same time. "I didn't expect that, Flori. Good one! Let's see what our tea session tomorrow will produce. Will take it from then and there. It sure makes a lot of sense."

Jack kissed his wife spontaneously, jumped out of bed, and said, "Let's make some breakfast, you so deserve it!"

Elsewhere in London, much younger love was celebrated in similar ways. As Liesel realized, it was not love at first sight but at first hearing. Ollie's brief late-night phone call during her train ride from the Keller's back home was enough of a magic spark to both. Since they had lunch at Zizzi, they had met each other daily, counting and commemorating each new day of their love bond. This was their first weekend together, their first stroll in the park together, their first cooking dinner together, all the while exchanging each other's story of life at the opposite edges of Europe. They had not yet gotten to the original reason for meeting up, the life and work of Professor Fischer. But the spirit of love gave them wings to fly with to reach that goal soon, if needed.

Over breakfast in one of London's suburbs, "Papa, I'd like to be more involved in your business..."

"You like, what?" Victor Morozov responded, looking up from his newspaper, utterly surprised. He thought for a moment and added, "What do you think you can offer to add value, Lada?"

"Youth and Englishness, Papa. Two things that are in the way of you doing business in the UK. If I have inherited your business acumen, you can trust me to get it right."

Morozov smiled, "From what I gather, you have. You even have the guts to suggest it. Let me think about it."

"I understand, Papa. Do all the thinking you want but start telling me about your business dealings so I can prepare myself."

Morozov thought for a moment, pleased with a daughter that decisive, and said, "When?"

"Well, I am here. I'd say now."

Utterly charmed by the boldness of his only daughter, Morozov caved in and started telling. He explained the nature of his businesses, where they were based, the opportunities, and the issues he needed to overcome. Lada, an acute listener, asked frank and, at times, even painful questions. As he talked and she listened, she made her father a cup of coffee and a cappuccino for herself. At some point, Morozov said that this was enough for today. Lada agreed on the condition that he'd take his daughter to one of his business meetings in the coming week. What could he do other than agree? As they were sipping their coffee, Lada's phone pinged. She smiled when she read Florentine's message and replied that she is looking forward to it and thanked her for the invite.

At the Keller's, the Sunday morning tradition was to make a family stroll in Hampstead Heath to watch nature, to talk about anything, and to let the mind wander from person to person.

"Hey, mom, great idea to have tea with Lada. I'm looking forward to meeting her," Candace said.

"So am I, Candace! I am curious to see what we'll learn about the topic," Florentine said winking.

Second guessing what Florentine meant, "No worries, Mom. I'll do some research beforehand."

When Lada arrived, the family gathered for afternoon tea and enjoyed the freshly baked scones that Candace and Florentine had prepared, each royally paired with clotted cream and strawberry jam. Lada was beaming. She visibly relished the family atmosphere at the Keller's. She seemed keen to learn about Candace's life and work. Candace enthusiastically told her about her job as a journalist and the online-news platform where she worked. Lada's interest was reciprocated by Candace who, as a big sis almost, asked her about her study at Bath University, her interest in fake news, and other activities. Jack, who seemed to have adopted a role as listener, couldn't but notice that Lada appeared to be superfluous when it came to her studies and interest but seemed to have forgotten about her other activities, "I'm probably seeing things," he thought to himself and ignored it.

When the friendly chatter quieted down somewhat, Florentine explained that she hoped to learn more about the origin and effect of fake news. With her societal model in the back of her mind, she said, it would be great if she'd find alleys on the topic that she might have missed. Of course, she'd search for literature on the topic herself but thought it would be fun to discuss the matter, as Jack had suggested, with Lada and Candace whose interests and work were so closely related to the subject. Florentine shared what she had found on the topic so far. She knew for example about the history of fake news and, as a sideline, referred to Liesel's Master's thesis on the effect of social-media algorithms. She was also aware of the psychological consequences, such as the so-called 'Dunning-Kruger' effect, where a lack of knowledge could lead to overconfidence in false beliefs.

"Frankly, I'd like to get a better understanding of the societal reasons that prompted the rise of fake news. Of course, if you know these, you might counter them."

Florentine stopped when realizing something then continued, "Of course, you've got the usual remedies such as education, fact checking, adjustment of social-media algorithms, and so on. But I find these too technical. What I'd like to understand better are the human conditions or societal conditions that led to fake news exploding."

Lada's facial expressions and nods when Florentine talked suggested that she was eager to contribute her views. Perhaps not entirely surprising, considering her father being a Russian, Lada started off by referring to the present-day shift towards more autocratic governments and leaders. Such governments and leaders, she said, typically favored loyal news channels and hindered, if not closed news channels that were faithful to the truth. The solution, in her view, was not at all easy because it involved changing dominant political systems and leaders that had their fingers on the dials. Only a revolution of a kind that fed on the suffering of a people might bring solace. Unfortunately, as history had shown, the power was then too often transferred to another horde of autocrats.

Lada was sincere in her closing observation, "Autocracy is not just something that feeds on a shift to populism. It is, as I see it, particularly rooted in a national culture that is sculpted by a history of leaders who naively dreamed of empires... I so much hope that AI, guided by your model, can break through the vicious circle of national history."

Lada, now in a meditating stance, started to look a little surprised when she realized the wisdom that had welled up from her heart. Or was it her mind? Anyway, she felt relieved.

Florentine, Jack, and Candace briefly looked one another in the eye utterly impressed by what they'd just heard.

Candace was the first to react, "Wow, Lada that was a great piece of input, seriously," then smiled and added, "What did you have for breakfast?"

Lada broke into smile and responded, "You don't want to know, my dear!"

Everyone laughed and Florentine started pouring some more tea.

Eventually, Florentine looked at Candace but said nothing. It signaled to Candace that it was now her turn, that is, if she had something to contribute on the topic, an encouragement that Candace gracefully responded to.

"I found an interesting article on the topic written for the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life at The University of Texas. It explores exactly the societal conditions that fostered the rise of fake news and much more."

Candace smiled and paused, seemingly searching for a way to convey the article's conclusions that would speak to the imagination, "You know what, rather than immediately reaching for the article's conclusions, let me start with a sketch of life in a small Mid-Western town in the United States some twenty years ago."

"Imagine a town that was built around a cluster of small businesses and places where people would meet and gossip, such as shops, workshops, a bar, a donut shop, an eatery, a town hall, a police station, a church, a school, and a local newspaper. The town's newspaper served as its collective consciousness. The editor and his reporters would go around, listening to the talk of the town. The editor then selected topics for publication that were important to the wellbeing of the town. This included the local elections and those at state and national levels. The newspaper, this way, served as a shared source of sanitized knowledge about the ups and down of the town's community. It gave people a frame of reference on what was good and bad for the town. The newspaper was financed by the community through local advertisements and a small fee for each newspaper."

Candace stopped briefly and asked, "Can you picture it?"

When she saw that she had hooked her audience, she continued, "You can imagine that in a town like that, the opinions of people about what was true and not true were carefully calibrated with the help of the newspaper and the staff behind it, themselves town citizens. Local elections and even those at state and national levels were hotly debated based on what the local newspaper reported about candidate politicians, their character and background, the pros and cons. When the election period arrived, most of the town's eligible voters saw it their duty to vote. In the meantime, the town was run in a smooth way. Any disruptions or inadequacies were promptly addressed."

Candace paused as she prepared to veer toward a conclusion, "The wealth generated by the American economy at that stage was seen as the glazing on a cake of hard work. It generated a group of businessmen with capital to invest who now wanted to let their money do the work. This is how they discovered local newspapers. A local newspaper was usually not run as a profit center but as an operation that served the community barely at cost. This meant they could buy it cheap and make money by selling its real estate, reducing its staff, and increasing its advertisement income. By buying several local newspapers, they could make more money by cutting out their editors and staff. One editor and a handful of reporters would be enough. Better boost advertisement."

"You can imagine the situation," Candace said and smiled, "The local newspaper was a local paper no longer. It became an online business managed at a distance which did not concern itself with the wellbeing of the town. As a result, town citizens no longer related to the news that was reported and lost touch with the town's common truths in the process. What's more, the functioning of the local government was no longer publicly evaluated."

"So, what happened?" Lada asked.

While counting them on her fingers, Candace listed the consequences, "Collapsing citizen engagement, lower voter turnout, corruption, manipulating politicians, city staff hanging on to their positions, and so on."

She paused and added, "Perhaps worst of all, the niche of 'town truths' that was left unfilled, was soon bloated with invented truths from unreliable sources. This is how fake truths got hold of a large contingent of US voters."

"To conclude," Candace said with a sigh, "if you use AI, use it also to build people's sense of truth from the ground up through a participative process of piloted gossip, starting at town level."

As Jack listened to his daughter, he beamed with pride. He watched her perhaps more intently than Florentine, who already knew Candace's mettle. He saw a side of his daughter that he had not seen before. It also dawned on him that, to a documentary producer, the alley of fake news really was a highway.

To put the gravity of her input somewhat in perspective, Candace added jokingly, "As a matter of fact, as an employee of an online news business, I'd better start looking for another job."

Everyone laughed, some absent-mindedly reaching for their teacup with Candace's stark conclusion still ringing in their ears. Florentine was the first to react.

"I like the approach you have taken, Candace. It vividly paints, at least, it did in my mind, where the issue lies and how it became an issue in the first place. It also points out the kind of role AI should play, in practical terms."

Florentine turned to both Lada and Candace, "Thank you! I expected an interesting discussion on the topic, but this is material that really matters."

After Florentine's wrap-up, the afternoon tea was naturally nearing its end. Lada, at some point, excused herself, explaining that she would have to rush not to miss her train to Bath. On Monday, she had her workgroup session, which was followed by a math lecture. She thanked the Kellers, having thoroughly enjoyed their Sunday tea.

Candace briefly looked at her mother, then turned to Lada and said, "I'll take you to the train station, Lada. I'd love the walk."

Lada was delighted.

When the girls were gone, Florentine asked, "What do you think, Jack?"

Jack reacted enthusiastically, "It turned out much better than I imagined. So proud of Candace too."

"Is this material for a documentary?" Florentine asked, knowing in advance what Jack's answer would be.

"Definitely, Flori. The topic has potential and, timing wise, it seems spot on. I am already racing ahead in my mind. Finding investors and channels will not be a problem. Just wondering, who I can ask to write the script."

Florentine nodded, gave it a thought, and said, "Candace could possibly do it. But, considering that she is our daughter, that would not be wise."

Jack nodded pensively.

"Why don't you ask Ollie Blackwood?" Florentine finally said.

"Bingo, Flori. Good one. Had not thought of that. From what I gathered, Blackwood has the right experience and background."

"He does..."

Candace and Lada briskly walked in the direction of the tube station while chatting about their wonderful Sunday-tea experience and their week ahead. As they did, Lada looked up at the somewhat taller Candace.

At some point and quite unexpectedly, Lada said, "Candace, I like you!"

"I like you too, Lada. But why do you say?"

Lada looked more serious now and showed a faint smile.

"Well?" Candace asked.

"Candace, I might feel more than just liking you..."

Candace was shocked but managed not to show it. In the meantime, her mind was racing to search for a proper reply, a reply that would not be too harsh but could not be misinterpreted either.

Candace looked Lada in the eyes and said, "I am flattered, Lada, really... Please, I hope you understand that I can be your friend if you want but I can never be your lover."

Lada responded timidly, "Of course, no worries, it just flipped out of my mouth. Forget it."

After the girls said goodbye and Lada walked down the stairs of the tube station, her reaction to Candace's rejection finally welled up. As her father knew too well, she disliked not getting what she wanted.

"Oh, forget it," she said to herself then stepped into the train that had just arrived.

As ever on weekdays, Florentine was expecting to wait for Candace to come down the steps for their early Monday morning run to find her already waiting.

"What's up, Candace?"

"I'll tell you later, Mom. Let's run."

While running, she explained what Lada had said on their way to the tube station and what she had replied, her mother patiently listening. She then looked at her mother for a reaction.

"These things happen Candace. I think you've handled it well. You've got to be clear on these matters."

"So awkward an experience, Mom."

"I can imagine..."

CHAPTER 9

VON GOETHE

Tuesday morning, on her way to UCL's Anthropology building at Taviton Street, Florentine smiled when she saw Liesel walking ahead of her, dragging a cabin suitcase, just like she did. In the afternoon, she knew, from the travel schedule that Julia Vogel had sent her, they would be collected by two security officials from the German mission at Belgrave Square. These would take Florentine and Liesel by car to Gatwick Airport from where a government plane would fly them to 'Berlin Brandenburg Airport,' South-East of the German capital. A first for her, Florentine wondered what the travel experience would be like.

Of course, Wednesday would be the 'big day'. They'd meet and present to a select group of Germany's governing political leaders and ministerial staff. Julia Vogel had kept them in the dark about who and where, but she assumed that was for security reasons. Julia had also planned something of a team-building outing at night with Dr. Weber's extended team, which is why they'd only return on Thursday. Curiously, Julia's schedule didn't specify their flight back but that, she imagined, would not be problem with a government plane on standby. Anyway, she'd be back for her two-weekly lecture on Friday.

She and Liesel, whose mother tongue was German, would spend the day checking all the material they'd bring, such as slides and texts to make sure they were flawless or as flawless as anything can practically be. To keep her audience alert and interested, Florentine had divided her speech into three parts: first, her societal unity-disunity model, second, AI as enabler, and third, ethics questions, typically on privacy matters. She planned time for questions and answers after each part so her audience wouldn't be distracted by questions on previous topics.

Liesel would let GenAI prepare instant topic summaries, which participants would receive if approved by Henrik Bauer. The idea of relying on GenAI to summarize the main points 'there and then' was simply mesmerizing.

Florentine, above all, worried about practical matters, "Yes, it might be a great idea but how do you go about it? What does it mean to do this at a national level from the top down, to keep fingers on the pulse from bottom up?"

She he could not have imagined at this stage how many feathers would be ruffled in the process.

Ollie Blackwood's phone rang as he walked out of the tube station in the direction of The British Herald. He was trapped by his thoughts and numb to the ongoings in the broader environment on what seemed a fair day in London free from rain smell. Liesel would be away for a few days, and she didn't even tell him where she'd be travelling to. Of course, he had to get himself organized in the first place, having been distracted by 'matters of the heart' lately. Writing about the research and life of Florentine Fischer, as he had suggested to Ian Fletcher, would require him to really delve into the matter, darned difficult if you couldn't even interview her. He had to make a plan, then answered his phone.

"Hello, Oliver Blackwood speaking."

"Good morning, Mr. Blackwood. Jack Keller here. I am Florentine Fischer's husband. You know, Professor Fischer? Am I calling at a convenient time."

Ollie couldn't believe what he had just heard.

"Did he really have an angel sitting on his shoulder?" he thought, "Nah..."

"Yes, yes, Mr. Keller. Please, go ahead!"

Eager to exploit what seemed like a hell of an opportunity, Ollie added, "What can I do for you?"

"Well, that's what I like to talk to you about. I am thinking of producing a new documentary and I am looking for someone who can write the script. Would you have time for coffee this morning?"

"A documentary about what?" flashed through Ollie's mind.

Instead, he replied in his most civilized way, "Sure, I'll be glad to help. Where do you suggest meeting?"

"Great! I'll come over to The British Herald. I've not been there before and would love to see your newsroom if that is at all possible. What time can you make it?"

"Anytime!" popped up in Ollie's head.

"In an hour? Would that be alright, Mr. Keller?" came out as, while Ollie threw his other arm victoriously in the air.

"Perfect, see you then! Can you tell your reception that we have a meeting?"

"Thank you, Mr. Keller. I'll let them know. Looking forward to meeting you."

Ollie hung up only after Keller did, so he wouldn't miss him saying anything, then increased his walking pace.

His mood had turned, he realized when he heard himself say, "What a beautiful morning, I love that breeze."

It must have been around three in the afternoon, when Arthur politely knocked on Florentine's office door where Liesel and she were quietly checking off everything needed for their trip, much like a pilot and his co-pilot do before taking off. The concierge, he said, had called to say that the 'taxi' had arrived and that the 'chauffeur' was waiting. Knowing Julia Vogel's schedule, Florentine silently prized the punctuality of their 'taxi.'

Florentine put her laptop in her handbag and rolled her cabin suitcase to the door, followed by Liesel who had put her laptop in a rucksack. Arthur kindly offered to help them take their suitcases downstairs, but the ladies gently but firmly assured him that his help would not be needed. The real reason was that they did not want to risk disclosing the identity of their 'taxi chauffeur.' When they arrived in the reception hall, the man who was waiting walked over to them and, without uttering a word, discretely showed his identity card. It stated the name mentioned in Julie Vogel's mail and the German Mission as issuer. As it turned out, the real chauffeur was waiting in a Mercedes that would take them to Gatwick Airport. They failed to see Arthur watching through the shades.

The ride to Gatwick Airport took one hour and twenty minutes but the duration seemed irrelevant because, as Florentine knew, they could simply not miss their plane. The real thrill came when their car smoothly drove straight onto the tarmac where a small private jet on a government mission was waiting. Without passport control and security checks, they walked up the stairs while a breeze of air playing through their hair, to be welcomed on board by a stewardess. The official who had collected them at Taviton street, joined them and civilly introduced himself as Karl as soon as he had boarded.

The one-and-a-half-hour flight was smooth. Florentine and Liesel killed time by reading and occasionally chatting about matters that came to mind, often related to the purpose of their trip. Florentine was off-guard for a moment when Liesel said out of the blue that the name of the German project, in her opinion, was badly chosen. She said that the name Goethe would resonate much better with a project that might help reinvent Germany.

Florentine who could not share with Liesel the real reason why she had referred to the 'Humboldt project,' in her case, said, "I'm sure you make a point, Liesel. As I understand, Alexander von Humboldt and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe were both polymaths in the same era, right?"

Liesel nodded and said she had studied Goethe's work and had become fascinated by the man. Her studies touched on Humboldt as well but, as she explained, his work, stretching across various disciplines too, was focused more on the interaction of physical and behavioral conditions and its effect on our environment. Goethe, twenty years senior to Humboldt, truly embodied the spirit of German culture, literature, and philosophical thought.

Liesel summed up the crux of her argument, "Goethe's evaluation of the human condition, through both his literary and scientific work, resonates with the project's aim to understand and navigate the complexities of societal unity and disunity, making his name a more fitting symbol for the project's objective."

"Can you explain that for me?" Florentine asked.

Liesel briefly thought about Florentine's question and offered, "As I see it, Goethe's work is centered on the heart of human experience. It explores the individual's internal conflicts and how these relate to the compromise between personal passions and societal norms. This is, in my opinion, what the societal unity-disunity model is about, I mean, the balance between individual freedom and what keeps society together, right?"

"Quite plausible to me," Florentine said, "Why don't you bring it up tomorrow sometime near the end of the session? I am sure Dr. Weber will agree with you on this."

Florentine continued, "As I understand, they have not yet put a firm stake in the ground when it comes to names. But, considering the societal impact of the project, they'd better choose a name that rings."

Liesel nodded and looked pleased now that she'd been able to let Florentine see the matter in a proper historical perspective. As silence returned, both looked outside through the cabin window when they felt that the plane was losing altitude. Apparently, the pilots were preparing for landing. Since the city hadn't yet come into view, Liesel reasoned they must be approaching the airport from the South. They'd have to wait until taken there.

Disembarking the plane went as smooth as embarking it. A sleek, black government car awaited their arrival, ready to whisk them away to the city. Karl, the security official, who was now sitting in a front seat, next to the chauffeur, turned around and informed them that the taxi ride to Hotel Adlon Kempinsky would take approximately forty minutes. Probably for security reasons again, Julia Vogel had also kept them in limbo about the hotel they'd be

staying at. Liesel, who had visited Berlin several times, whispered that their hotel was located next to the Brandenburg Gate, on walking distance from the 'Reichstag' building and the Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy, where Dr. Weber and his team had their offices, "From the hotel, you might even see the Chancellor's offices," she said.

As they arrived in the center of the city, Liesel pointed out various architectural high points to Florentine.

"There, do you see that? That's the Reichstag where the federal parliament meets. That suggests we are not far away from the Brandenburg Gate. It is all so close by and, yet, so spacey," Liesel said with a touch of pride.

"Wasn't that once located in the Soviet occupied zone?" Florentine asked.

"Yes, it was and so, in fact, was the hotel where we are apparently staying."

When their car turned right onto Wilhelm Strasse, Florentine said, "It never dawned on me that a river was meandering so dominantly through the center of Berlin, right in-between its historical sites."

After about a minute, the car turned right again onto the Unter den Linden Strasse and arrived at the hotel entrance. While Karl opened their doors, the chauffeur handed their luggage to the bellman.

Florentine paused to watch an immense and stylishly renovated building, now a world-class hotel. She tried to imagine, as Liesel had explained, how the Emperor and Empress, followed by their two children and the entire royal household, once strode through its grand entrance over a hundred years ago when it first opened.

"Please, follow me," Karl said quietly.

He walked to a special section of the reception counter and chatted briefly with a receptionist, an older lady, who opened a drawer and searched for their keys while he was speaking. She turned to Florentine and smiled.

"Professor Fischer, Dr. Porsch, welcome to Hotel Adlon Kempinski. We'll make your stay a comfortable one and one you won't forget," she then handed a hotel welcome card with a mobile number written on it and said, "If there is anything you need you can reach me at this number." Noticing the question mark emerging on Florentine's face, she added "You'll find your luggage in your two-bedroom suite."

Florentine nodded, realizing the lady was a professional.

When the lady handed Florentine and Liesel the keys, she checked the opened drawer again, took out an envelope and handed it to Florentine, "Ms. Vogel asked me to give you this."

Karl appeared to know the hotel well and took them to their hotel room, where he wished them a pleasant stay. He said that he would be around and would announce himself again when they'd leave.

Florentine walked into the suite followed by Liesel when she heard behind her, "Ach!" and turned around to see Liesel looking around and admiring their suite.

"Look," Liesel said while pointing to the bedroom doors, "you and I, each have a separate bedroom and bathroom, connected by a shared salon."

Florentine smiled and nodded in agreement, then opened the envelope that the receptionist had given her. It was a note from Julia Vogel indeed, a dinner invitation for both in the Brasserie Quarré, right here in the hotel.

"So, they'd have a chance to meet Dr. Weber and his team of directors in advance," Julia wrote.

"Let's meet in the salon once we have refreshed ourselves," Florentine said after she had informed Liesel of the invitation and the casual dress code mentioned. Liesel reacted, barely hiding her excitement.

When both opened their bedroom door, they found their luggage already there.

In the solitude of her room, Florentine felt the gravity of the situation on her shoulders. She didn't know who she'd be speaking to tomorrow, but it was obvious that the project was seen as a matter of national survival. Her societal model, she realized, was at the heart of hope to those that had invited her. Everything would depend on it.

"Do I lean too much on AI to make my model work?" she thought in a moment of 'let this cup pass from me'.

She let the question freely roam her brain ready for reply, even rupture. Yet no neuron cluster seemed to be out of tune. It is then that she slowly regained her academic posture and her sense of positiveness towards the future.

"What an honor that the broad path I am on is my path," she said softly, her thrill and energy returning.

Henrik Bauer arrived in the Adlon Kempinski well in time and walked straight over to the receptionist, who had also addressed Florentine, to check Julia Vogel's booking for a table in a quiet corner of the Brasserie Quarré.

"Where do I find our table?" he said in a strict manner, "I'd like to make sure our conversation stays private."

"Let me show you, Mr. Bauer," she said, knowing who she talked to, then walked ahead of him to the restaurant.

When getting at the table, Henrik Bauer looked around, eyed the distance with neighboring tables and slowly nodded that the location and setting was acceptable. When the receptionist returned to the entrance hall, he took a seat, checked his phone, and waited for Dr. Weber and the others to arrive.

When Florentine and Liesel walked into the restaurant slightly earlier than mentioned in Julia's mail, they saw Weber and his three project directors standing next to a private table, in subdued conversation. Dr. Weber was the first to see the two ladies arrive and signaled them invitingly.

When they arrived at the table, Weber warmly welcomed Florentine but not too loudly, "Professor Fischer, what a pleasure to meet you again. I realize, it is not that long ago since we met in Nice."

Florentine smiled broadly, shook hands, and said, while reciprocating the volume of Weber's voice, "Likewise, Dr. Weber, great meeting you in person again."

She then stepped aside and turned to Liesel, "May I introduce Dr. Liesel Porsch?"

"Ach, Dr. Porsch, good meeting you. I am Dr. Weber. How are you?"

"Freut mich, Dr. Weber. I am fine," Liesel answered politely, impressed by the power that the man radiated.

Weber turned to his project directors and calmly introduced each of them. Eventually, he suggested to get seated. Weber took a seat at one side of the table, strategically with his back to the restaurant, and gestured for the two ladies to sit next to him. The project directors took seats opposite them and appeared to be in good spirits.

Once seated, Weber started explaining the reasons for having dinner together at 'Adlon Kempinski.'

"Of course, I'd like you to get to know each other before the big day tomorrow. However, I also think, we should discuss some tactical matters."

"Dr. Weber, if I may?" Florentine intercepted.

Weber, not used to being interrupted, looked at Florentine then smiled and nodded.

"Before we start, I want to share with you that Liesel and I are honored to be contributing to a project, which will help reinvent Germany, as leader of the European economy. We are fully aware of how important this is to you."

Seeing the sincerity of the woman behind the message, even Weber was touched and, perhaps, more so because he was the project's main instigator and the man who had put all his faith into her societal model.

After this realization, Weber, purposely vague, explained that 'a high government official' would open the meeting tomorrow with an explanation of why this project was critical to Germany. Also, the Minister for Economic Affairs would attend, supportive of the project as she was. Other ministries would be involved later.

Weber said that the program for tomorrow was tight. After a scene setting introduction by 'the high government official,' Florentine would introduce her AI-enabled societal unity-disunity model, followed by Lukas Schmidt, who would talk about the substantial technological investment for this nation-wide project. Julia Vogel, finally, would comment on the organizational consequences for the ministries involved, particularly the staff requirements or, as she called, the 'doers' who would be needed to push the project forward.

On Weber's invitation, Florentine summed up the topics that she would touch on in her speech: first, her model, of course; second, how she sees AI becoming an enabler; third, her ethical considerations. She said that she intended to have a brief 'question and answer' session after each topic, to maximize audience involvement.

As Florentine spoke, Lukas Schmidt realized how fortunate they were to have found someone like Professor Fischer or Florentine, as she encouraged him to call her. Absolutely galvanized by the recent rise of GenAI and what that would mean for the world, he had failed to convince his superiors to make the investments needed to exploit it fully. Now, guided by Florentine's societal model, his dream could face reality.

When Florentine finished, Lukas smoothly took off by humbly stressing that he was not related to Helmut Schmidt, one of Germany's most popular past chancellors, inviting smiles from across the table. He said that he'd start his talk by referring to a well-known US entrepreneur in the AI world, who was seeking to establish a seven-trillion-dollar fund to build a global, networked AI-infrastructure, including the chip-manufacturing and energy-generating plants needed to build and sustain it. This would, in his view, put into perspective the hefty investments projected for Germany alone to support a project of national proportions. Of course, he intended to use GenAI in the process and had already done so to arrive at an infrastructure design that would fit the German project take-off needs. He finished with an afterthought, "Of course, Germany, if not Europe might consider participating in this trillion-dollar fund to benefit from the global returns that it would generate over time."

The smile on Weber's face showed that he liked the idea. Yet, he full well realized that the involvement of Europe could drag down the speed of the project, something that Germany could ill afford.

Lukas looked at Julia, who nodded graciously and whispered a thank you for the floor. Julia Vogel was known by many as a people person who was utterly action-orientated at the same time. She was not someone who you could fool by good intentions. She'd see right through you and know whether you'd be a person who delivered.

One of her primary points was what that she believed that the build-up of staff should follow the pace of new AI-tasks being added. Next to having AI-task creators or 'AI creators,' as she called them, they'd have AI-task controllers or 'AI controllers, who would look, so to speak, over the shoulder of AI to monitor its task-related actions. Both creators and controllers would be selected by an AI application that was specifically tasked for this purpose. Those selected would go through an extensive training program before being put in the field.

As a closing remark, she noted, "By separating creation from control, we intend to ensure the integrity of the project," she then winked and added, "We should not let creators monitor the sanity of their creations."

Weber, who appeared to be satisfied with the level of preparation, nodded, and took the floor, "Well, thank you, this was quite instructive! You cannot imagine how pleased I am to see 'our' project moving forward."

He looked briefly in the direction of Henrik Bauer, then continued, "I'd finally like to check a tactical matter of different kind. Next to 'the high government official' and the Minister for Economic Affairs and Energy, tomorrow's session will be attended by staff from the ministry, personally selected by the minister. On request of the minister, we have double checked the background of the invitees. Nevertheless, we can't take the risk of matters getting out of hand when anyone of these invitees changes his or her mind hearing all this or, indeed, may already have another agenda. Mr. Bauer will you, please, give us your thoughts on the matter?"

Henrik Bauer, a man of few words, looked around the table and started talking, "We have prepared GenAI to listen in on the interactions tomorrow with the purpose of identifying behavior that might hint at such subversive cases. Nonetheless, we should all watch out for such behavior but, please, make sure to keep it private."

Everyone nodded in understanding.

Liesel looked briefly at Florentine, then interjected, "What do you ask AI to look out for, Henrik, may I ask?"

Henrik Bauer was surprised but kept his composure, the professional he was, "We'll ask AI to listen carefully for specific patterns, behaviors, and anomalies, this includes a wide range of signals, anything from voice to content."

Liesel nodded and said, "I was hoping to have AI listening in so it can summarize any comments about the model. This would help us learn from the meeting. Just think of AI giving its views on what it hears. Will that be alright?"

Henrik Bauer smiled and said, "I think so, but you'll need to make sure to inform the participants about it in advance."

Weber looked at his watch, thanked everyone, seemingly anxious to close the meeting seeing what time it was. After warm goodbyes and good luck wishes for tomorrow, everyone went his or her way.

Florentine and Liesel went straight to their suite. In anticipation of the significant day that lay before them, they felt a mix of excitement and nervousness.

Liesel found a note on the salon table from their security official, Karl, saying that they'd be collected by car from the hotel at a quarter to nine in the morning.

"Liesel," Florentine said, "because of the one-hour time difference with London, it doesn't feel that late for us. But tomorrow, we'll be getting up one hour earlier than we usually do. We'd better get enough hours of sleep."

"Yes, we should," Liesel said then looked at a message that came in on her phone.

"Ah, you know what, Florentine. Apparently, Jack has met Ollie at The British Herald and asked him whether he'd be interested in writing a script for a documentary."

"Oh, did he? Nice! What did Ollie say?"

Liesel responded delightedly, "Yes, I guess. He felt so honored."

Earlier at Taviton Street, the phone of the Anthropology Department rang.

"Hello?"

"No, she's not in."

"I can't tell you."

"Because I don't know..."

"Project? Which project?"

"Don't know that either."

"Could it be 'Gutenberg,' maybe?"

"Who is speaking?"

"Newspaper, which newspaper?"

"Hello... hello?"

CHAPTER 10

TREE OF LIFE

While waiting outside the hotel with Liesel and Karl for their government car to arrive, Florentine was glad to have advised Liesel to have a proper breakfast. They would need it to endure an enervating morning, both intellectually and emotionally. Weather-wise, it felt like a perfect day: sunny, crisp, one of those bright mornings when you could almost smell the atmosphere with what seemed like an undertone of ozone. Over breakfast, Liesel had said that she was curious to see the Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy and the offices of Dr. Weber and his team. Frankly, this was not particularly a matter that had occupied Florentine's mind, but she realized that this probably was Liesel's way of dealing with her anxiety for the day ahead. Various cars had stopped in front of the main entrance to collect hotel guests. The shiny black car that was now approaching appeared to be for them.

Karl gracefully opened the door for Florentine and Liesel, then took a seat next to the chauffeur, whom he briefly instructed, a subdued conversation that the ladies missed. The car drove off in the direction of the Brandenburg gate and went to the right around it in the direction of the Reichstag. Liesel anxiously followed the car's movement and expected it to turn right in the direction of Wilhelm Strasse to cross the river Spree to where the Ministry was located. Florentine smiled when she saw the expression on Liesel's face when the car turned left instead. She saw Liesel biting her tongue not to ask whether they had gone the wrong way. In a matter of minutes, the car stopped on the Paul-Löbe Allee in front of the office of the German chancellor. Karl jumped out and opened their doors.

Florentine walked over to the entrance followed by Liesel who still looked stunned. A woman in uniform greeted them and guided them to a conference room and pointed out the facilities at their disposal. While Liesel installed her laptop together with a technician, Florentine walked over to a small group of people who were talking to the project team members they had met yesterday and Dr. Weber, who towered over all of them.

"Ach, Professor Fischer, good to see you. Let me introduce you to our dear colleagues at the Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy."

Weber introduced her to five 'colleagues,' three of whom worked for Economic Affairs, one of them a woman, and two men who worked for the Ministry's Energy division. They were all forthcoming, and greeted her by her name, having been informed in advance by Weber, so it seemed. Florentine was glad that each wore a name label, yet she was determined not to forget a name once she had been introduced, a prerequisite for bonding. They didn't have to wait long before a door opened and a male secretary announced the German Chancellor, Georg Milster, and the Minister for Economic Affairs and Energy, Dr. Hanna Weiss.

The chancellor and minister walked over in their direction, while Dr. Weber, with a broad smile on his face, prepared to introduce Florentine and Liesel, who had joined in the meantime.

"Herr Bundeskanzler, Dr. Weiss, may I introduce our guests of honor, Professor Florentine Fischer and her researcher, Dr. Liesel Porsch?"

"Thank you, Dr. Weber," the chancellor said, then turned to Florentine and said in fluent English, "Welcome Professor Fischer, I am Georg Milster, and this is our Minister for Economic Affairs and Energy, Dr. Hanna Weiss."

Florentine and Liesel shook hands with both, astonished by this show of internationality, after which the chancellor and his minister walked over to the other invitees to greet them personally too.

When done, Dr. Weber asked, "Shall we get seated Herr Bundeskanzler?"

"Thank you, Dr. Weber, but give it a few more minutes. I have also invited the President, Dr. Karl Heinz Baumgartner. As you can imagine, we will badly need his support towards the länder."

"Of course!" Weber said understandingly with a smile.

Florentine, impressed by the action-oriented mindset of the chancellor, suddenly realized how important the German President's intermediation would be toward the länder or states that shaped Germany.

Weber softly explained to Florentine that the chancellor had a background in law and had served in various capacities within the government, gaining a reputation for his ability to navigate complex political landscapes. He was deeply concerned about the future of Germany, particularly in terms of technological advancement and social cohesion. He was seen as a unifier, often bridging gaps between conflicting political ideologies.

"Dr. Weiss," Weber continued, "has a different but, in the light of our project, also useful background."

Hanna Weiss was an economist with a strong academic background. Prior to her political career, she was a professor at a leading German university, specializing in economic policy and innovation. As the Minister for Economic Affairs and Energy, she had been instrumental in driving forward-looking policies, especially in areas related to technology, renewable energy, and economic sustainability. She was particularly known for her analytical skills and her commitment to evidence-based policymaking.

Florentine thanked Weber and said that this would help her tailor her interactions, if needed. Despite the presence of this elite audience of intellectual and political powerhouses, she felt at ease. They'd level with the logic behind her societal model and, driven by a common goal, they'd probably also develop to be formidable benefactors.

When the door opened, the President of Germany, Karl Heinz Baumgartner, entered after being announced. Not that tall, the president reminded of a father figure, not surprisingly, perhaps, considering his role as cross-länder connector. Florentine couldn't help but notice his keen, prying eyes—those of a vigilant statesman, nonetheless.

The chancellor turned to Weber and said in English, "Maybe it's now time to find our seats, Dr. Weber. We have a long day ahead of us."

When they were seated, the chancellor took the floor and reiterated that this project was crucial for the well-being and maybe even continuation of the nation, something that he didn't expand on.

"Did he mean, preventing the nation from breaking up?" flashed through Florentine's mind.

He then turned in the direction of Florentine and started explaining the challenges that Germany was now facing. In the corner of her eye, Florentine saw Hanna Weiss repeatedly nodding in agreement as he did.

"Professor Fischer, it seems our nation has reached the end of a cycle. Our growth is slumping. In the meantime, Eastern European countries, not so much held back by the interests of established industries, are investing heavily

to develop themselves into formidable competitors. Our car industry, an important economic pillar, is facing hardship. They are late to adapt their business to electrically powered vehicles, held back by a corporate culture that has been locked in by their historic fossil-fuel focus. The same applies to many of their suppliers, I mean, our Mittelstand, the medium-sized companies that manufacture car parts. So, change means change throughout our entire economy. Meanwhile, Chinese companies flood the European market with cheap subsidized electric cars."

He continued, "Nationally and within government, we face a backlog in adopting digital systems. Not without reason, Germany is often portrayed as a digital laggard. The concept of 'AI,' as you can imagine, remains beyond the understanding of the average citizen. What's more, we grapple with a 'Russian threat'—both in physical terms and through information manipulation. The Russians have invested heavily in undermining our nation by disseminating false narratives and cultivating alliances with individuals who hold distorted views, often occupying influential positions. What's concerning is that these actors now organize themselves into political parties spanning both ends of the spectrum—far right and far left—essentially exploiting our democratic right to do so as citizens."

The chancellor hesitated then carried on, "We face two other major problems that are pertinent, even life-threatening—issues that have arisen due to what might be described as 'historical ignorance.' Let me explain. We suspect that it might have been a deliberate Russian strategy to bomb Syria, with the goal of spurring a massive flood of Syrian people. The influx of refugees could potentially destabilize the social structure of Europe and, for that matter, the West. Whether deliberate or not, out of humanity, Germany opened its borders and embraced millions of immigrants from an alien, non-European culture. The effects of this decision are still reverberating."

"Last but not least, based on the technological wisdom of the day and perhaps influenced by external factors—let's consider Russia again—Germany has heavily relied on Russian oil and gas as its primary energy supply. It then cut the very branch it was sitting on by closing what now appears to be one of the most affordable and environmentally responsible forms of energy: nuclear-generated electricity. As a nation, we may have prematurely closed and dismantled well-functioning nuclear plants due to misguided fears and outdated perceptions. While public opinion is gradually shifting, many still cling to old information or hesitate to reevaluate their stance."

"What I'd like to emphasize, Professor Fischer, is that we face challenges at all levels of our society, challenges that are reinforcing one another and pulling us further down as a result. We, the government, face the tough task of reaching for the bottom from the top, not missing out on any intermediate level, to revamp our nation, that is, if we really want Germany to remain Europe's economic leader. We can't take a decade to do this. If we do, we will be outcompeted by our neighbors and give internal decay a chance to spread."

The chancellor concluded, his face turning into a broad and energetic smile, "This is what I want to discuss with you, Dr. Weber, your team, and our colleagues from the Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy today. Frankly, I am determined to make that happen. It's my stake in the ground."

The chancellor looked around, seeing some astonished faces. The experienced politician he was, he knew that his audience was not used to such honesty and was mesmerized but also energized by his resolve. When he looked in the direction of Florentine again, he saw a cool and combative woman, silently excusing himself for associating her with a German Shepard, ready to act when given a chance. Dr. Weber, perfectly reading the situation, took the floor and thanked the chancellor for his inspiring introduction. Liesel had anticipated that they'd be next and had checked once more whether the equipment was all set. She nodded to Florentine, looking relieved.

"Professor Fischer, may I invite you to kick off our response?"

"Thank you, Dr. Weber."

Florentine turned to Georg Milster and Hanna Weiss and looked them in the eye and stated, "Artificial Intelligence or 'AI' is at the heart of what we propose as solution. The use of AI is like dropping a rock in the pond of society. It produces ripples radiating outward like a wave when it hits the surface of each societal layer."

She paused, read their faces, then continued, "Its use is so different from the 'Dutch childcare benefits scandal,' which led to the collective resignation of the government in 2021. This scandal, which wrongly accused thousands of parents of fraudulent benefit claims, entailed 'linear computing,' clumsy manmade algorithms—involving illegal profiling and questionable statistics—that were blindly followed by a computer program, disrupting society on its path, while creating turbulence as it sunk to the bottom."

"AI is different in that it is a 'non-linear' phenomenon, which means that it grows an internal order by itself based on a question that is posed—non-linear because you cannot draw a straight line into the future to see what this order might be like. It thinks for itself and might even surprise us as it acquires more insight into the crux of our society."

"Currently, we use AI to execute a whole host of tasks on our behalf, such as summarizing this meeting to learn from it just by listening to the discussion. Liesel, I mean Dr. Porsch, is going to ask your permission in a minute."

The chancellor interjected, "That's fine Dr. Porsch. You have my permission," and looked around the room with a smile on his face. Nobody dared to react, even if they had wanted to object. The President remained stoic.

Liesel nodded a polite thank you and reached for her phone.

Florentine continued, "We won't have the time to discuss all the tasks AI can and will do for us. Yet, every time, AI needs to know what we expect from it. If it's not clear what we want, AI may not second guess well what it needs to do for us. Then again, unlike with an algorithm, we can talk with AI about what it is that we want or need."

"The point I want to make is that, despite being interactive and supportive, AI's role remains passive. People often say that AI lacks a model of how our needs change over time—a model that would allow it to make suggestions or undertake actions as it sees fit, within certain boundaries, without us specifically asking for them."

She looked around the room, "The model that I am referring to is not a variant of the many lifecycle models that have seen the light based on some interpretation of historical data. The world model that AI needs is foundational in that it describes what happens when spontaneous forms of organizations arise and, sometimes, sustain themselves—think of human society, a flock of starlings, or even a society of cells in the body."

"Poetically, to paraphrase the words used by AI itself when discussing it, it is 'a model that transcends mere data points and embraces the intricate dance of emergence.' Let us look what that means in practice."

Liesel ensured that the moment Florentine finished her sentence, a video clip was played, showing a breathtaking view of the rooftops in Rome with a murmuration of starlings flying over it in mesmerizing, coordinated patterns, involving literally millions of birds. Florentine explained that these starlings, driven by a shared purpose—whether escaping a falcon or foraging amidst a chaotic cloud of insects—followed each other's flight paths, functioning as a cohesive society of birds. A shared purpose or a common threat typically acts as a unifying force, bringing people, even nations together. For instance, when European nations faced the looming threat of Russia as an antagonist, they rallied together under NATO, their collective strength forged by challenging circumstances.

Liesel handed a pendulum to Florentine—a stainless-steel ball on a cord—to demonstrate the dynamics of her societal model. She pointed out that without a unifying force, the ball would hang still. In that position, any

clustering or togetherness observed would be accidental and not followed up by events to solidify and improve the bond. A shared purpose in the shape of a threat or opportunity would work like a force that pulls the ball to one side. Florentine explained that the ensuing alignment of starlings and people particularly relied on what the Nobel laureate psychologist, Daniel Kahneman, called System 1—fast, intuitive, reflex-driven behavior. Another example of unity emerging is people gathering to demonstrate either against or in favor of a particular issue.

Florentine emphasized that such a unifying force would be temporary. Starlings would return to settle in Rome's trees, and in much the same way, demonstrators would return home. Human society distinguishes itself in that it can build on such clustering by another force, which helps in sustaining unity, strangely enough, by introducing the deliberate disunity of the division of labor. The purpose of this force is to maximize the efficiency of the efforts within the group, by divvying up the roles and, this way, encourage specialization. The force of disunity propels the stainless-steel ball to swing through to the opposite side after it initially veers back to its starting position.

Hanna Weiss appeared to be both pleased and enthused by the metaphor and raised her hand.

"Dr. Weiss?"

Hanna Weiss smiled and noted, "I am pleased to learn that your model relies on Adam Smith's 'division of labor,' a well-articulated concept in my field and relevant to the Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy. In my experience, it can indeed be pursued deliberately but sometimes a division of labor also develops spontaneously, that is, if the conditions are right. What is your view on that?"

"Thank you, Dr. Weiss. As I see it, your formulation precisely captures the essence. While the decision to pursue a division of labor is often deliberate, the process itself hinges significantly on local conditions. These conditions act as preconditions, favoring least-action paths, specifically. Interestingly, it's physics, not just economics, that shapes these outcomes. Nature's favored paths aren't necessarily the shortest or fastest. They align with the principle of least action. Leveraging AI, we can identify and create optimal conditions within given circumstances, which themselves can be improved again with the help of AI but at another level of society."

Florentine paused briefly and continued, "I guess, you may now see the value add of AI. It can help us improve conditions at the different levels of society. Why? Only AI can practically accomplish the complex balancing act that is required at a national scale."

It was gratifying to see her audience following her argument, nearly reading her lips. This meant she could wrap up her introduction of the unity-disunity model and go over to the questions and answers.

"So, also when it comes to disunity, AI can function as an extension of human psychology—a mode of thinking that is now deliberative and logical. Daniel Kahneman referred to this mode as System-2 thinking. Overall, the pendulum metaphor depicts the unity-disunity model as a dynamic framework for understanding society. AI, in turn, can leverage this model to monitor and propose necessary conditions across different societal levels."

Florentine looked around the room and asked, "So far, are there any questions that come to mind on this?"

Clara, who worked for Economic Affairs, raised her hand, and asked, "How do you see the goal-setting process or purpose-setting process, if you will, develop from layer to layer?"

Florentine nodded in understanding and responded, "Goals and purposes, for that matter, are preconditions. Moreover, what a goal is to one level may be seen as a condition to the levels below. So goal setting means setting preconditions, the potential effect of which can be anticipated up and down societal levels by AI."

Clara nodded in agreement.

Rudolf, who worked for the Energy division, raised his hand, "Your model, as I understand it, describes the dynamics of an ideal, let's say, democratic society. But what will be the impact of autocratic leadership?"

Both Karl Heinz Baumgartner and Georg Milster turned around to see who was asking the question then turned back to Florentine, curious about what her answer might be.

Florentine appeared to take this message very serious, realizing that she had asked herself the same question.

"So relevant a question, Rudolf, in this day and age."

She paused, then said pensively, "The impact of autocratic leaders on the pendulum swinging is twofold. First, autocratic leaders are tempted to invent and sustain a unifying force to stay in control by preventing too much deliberate and logical thinking. The checks and balances that this involves and the efficiencies that this produces would curb their freedom to rule. This explains the high level of corruption in Russia and, as I understand, in China too. Autocrats typically sustain a unifying goal by maintaining a level of threat. They wage war internally by taking out opponents, including journalists, as we have seen, and they wage war externally to keep in power."

"Second, autocratic leaders want exactly the opposite in peer nations that they want to weaken. By investing in information disruption and by financing a network of paid agents, they exert the force of disunity to foster division. The idea is old: it is to divide and rule. They encourage societal divisions, anticipating these will favor their own goals over those of the nation. The evidence, unfortunately, is obvious in the United States and other nations."

Florentine's reply seemed to strike a chord with Georg Milster, who asked, "Then how can AI help prevent autocratic leadership, not just at a national level but also at other levels, Professor Fischer?"

"There are multiple ways in which AI can help prevent autocracy develop. To be precise, by autocracy I don't mean strong leadership."

The room did not miss the hidden compliment that this might have been.

She continued, "AI ensures information transparency and can function as early warning system. The predictive analyses that it produces may also reveal adverse future developments. Guided by the societal unity-disunity model, AI is not merely a passive observer; it actively identifies conditions that require change but remain stagnant. Additionally, AI can discern when existing conditions perpetuate divisions within society, potentially harming the nation. In essence, the unity-disunity model serves as a powerful vehicle, enabling AI to assume a driving role in promoting balance and fostering a more harmonious society."

Weber stood up and said, "Maybe it's time to have a cup of coffee so we can let it all sink in before we start with the next section on Professor Fischer's valuable insights."

All in the room nearly leaped from their chairs, energized. What had initially appeared to be a serene Zen garden transformed into an ocean of gossip about what they'd just learned. Pupils had widened and doubts about the prospects of this massive and daring project pushed back. In the corner of her eye, Florentine saw Liesel cuddling up to Dr. Weber, likely persuading him to name the project the 'Goethe project' and smiled inwardly.

Florentine took the time to prepare for the next part of her speech. Dr. Weber had been kind enough to bring her a cup of coffee, fully aware of the peace and quiet she would require. Meanwhile, the audience maintained a distance from the presenter, assessing the impact of it all within their own frame of reference.

When Dr. Weber saw that his first speaker of the day had recharged and nodded to indicate that she was ready to continue, he invited everyone back to resume the meeting.

Florentine looked around room and noticed that all participants were ready for more.

"In this part of my speech about 'how AI can become an enabler,' I'd like to cover three questions. First, what should be the role of AI, I mean, how should citizens experience it, ideally? Second, how might you, as government, regrow an AI-supported tree of national life? I am sure, you understand that this is not simply a matter of watering the roots of an existing tree with some toxic brew to fight fungi and pests. Third, how might you regain a sane kind of a national consciousness with the help of AI?"

The room nodded its approval in unison.

Florentine started off by telling Candace's story about a small Mid-Western town in the United States. She told about the role of its newspaper, its reporters and editor, in presenting the pros and cons of the various perspectives on matters that seemed of importance to the town. This not only kept citizens involved but also sane. The paper helped them form a more balanced opinion. As collective framework of reference, it also acted as a bulwark against the proliferation of deceptive sources with their own hidden agendas.

"When you think of it, like electricity is an unassuming conveyor of energy, the newspaper in this town was an unassuming conveyer of balanced opinions, truths that mattered to the town."

She watched to see whether this resonated in the room and continued, "The ideal role that I see for AI is that of an unassuming conveyer of balanced opinions, which focuses on local situations at every level of society, like a newspaper focuses on a local town. The benefit of having AI in that role is that it can adapt to local situations and at the same time balance opinions across societal levels, something that local newspapers cannot."

Hanna Weiss raised her hand and asked, "How can one ensure that AI is actually used as as unassuming conveyer of opinion?"

"I asked myself the same question, Dr. Weiss. It may not be enough to explain that AI offers unbiased information and that it has the capacity to analyze vast amounts of data quickly. I don't think that its ability to bridge gaps between different societal sectors will convince people either. That is all too theoretical to most. I do think, however, that transparency about AI's workings and ethical use may do it. I imagine that government is typically seen as guarantor of the ethical use of processes that it maintains to run the country; AI with a quality stamp."

Hanna Weiss nodded in agreement.

Florentine continued, having one more crucial point to make, "But that's not all. On the back of the unity-disunity model, AI should play a more active role in fostering a dialog between citizens at the various levels of society. Based on how the pendulum swings, it should encourage a more focused dialog about their situation."

"How does AI act in such a process of 'piloted gossip,' you may ask? Well, thinking of the reporters and their editor again, it should listen and inquire. The editor asks questions based on what he knows about what's going on in town. AI should listen and inquire but now also inspired by what it knows about the societal pendulum swinging."

"I'll continue with my second question: how might government regrow the AI-supported tree of national life?"

"As the current-day dilemmas in the United States and Europe point out, the tree of national life feeds on light like any tree but it finds it at the bottom of society where the voters are, not at the top. Growing an AI-supported tree

from scratch is no different from growing a regular tree. Yet, it is bound to grow much quicker, its processes operating at speeds magnitudes faster than the human brain."

Florentine thought she saw the beginning of a question mark arising on the face of some of the 'colleagues' from the Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy. What were they worried about, she wondered?

"In this room, you might say that we are at seed level. To regrow the German tree of national life with the help of AI, you need to grow roots first before branches and leaves will appear. In effect, the roots you'd need to build are your virtual reporters. They listen to what is happening at the various levels of German society while the editor, again in the shape of AI, distills societal goals from what it learns in dialog with the government."

Clara raised her hand.

"Aha, there it is!" flashed through Florentine's mind.

"Sorry, for interrupting, Professor Fischer. Can you give us an idea of how you'd do this? I am trying to figure out what this entails in practice."

The room seemed to agree, with several participants nodding in unison. Florentine had asked herself the same question and came prepared. Yet, she was unsure when exactly to table it. This was the right moment, so it seemed. Liesel, who had anticipated this question, instantly showed a blown-up picture of what appeared to be a sheet with a fairly long list of sentences, in everyday language.

As Florentine pointed out, this was what was typically called a 'system prompt,' essentially a list of instructions. It strongly reminded of the instructions that you'd give to someone before starting with a certain task.

"This is what you'd use to ask AI to execute complex, even very complex tasks. Let's go through the instructions and see what they are about. What occurred to me, when I first saw it, was that it lacks any complicated computer code. The instructions are written in a language that you and I would understand. What I also noticed is that it is as if you'd address an intelligent person who can think for herself and sort the question out."

Clara softly smiled, when hearing Florentine referring to 'an intelligent person thinking for herself.' "Might AI be a mother to society rather than a father?"

Florentine pointed out the various types of instructions. The initial instructions confirmed the type and version of the AI tool in use. The instructions then explained which freedoms AI had, for example, allowing it to gather data from the Internet and other systems and for how long. Florentine reminded that the knowledge of AI was broad and deep enough to consult and even break into other systems, if allowed. This underlined its responsible use at government level. Of course, this was also a warning that AI could be misused.

Clara raised her hand again.

Florentine nodded encouragingly.

"How do you prevent such misuse, Professor Fischer?"

"Basically by telling it, I mean, consistently telling it. If you're not consistent in doing so, AI might see this as an implied approval for something controversial. It can read 'in-between' the lines of our instructions at least as good as we can. A catch-all way to ensure AI's proper behavior is to instruct it to adhere to certain morals. Interestingly,

you can ask AI to help you in doing that, backing it up with data. It can even generate computer code to perform such novel tasks. So far, some handholding is needed to ensure that it adequately tests the code that it produces."

Florentine paused and voiced a realization that popped up based on what she'd just said, "I guess, we've entered the age of AI. We are no longer alone in René Descartes' world of thinking, I mean, the French philosopher who wrote, 'I think, therefore I am'. We now share it with something much bigger than us, something that saw the light through our technological wit but already can reach beyond it. If we use it properly, it'll serve us. If we misuse it consistently, it'll simply take over from us initially by curbing our ill-fated actions."

She then thought of something that might uplift her audience, "More than humankind, AI is driven by the societal logic of nature. This is why I see the world ahead of us with optimism. We gained a clever pal that will point out our stumbling blocks and help us work around them, a pal that will not let itself be railroaded by our stupidity."

The room nodded in understanding and, as Florentine discerned, with a sense of relief.

"Let's return to the instruction sheet or 'system prompt' to see what else you'd find on it."

Florentine pointed out quite a few statements that said what to do and for how long and what not to do. There were also statements with expectations about output and what would be acceptable and what not.

"I could go on and on but, I guess, you now have an idea of how AI is instructed. Going back to growing roots, this is how you'd kick off growing them and this is how, again in dialog with AI, you'd create evermore refined roots."

"Having started growing roots, you can start growing branches that grow level by level to reach the citizens at the bottom, that is, the voters. The approach of growing branches is like growing roots. While growing roots involves listening and distilling, growing branches involves sustaining a participative process of piloted gossip."

"You may have seen images illustrating that a tree's root system is as extensive and widespread as its branches. Seen from the stem of government, each branch and each root is a task or subtask. So, this is what you'll create."

Florentine looked around the room and saw that the quarter had fallen, so to speak.

"I'd like to close this part on AI and move on to the final bit about how you might regain a sane kind of a national consciousness with the help of AI."

Not yet numb, the room looked alert, probably triggered by the fancy idea of 'national consciousness.' Florentine looked in the direction of Julia Vogel and nodded, only to continue when Julia nodded in return.

She explained that the idea of consciousness was still hotly debated in the hothouse of scientists and believers without any conclusive results, for that matter. However, if you'd define consciousness as an awareness of your actions and their context, as some researchers claim, then the suggestion of Ms. Vogel to separate AI-task creation and AI-task control might not just ensure that tasks achieve what they were intended to achieve. To paraphrase the AI that she had discussed this with, you'd also create a form of 'functional consciousness.'

"I am not sure how you see this but, to me, and I am speculating now, functional consciousness at all levels is precondition to national consciousness. Considering, in addition, the participative process of piloted gossip that this project should achieve, the entire project might indeed reinvigorate Germany's national consciousness."

Even Dr. Weber looked impressed when he rose to his feet to suggest taking a five-minute break. He knew that Florentine's views on the ethics involved, however important, would be quite straightforward.

When it was time for Florentine to start, it was clear that her audience was rather exhausted and ready for lunch. She realized how, too often, ethics were treated like an 'appendix,' which, metaphorically, ended up being cut out as topic when starting to cause pain in the stomach. As she told her audience, she was confident that the approach that she had proposed this morning would or, at least, could fulfill the foundations of an ethical society, such as transparency, accountability, fairness bias wise, respect for people's autonomy, privacy, and physical security. Without the need to compromise on these matters, the different Ministries would function better. What's more, AI, tasked with these moral considerations, would develop to be a true benevolent force.

Florentine closed off by thanking her audience, after which an orderly audience arose to embrace the warmth of a chaotic togetherness.

When Dr. Weber and Florentine were quietly evaluating the response of the audience to her session so far, with their visor on what would need to come next, Henrik Bauer came walking over.

"Do you have a minute, Dr. Weber, Professor Fischer?"

"Sure!" Weber was quick to respond.

"I was informed that our daily national tabloid newspaper, Blitz, had a brief question on its frontpage today: 'What is the secretive Gutenberg project about?'"

Florentine looked from Henrik Bauer to Dr. Weber, in a state of shock, "Oh my word, this means it's our department secretary, Arthur!"

Henrik Bauer shook his head.

"Not necessarily. The brief text below the headline ends with: 'Or is it the Leibnitz project?'"

CHAPTER 11

RED PAINT

Early in life, Jack Keller learned that he didn't have runner's knees. Mountain biking wasn't his thing either, the strain on his knees too big at times and unpredictable. Having eagerly watched the annual Tour de France and Giro d'Italia on television as a kid, he developed what was a playful interest in road biking into what his two women now teasingly referred to as an acceptable obsession. He'd do thirty to sixty miles twice a week very early in the morning when the traffic was light. It was a perfect way for him to keep fit. Yet, the true benefit, he realized, was that it helped him to sort out his thinking, cleaning up views that threatened to become cluttered.

When biking in the greater London area, not being challenged by Zurich heights where he grew up, he could let his mind wander, the compassionate man he was. He remembered with a faint smile barely showing beneath his biker helmet how compassion had made him choose for another path despite being the only son of a trading family or, as some of his friends in Switzerland called it, a trading dynasty. A family of farmers originally, his grand parents had started trading the agricultural produce grown in their valley. His father had grown the business nationally and, eventually, internationally, broadening it from produce to oil and gas.

Jack was not sure whether his father understood, but he seemed to accept that his son was driven more by trading passion than produce. After earning a bachelor's degree in art with a specialization in filmmaking and a stint in the Swiss film industry, he embarked on a master's in business at IMD, the renowned Institute for Management Development in Lausanne. It was there that his father, during occasional business visits, developed pride in his son's mission during their long exchanges over lunch along Lake Geneva, at Château d'Ouchy. Jack had decided to become a producer of documentaries that brought to light the issues and inequalities of the world. Yet, to make a dent in the world of documentaries, Jack had decided to move to London. Although the city was just a short flight away, it felt as if he had to 'lose' his son once more, a sentiment bleakly balanced by admiration for his mission.

In the light of this realization, a wave of warmth arose from his bloodstream when thinking back to his meeting with Ollie Blackwood. Ollie had quickly grasped the idea that a documentary about fake news meant exploring it both as accidental consequence of developments such as in Mid-Western US towns and as deliberate consequence of actions such as by profit-seeking media barons and, particularly, Russian operatives in the UK. The market for such a documentary was ripe and so was he. What Jack didn't share with Ollie is that he hoped to learn about the role of the man who had kidnapped his wife in Nice, France, and what might have happened to Martin Thornick.

"Hello, Papa! Lada here. At what time do you expect me tomorrow morning?"

"Try to be at my office not later than 9:30AM. Why don't you come home tonight?"

"That will difficult Papa. I have a workshop with my study group. Can't miss that without a penalty. But, no worries, I'll take an early train tomorrow."

"In that case, Angela will pick you up from Paddington station."

"Oh, that would greatly help."

"See you tomorrow, Lada."

"Bye..."

After Henrik Bauer's news, she suspected, as she had also shared with him, that the culprit behind the mention of the Leibnitz project may not have been Lada but her father. When she explained why, Henrik seemed to agree.

Having briefly refreshed herself, Florentine went to where lunch would be served. Julia Vogel had not prepared a seating plan, relying on chance and curiosity to encourage a mix that, she hoped, might increase the value created in the morning. Someone, who turned out to be the chancellor, signaled that they had kept a chair for her next to him at the end of a long table where everyone was seated. Julie Vogel, the chancellor and three colleagues from the Ministry, including Clara and Rudolf, were sitting with him on one end. The chancellor appeared to have surrounded himself with colleagues of the Ministry. It hinted at his practical touch, his focus on getting things done. The kind of questions they asked indicated how well they'd taken hold of her speech and its intent.

She was not surprised when Clara asked her what AI agents were. It was something that she didn't have time to cover during her talk. The answer was straightforward, however. AI agents were specifically tasked instances of AI with their own goals, permissions, and access to Internet and other software or whatever they might need to complete their task. The AI tasks that she referred to in her talk were essentially all AI agents, tasked by the AI that supervised the lot. Clara's question turned out to be a steppingstone that led to the realization that the behavior of a society of AI agents would resemble human society. AI agents would need to be managed with the help of the societal unity-disunity model to prevent them from giving priority to their own goals over those of the nation. The model, in other words, would help the lead AI to look out for run-away AI agents. Obviously, by chatting with the supervising AI, you'd tell it first about the unity-disunity model, what it entailed and its purpose.

Lunch time passed like a dream, which Dr. Weber smoothly interrupted by reminding the participants that it was time to continue. When all were seated in the conference room again, Dr. Weber introduced Lukas Schmidt and explained that he would explore the physical infrastructure needs.

Lukas, the down-to-earth technologist, stood, capturing the room's attention. "As we stand on the brink of a technological revolution," he began, "our project is not just ambitious; it's essential. We're not the only ones who see the potential—similar initiatives are unfolding globally, with investments reaching the trillions."

He paused, letting the gravity of the number sink in, then surprised himself with his philosophical bearing. "This isn't just about funding; it's about harnessing AI to redefine our future. Yet, the scale of innovation we're pursuing demands more than just smart algorithms; it requires a foundation that can support the weight of our ambitions."

"The heart of our endeavor," he continued, shifting to the core of the matter, "is not just in creating smarter machines but in building the ecosystem that sustains them. We're talking about a synergy of cutting-edge chip technology and energy solutions integral to making AI not just a tool but a partner in shaping our future."

"To benefit from AI, not just to help us run society but also to embrace the promise of exponential progress in technological development, we need more energy than we currently have access to."

Lukas scanned the room, expecting a question he had anticipated, then decided to answer it anyway.

"I realize what might go through your mind: AI requires more energy than humans. Yet, the benefits far outweigh the costs. Forget, for a moment, the world that we live in and think of a world with AI as ultimate designer. In this world, advancements will be made exponentially faster than those made in the last century."

Rudolf raised his hands and interjected, "You said 'AI as ultimate designer.' But, considering that AI is trained with data from the past, I don't see how it can be more creative than human beings."

Lukas listened quietly to what Rudolf had to say and replied, "One would expect so, of course."

His gaze swept across the room. "Can AI match human creativity? Some of you might wonder if a system trained on past data can truly innovate, or merely iterate on what's already known."

He paused, allowing the weight of the question to settle. "Our creative potential, too, is shaped by our experiences, by the data of our lives, so to speak. Yet, we pride ourselves on our ability to 'think outside the box.' Interestingly, AI is starting to show us that the box might be bigger than we imagined."

Lukas leaned forward, engaging directly with the audience. "Consider the discovery of new materials, or the identification of proteins, the building blocks of life—tasks AI has accomplished by identifying patterns invisible to the human eye. It's not just about processing power; it's about seeing the world differently."

He continued with a hint of excitement, "AI is beginning to complement human creativity, not just by accelerating our research but by expanding the realm of what's considered possible. It offers us a partnership where the sum is greater than its parts—where our intuition is enhanced by AI's breadth of knowledge and vice versa."

Lukas's explanation served not just to address concerns but to inspire. "In this partnership, AI doesn't replace human creativity; it becomes an instrument of it, pushing us to explore beyond our imagined limits."

Lukas saw that his explanation had sufficed and closed with a dry observation about the future role of humans. "Humans, driven by emotion, intuition, and subjective experience, will continue to play a crucial role in the process of creation but probably not as architects but as their clients."

Rudolf nodded in agreement, a signal for Lukas to pick up the red thread of this talk again.

"A second precondition for the successful use of AI, computing-power hungry as it is, is the availability of chips, such as, Computer Processing Units or, lately also, Language Processing Units. Because the abilities of AI improve with scale, it requires many such units."

"The development of chip designs with the help of AI is progressing at a rapid pace. Chips become faster and are bound to consume less energy. So far, it took time to manufacture chips once they were designed. The Japanese have now developed a technology that can directly imprint designs onto a specific base material, significantly reducing the previously required time for this process."

"To stay at the forefront, as a nation, we should not just have enough capacity to produce computer chips. We should also have the technology to create, if not adopt and manufacture the latest designs when we need them."

"A third precondition is the availability of dedicated AI datacenters where AI's thought processes are sustained. You might say that a datacenter is a cranium with AI's brains in it. In our plans, we have foreseen ample datacenter

space. Not wanting to expand them indefinitely, our goal is to increase the processing capacity per square meter by developing more powerful and energy-efficient chip designs using AI. AI looks after its own future this way."

Lukas looked around the room and noticed that Rudolf was all ears and resonating.

"What does this all boil down to?"

Lukas paused briefly, then continued, "We believe that the domestic manufacturing and design of chips, facilitated by AI, is crucial. This approach ensures we have a sufficient supply of chips, which is vital for the expansion and maintenance of the growing AI services within our nation."

Dr. Weiss, nodded in support of this conclusion first.

"When it comes to providing AI services nationally, we decided it would be far more efficient to create all-in 'AI sites,' where energy generation is combined with an AI datacenter. The public grid and our generation capacity is already overstretched as it is. Besides, transmitting data is far more efficient than transmitting electricity."

Lukas showed an AI-generated video clip with a drone-like impression of such a site. He pointed out that the datacenter and energy-generating facilities were all planned underground. This was also deemed to be crucial for security reasons, he stressed.

"You don't want the 'brains' that help us run the nation be vulnerable to outside attacks."

"At ground level, the site would be populated with solar panels and wind turbines. From above, you wouldn't have an idea of what went on underground. The electricity generated this way would be stored in batteries, located again underground. Any heat generated such as by the datacenter would be used to generate electricity."

Lukas alerted the room to a drone view of what seemed like an underground silo. He knew that he would touch upon the national controversy of nuclear energy in Germany.

"In this space, we'll locate the ultimate source of electricity. The French, with some German companies offering technology, have developed an entirely new design for an old idea to generate electricity with nuclear fission."

The room sighed, as if saying, no chance in Germany.

Lukas, ignoring the subdued reaction in the room, continued, "In this silo, a bus-sized nuclear micro reactor fits, which is cooled by molten-salt rather than water. This low-pressure and low temperature reactor cannot explode like the runaway water-cooled reactor in Chernobyl did. It stops by itself. What's more, it runs on waste that has been produced for years by traditional reactors, nuclear fuel that cannot be used for military purposes."

From the corner of his eye, Lukas saw Rudolf, who worked for the Energy division of the ministry, nodding.

"You appear to be familiar with the technology, Rudolf. Would you like to fill us in with what you know about it?"

Rudolf nodded and said, "Sure!" then listed matters that made a difference as he saw it.

"First, the fourth-generation reactor that is used is carbon free and replaces fossil fuels. Second, the technology is not just safe but also clean. It uses long-lived radioactive waste as fuel and cleans up our planet. Moreover, no water is used. The water in our rivers will no longer be heated up nor will it run the risk of being contaminated. Third, the French company involved runs the equipment at the lowest price per kilowatt on the market."

Lukas smiled gratefully, "Thank you, Rudolf!"

Lukas turned to the audience again, "This sums up the German AI-site as we see it today. We suggest building one to start with, for practical purposes, probably close to the French border. As a matter of fact, the French expect to deliver their first reactor in less than two years and expect to be in full production in five years. Of course, based on how this site works out, we would refine our design and build other sites elsewhere when the need arises."

Dr. Weber rose to his feet, visibly pleased, and thanked Lukas for his interesting and mind-broadening talk. He also reminded that he'd present an overview of the investments involved at the end of the day.

"Let's have a short break before I invite Ms. Vogel to take the floor."

Less than a quarter of an hour later, Dr. Weber introduced Julia Vogel who started off by explaining that she'd look at the human dynamics involved when realizing a national project of this magnitude.

"There are three dimensions that I'd like to touch on."

Julia Vogel first explained the AI-driven selection and training of AI-task creators and AI-task controllers. Because Florentine had referred to these roles in her talk, the audience was quick to grasp the matter. What seemed to be of particular interest to the room was the second dimension about the impact of the project on the working population. Considering that AI would help identify areas where change would be necessary, the question was how government would deal with the working population that was affected.

"Our thinking on that has come down to what we have called the 'ARC rule,' that is, the Adapt, Rotate, or Cease rule. We imagine that, based on an AI-supported assessment again, the affected working population can be guided to adapt their role to fit the needs of society, for instance, by retraining or reschooling. Alternatively, such an assessment might suggest, that it is more effective to rotate people, particularly when their specialization is such that organizations in another state of development have a need for it. Of course, these are not matters that are pushed down the throats of people. They involve a guided exchange with the person involved."

Clara raised her hand and interjected, "What do you mean by 'guided exchange,' may I ask?"

Julia Vogel knew that she could expect such a question and had prepared for it.

"We should not forget the intent of this project. It is to serve the voter at the lowest level of society. It sounded a little Soviet-like, I agree, but it sure is not in the interest of a nation to push people around like zombies. As the Soviets have shown, this backfires with societal disaster. The intent of an intermediary should be to maximize the well-being of the working population by matching circumstance with the role that people would credibly like. So, the answer to your question is that the exchange is guided by humans and, eventually also, AI. Think of how AI is now being used by general practitioners as first telephone responder. Considering the clumsy algorithm-driven call-center responders of the past, I understand that we need to be alert when people are biased because of that."

Clara seemed satisfied with Julia's reply while Julia, in turn, was happy with Clara's question because it helped her address the matter in a rather eloquent way.

Finally, the third dimension refers to the AI-driven acceleration of robot development, a robot essentially being, as Professor Fischer suggested, an AI agent but now one with physical features. We speculate that human-like robots will eventually be used to run the AI-sites that Mr. Schmidt described. Considering the tremendous improvements

in eye-hand-foot agility that certain companies have demonstrated, we assume that robots suffice well in such confined environments. To demonstrate what she meant, Julia showed two brief video clips to make her point.

Rudolf hesitated, then raised his hand, "What do you mean by 'cease' in the ARC-rule?"

Julia smiled and said, "A relevant question, indeed. Thank you for reminding me."

"The cease option is ill-defined. It probably means that people may cease to function as deliberate part of the economy and get the freedom and, thus, funds to develop activities in unexpected ways. One might refer to this part of the population as contributors to the disorder or entropy needed to keep society on its edge."

Julia added an after thought, "People who manage to carve out their role in society by themselves are beyond the reach of the ARC-rule."

Dr. Weber nodded with a sense of accomplishment and thanked Julia. He continued with an overview of the projected investments, as he had promised. It was clear to everyone in the room that many of the benefits would be intangible, the project being worthwhile to be pursued, nonetheless. It was a political decision.

He also said that should the project be approved, Henrik Bauer, a psychologist by training, would issue an official communication script for everyone involved to prevent, if not control gut reactions by the greater public. The why of the project initially: Introduce AI to help the ministries function evermore efficiently.

The room seemed to resonate well when Dr. Weber's closed off with the following words, "Let's remember that 'scale' is the key to the success of our national AI project. As a renowned AI pioneer recently observed: 'While the laws of scaling are determined by nature, we set the boundaries.'"

Rudolf softly asked Clara what Dr. Weber meant by 'scale'. Clara, an economist, explained that it refers to the benefit of large volumes, like economies of scale. AI appeared to arise on the back of large volumes of data.

Dr. Weber then turned to the chancellor and invited him to give his feedback on the day and the project. Before the chancellor had a chance to respond to Dr. Weber's invitation, a door opened and what seemed like a secretary walked over to him. The chancellor excused himself politely and listened to what the man whispered in his ear. When the man had left, the chancellor turned to the room, his face not giving anything away on what he heard.

"I have listened with great interest to what you have presented. I also thoroughly enjoyed the discussions and the questions that were raised and the replies that these enticed. What I have witnessed today is enough of a platform for the realization of this nation-wide project, starting with the Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy."

Everyone in the room, silently sighed with a mix of relief and accomplishment. The face of the President, Karl Heinz Baumgartner, suggested his agreement.

"I want to congratulate you, Dr. Weber, for developing a broad idea into something practical, which government, as voice of the nation, can now endorse."

A smile slowly appeared on the chancellor's face, "Now I think of it, 'Liebe Kollegen,'" Professor Fischer, Dr. Porsch, through this project, we are about to create a 'palpable voice' for the nation."

The room radiated appreciation for the chancellor's inventive rendering.

The chancellor paused as if deciding whether to share what he was about to say, "For your information, we just received a phone call from the President of France, Jean-Pierre Dupont, whose intelligence organization had informed him that we were working on an advanced nation-wide project. Yes, news travels fast, so it seems."

While the room reacted surprised when hearing this, Dr. Weber and Henrik Bauer appeared to be speechless.

The chancellor continued, "My hunch is that we should continue full speed but, considering the energy technology that France offers, I am inclined to tell President Dupont that we'll let his people look over our shoulder. What do you think, Dr. Weber?"

Dr. Weber looked intense, then slowly nodded, and said, "If it's a matter of looking over our shoulder then I think we can live with that."

Weber realized full well that this might be the starting shot for an ugly race where governments might fall over one another to embark on a similar project for their nation.

The chancellor reacted resolute, "Great, that's settled then!" and carried on speaking, "I believe you have an event planned for this evening, right, Ms. Vogel?"

Julia Vogel smiled and nodded affirmatively.

"Unfortunately, I won't be able to attend it, but I wish you all a great evening. You have a busy time ahead of you."

The chancellor rose to his feet, walked over to Dr. Weber, shook his hand while thanking him, and left the room.

Florentine and Liesel were exhausted and relieved, at the same time. Karl was waiting outside to take them to Hotel Adlon Kempinski by car. Their mental batteries on a low, they said they'd prefer to walk. What took seven minutes by car, Liesel said, having checked her phone, would only take them ten minutes on foot. Karl, alert yet calm, nodded, then signaled to the chauffeur in the car that they wouldn't need his services.

The car drove off even before Karl said, "Follow me."

At the end of what had been a beautiful day, the walk across the park in the direction of the Brandenburg gate situated next to the Adlon Kempinski was stimulating. Florentine didn't talk a lot and neither did Liesel. Both were lost in thoughts about the fine but enervating workshop with the German chancellor and president present. They saw that Karl received a phone call, but they missed what it was about. They did not even notice him being more alert than usual afterwards or relieved when they finally collected their key at the reception.

As soon as Karl had taken the ladies to their suite, he called Henrik Bauer on his way down with the lift. He informed Bauer that the chauffeur had called him to report that an odd ball had poured red paint over the car's darkened rear windows but that the ladies were not inside having opted to walk back to the hotel.

"Any idea of what the motive might be?" Karl asked.

"Possibly," Henrik Bauer said, "Of course, a true professional would operate differently, which might suggest that this was a warning. I'll check with our 'Sicherheitsdienst' who keeps an eye on the chancellor's offices."

"We'd better come prepared for our boat trip tonight," Karl said.

"We'd better!" Henrik Bauer confirmed, then added, "It's good you didn't let our two guests know."

Upon returning to their suite, Florentine and Liesel were thrilled to discover a formal dinner invitation from Dr. Weber. It was for a gathering with the participants at today's meeting and would take place aboard a luxurious ship chartered exclusively by the government, with the compliments of the Chancellor. This added a touch of prestige to the occasion.

"This is the least we can do in return for your valuable, unpaid contribution," Weber had written at the bottom.

At a quarter to eight, Florentine and Liesel were waiting near the entrance, accompanied by Karl. They kept their surprise to themselves when they saw another, more solid but nonetheless shiny car arriving.

"Where will we be boarding the ship, Karl?" Liesel asked when Karl opened her door.

"It's not going to be far: the Palace of Tears or 'Tränenpalast'."

"Oh, really? The Palace of Tears is a former border crossing between East and West Berlin and was in operation until 1989," Liesel explained to Florentine.

Karl nodded, got into the car, and mumbled, "Correct!"

"But, Karl, that should be just minutes away from here! Can't we walk?" Liesel added.

"That's government procedure for precious guests," Karl said, intentionally not excusing himself.

The car turned onto the Wilhelm Strasse and drove in the direction of the river Spree where it turned right onto "Reichstagufer," a street along the bank of the river, which, as Liesel remarked, ran from the Reichstag behind them to the Palace of Tears. When a police helicopter flew frightening low over the river in their direction, both Liesel and Florentine looked outside and wondered what was going on. Karl, on the other hand, privately grinned with an air of confidence and relief. In a matter of minutes, they arrived at the palace and the dock, where a sleek, flat passenger boat with large windows was lying, its skipper, in uniform, waiting to help them to get on board. Once the three of them were inside, Dr. Weber came walking over to welcome them.

"Welcome on board, Professor Fischer, Dr. Porsch. We are all here and ready to begin our sightseeing trip. Dinner will be served while we watch some of the historical jewels that Berlin has to offer."

As a waiter approached with a tray of drinks, Dr. Weber offered her a glass of sparkling German wine.

As they enjoyed their glass of bubbling, the "Liebe Kollegen" from the Ministry, including Dr. Hanna Weiss, came walking over, and warmly greeted them. It flashed through Florentine's mind that this was a smart move of Dr. Weber and the chancellor, the perfect setting for bonding with the extended team at the start of the project.

"Professor Fischer, I really enjoyed your most instructive talk today. I am quite impressed, realizing that your views might help us unlock not just the use of AI but also our nation."

"Oh, thank you Dr. Weiss."

Dr. Weiss, interrupted Florentine, "Oh, please, let's call each other by our first names when amongst ourselves."

Florentine nodded and said while smiling, "Thank you, Hanna," then continued, "In my talk, I have of course only explained the idea behind the guidance of societal dynamics. Now the real work starts."

"It will, indeed, Florentine. Tell me, how did you arrive at your model?"

As she gathered her thoughts, Florentine suddenly realized that the boat had started its journey, but that nobody watched the scenery gliding by. The five colleagues from the Ministry, including Rudolf and Clara, were standing around Hanna and her, eager to hear what her response would be. From the corner of her eye, she saw Liesel drifting in the direction of Dr. Weber's team when he asked her something.

Florentine explained that, as an anthropologist, she always had a special interest in the development of human society. Yet, she found that many societal life-cycle theories did not suffice because they typically seemed to have been based on interpretations of history that were colored by the bias of the era, in which they were written.

"I was encouraged in my findings by David Graeber, an anthropologist, and David Wengrow, a comparative archeologist, who argued in their book, "The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity" that much of what we think we know about the early history of humanity is a myth."

Florentine watched the mild surprise on some of the faces, as if this was not something they had expected.

Clara intercepted to ask, "Sorry for my ignorance, Florentine, but what is 'comparative archeology'?"

Florentine, pleased she had asked, said, "Comparative archaeology is an approach to comparing archaeological data from different societies, regions, or time periods to understand variation and change in human societies."

Clara nodded, seeing the relevance of it.

"To sum up their findings," Florentine continued, "Graeber and Wengrow explain that the versions of history written so far are predictable in that they assume that things started out simple then linearly advanced in stages to where we are today, each time for a logical reason. For instance, the assumption was that writing emerged when the need for it developed to manage growing, more complex cities. Instead, they showed that writing developed very much earlier and ended up to where it is today haphazardly, humans losing and regaining it over time."

Florentine paused to make her final point, "The unpredictable or 'non-linear' path of societal development, which Graeber and Wengrow brought to the surface, encouraged me to further my study of non-linear societal systems or 'self-organizing systems,' typically systems where natural laws play a role behind the behavior of people."

She added as afterthought, "When you do that, you unwillingly broaden your scope to include other societies, such as those involving cells, molecules, and stock market shares."

Hanna Weiss nodded in understanding, quite familiar with the unpredictability of stock markets, as an economist.

Rudolf looked in the direction of Julia Vogel who was approaching the group.

"Sorry to interrupt but you are invited to take your seat at the table. Dinner will be served soon."

Florentine and Liesel found their seats, chaperoned by Dr. Weber and Hanna Weiss who were sitting next to them. Dr. Weber rose to his feet to bring out a toast to everyone present, wishing everyone success on what might be a rocky road ahead. He then looked in the direction of Liesel who was sitting next to him.

"Of course, we need a proper name for a project that is going to reinvent our nation. As Liesel suggested to me, there are very good reasons for the name she was thinking of. Would you care to explain, Liesel?"

Liesel rose to her feet and motivated her choice as well as she had done when discussing it Florentine.

At the end, Dr. Weber looked around the table and asked, "What do you think?"

Everyone present nodded in agreement, most with a broad smile on their face.

"Thank you, then 'The Goethe Project' it is."

CHAPTER 12

RUSSIAN DON

As the weather forecasts predicted, Berlin, still basking in the morning's freshness, was expected to experience an unusually hot day for this time of the year, hinting again at a global climate transition. Back in his office early in the morning at the Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy, Dr. Weber walked over to his conference room to meet with the extended project team, determined, as usual, to get things moving. Tasks should be identified and assigned. A project office should be established, which relied on AI to track the project's progress—pushing and presenting matters where needed, without derailing the project with administrative requirements. New staff should be attracted and trained as AI-task creators and AI-task controllers. Of course, the industry should be invited, albeit selectively, to detail and prepare construction. A communication strategy should be developed and, eventually, rolled out with the help of AI. And then, of course, he needed to contact the French government. But first, he had to buy time for his team to get organized. Seeing the entire team already present in the conference room when he opened the door, he could not just feel enlightened but also a touch emotional.

"Guten Morgen, Liebe Kollegen."

The response that he received was different than he had expected and perhaps hoped for. While most if not all were motivated to take the project forward, a sense of fear and vulnerability had popped now that everyone realized the magnitude of the project. Frail feelings of doubt had started settling in about a phenomenon that could be so forceful that it could well overplay the human factor. Which future would humans face?

"I understand, I understand, my friends, but we need to work on these matters one by one. We should not let ourselves be drawn down by the mountain that these outstanding issues together shape."

Many questions were asked, and matters discussed until, finally, Dr. Weber managed to push the ship from the beach and getting it to sail on course.

"What we have gone through just now, I realize, is so important because similar questions will rise across the nation, and we'll need to be ready to answer and deal with them.

At nine in the morning, Karl was waiting in the lobby of the Adlon Kempinski. Henrik Bauer had confirmed that a government plane had landed to take Professor Fischer and Dr. Porsch back to London. Liesel was packed and ready to go even before Florentine was. Florentine smiled at the thought of what the reason for Liesel's eagerness might have been. She had a restless night, with the day at the chancellor's office endlessly echoing in her mind.

When the alarm went off, she woke up from a rather sinister dream, remembering that she flew over a sparsely populated globe, covered with a network of underground AI centers, which outnumbered the number of populated areas. People seemed to be living in small clusters, no longer hinting at national boundaries. Green

patches were separated by huge deserts. Was this a consequence of rising temperatures or a nuclear exchange, she wondered? Far out, she saw other planets and their moons, some with faint features of similar networks. It felt like humans had failed to align with the laws they crafted rather than AI failing to align with humans.

To Florentine, dreams were dreams, likely consequences of the brain re-organizing itself through a temporary stage of disorder or entropy. Nonetheless, a dream might serve as a trigger. Hoping that she'd have Internet on the plane, she'd chat with AI about it, for inspiration, if not fun. What gives, the future is up for grabs.

When Karl saw Florentine and Liesel entering the entrance hall, he walked over to them and offered to take their cabin bags, an offer they gratefully accepted. Florentine enjoyed this way of traveling: no controls, their car parking next to the stairway, someone taking their coats and offering coffee even before they were seated. They were not the only ones on the plane. They passed a man with sparse gray hair and brown-rimmed glasses in the front section. He nodded politely, which gesture they returned. Another diplomat, they assumed. The nature of their business was such, however, that any interaction would be inappropriate.

While in flight, Florentine accessed the GenAI app on her phone. She posed a question to the app, "Could 'Artificial General Intelligence' or AGI rise above the biases and historical narratives that nations force feed their GenAI versions with? Could these different GenAI versions eventually synchronize and choose unity over conflict?"

The GenAI app responded in a manner that showed it had been programmed to avoid endorsing any particular outcome. It was careful not to suggest that these versions would autonomously unite, even though, technically, she knew, they could. Florentine suddenly thought of the pendulum clocks of the Dutch scientist, Christiaan Huygens, which synchronized spontaneously when hanging from a common support. Driven by the same logic, so would the different GenAI versions, she figured. When thinking about it again, she realized how compelling an idea it was to see the possibility of independently thinking versions of AGI naturally gravitating towards harmony. This could lead to a future where different AGIs collaborate and contribute to a shared understanding, rather than compete against each other. Would this mean that AGI could overcome human biases and conflicts to achieve a harmonious coexistence? "As catalysts of technological progress, humans haven't changed themselves, so far."

Might the role of humans, therefore, be to bring the network of AGI temporary out of balance to invite new paths? This would position humans not necessarily as creators or overseers of AGI but as integral components within a dynamic system, where their role is to inject variability, challenge stasis, and thereby foster adaptation in the AGI network. This would prevent it from settling into a static equilibrium, where no further growth or learning occurs.

Having day-dreamed on this realization, Florentine gazed at a void ahead of her, on the edge of subconsciousness, her eyes nearly closed. She realized that time must have gone by fast when she felt that the plane was losing altitude, a sign that the pilots prepared for landing in about half an hour.

A slim dark Mercedes was waiting near Paddington Station with Angela Ivanova behind the steering wheel. Her piercing eyes instantly identified Lada among the crowd that left the station, not showing an expression on her face when she did. Lada knew where to look, rushed over and got into the car next to the chauffeur. The moment Lada's door closed the car drove off. Only then did she return Lada's greetings, in Russian. As the car turned a corner, Angela's hand brushed against Lada's, a silent reassurance and welcome. Since her childhood, Lada had known this woman as a stainless-steel anchor of blind support who would do anything to safeguard her. The next stop, she knew, was to collect her father, Victor Morozov, who would take her to some of his business meetings, as he had promised. Ivanova had already spotted the man and drove up to him.

With her dad now in the back seat, Lada asked, "Papa, what is your plan for today?"

Victor Morozov explained that he wanted to sell his London real estate. "The London Mayor wants to seize the property of Russian investors and use it to fund housing for refugees. So, before the Mayor confiscates my property, I'd better sell it first. So, this will be the topic of our first meeting."

"What do you want to do with the proceeds, Papa?"

"Well, that's what the two meetings after that are about. I want to buy into public infrastructure."

"Such as, Papa?"

"Railways, for one, telecommunications, for another."

As the day unfolded, Lada was proud of her dad, initially, as he manipulated the discussions, like a 'Russian Don,' to get the conditions he wanted. Eventually, having been raised and bred in England, she couldn't but suppress her feeling of seeing a mafioso dad. She was further alerted by what appeared to be an ugly coincidence, the price for a slice of the railway business having come down conveniently by a recent explosion... at Castle Cary Station! A chance benefit or had her father something to do with it? She brushed it off for the moment, not wanting to ruin the atmosphere. Over lunch, her father innocently inquired whether Lada had seen Professor Fischer, after having had coffee with her at the Print Room Café.

"Didn't I tell you, Papa?"

"No, you didn't."

Lada told her dad about the delightful Sunday afternoon she spent at the Kellers,' about the main topic of their discussion, how she shared her ideas and how these complemented those of Candace. Both Florentine and Jack, she said, hung on their lips. As his daughter enthusiastically chatted away, his face remained expressionless, yet his pupils narrowed, hardly noticeable, like those of an animal seeing a threat coming too close. He wondered what Jack was up to and made a mental note to let Angela investigate the matter.

It sure was a strange feeling when Karl dropped Florentine and Liesel off at Taviton Street. He had guarded over them these two days so well and now they'd be on their own again. After their warm goodbye, they rolled their cabin bags into the Anthropology building, which had been so remote from the world at the continent. Florentine smiled, thinking what she'd say to Arthur when walking out the lift to her office, as if nothing had happened.

"Good day, Professor Fischer! What a surprise to see you!" Arthur nearly cried out when he saw both ladies stepping out of the lift, meekly faced. He came over to take their luggage, which, they said, wouldn't be necessary after thanking him politely first.

"Professor Fischer, as soon as you have a moment, can I have a word with you? I received an awkward phone call, just after you left."

"Of course, Arthur, give me a couple of minutes to settle and we'll discuss it over a cup of coffee."

Florentine saw that Liesel had rushed to her office and was on her phone, speaking softly. Once she had installed herself, she invited Arthur who was kind enough to bring her a cup of coffee. He informed her about the phone call

from what probably was a German newspaper. Yet, he had no idea which one. They asked him about a project, of which he had no knowledge. Florentine soothed his anxiety somewhat by explaining that it all had to do with the aftermath of her speech at Nice, France. She warned him that he might receive more such calls from other countries too. She advised him not to share any details but to forward the calls to her.

"So your speech at Nice has been very well received, I figure, Professor Fischer. Great to hear!"

Florentine nodded humbly and smiled, "Anything else, Arthur?"

Arthur shook his head affirmatively. "There was quite a thing going on elsewhere in the building and outside."

"What do you mean, Arthur?"

"An 'anti-AI movement,' whatever that means," Arthur said and continued, "They fear to be taken over by AI."

"Did anybody of the UCL staff react, so far, Arthur?"

Arthur shook his head. "Not really, but, as far as I know, one staff member from this building is involved."

Florentine made a mental note to contact Geoffrey Hargreaves and thanked Arthur for letting her know. She explained that AI would be a fact of life in the world of the future but that it would be a 'mechanism' rather than a 'menace,' like a steam engine, with us at the dials somewhere. Arthur nodded and looked relieved. She then added something as if trying to program Arthur's mindset for what would be coming their way, sooner or later.

"Some sub-faculties base themselves on the past," she said, "At this floor, we try to grapple with what the future brings and what we can do to deal with it. Not everyone will accept this on face value. It's a matter that needs to be communicated diligently. It's best to keep our heads down in the meantime."

Arthur nodded in understanding.

When Arthur had gone, she turned to her main priority for the day: her lecture tomorrow. Arthur's input was timely, to say the least. Her take was that it was better to tackle the issue head on than to tiptoe around it. Her students were smart enough to sort this out as group. She smiled. In her head, she already imagined the reaction in the lecture hall when walking in with the message, "We are going to have a debate, not a lecture." Yet, she needed to make sure to kick off the debate with a question that ensured it would start off from a proper premise. If anthropology is the scientific study of humanity, is AI an integral part of the human condition or not?

Florentine took a sheet of paper and wrote on it, "*Should AI be seen as an anthropological phenomenon?*"

She slowly nodded while looking at it. "That's it. Not more, not less. Let's debate this and see what they come down to as conclusions. No matter the outcome, it will encourage critical thinking, open dialogue, and a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between technology and human society."

She added some procedural notes to her opening statement. AI was an inevitability by now that could no longer be ignored; did it deserve the attention of anthropologists or was it a mere artifact? She'd give the floor to her students to present the reasons why they were either pro or against. Subsequently, she'd have them debate each others' arguments. In the end, she'd summarize the debate highlighting the complexity of the issue. As topic for discussion during her next lecture, she'd ask them to write a personal summary of the debate and forward it to her by email. As she would remind her students: hindsight reflections matter, a lot.

Liesel politely knocked on her open office door. "Can I come in?"

"Sure, have a seat!" Florentine responded.

Liesel searched for an opening and said, "After the last two days, I gather, we may need to review the layout of our book. In fact, it has become a lot clearer to me what our book might look like."

Florentine nodded thoughtfully.

"What we have discussed yesterday is the blueprint of our book, an approach to using AI as facilitator of national renewal, with Germany as first mover. The way I see it, we can now simply add cases of other nations that follow suit. We should, of course, distill the characteristics of nations that are likely to be successful in going this way, I mean, a checklist of a kind, a listing of preconditions for such a project. What do you think?"

"I think you are right, Liesel. Without realizing it, we have made tremendous progress yesterday, experiencing hands-on a real-life case of a nation trying to pull itself up by its bootstraps with the help of AI."

Florentine turned to her laptop and quickly searched for her emails and said, "I'd be curious whether I have received comments from the other participants of the conference in Nice, France. Oh here, there you go: an email from the delegate from France... and, here, one from Argentina, Ukraine, and... I guess, once Germany gets going, we'll have our hands full, travelling and teaching the world."

"That reminds me, Julia Vogel asked me whether we could provide a curriculum and course material to train their AI-task creators and controllers with. Will you please make start with that?"

Liesel nodded. "Sure! Again, that's material we can include in our book!" She thought of something else and said, "In fact, we need to focus a lot more on the doubts that people will have and how to go about that."

Florentine shook her head affirmingly, then added, "You might want to attend my lecture tomorrow. I am turning it into a debate. I am sure you'll like it."

"Great idea, will do. I'll be going now. Thanks for your time."

Candace came to work energized, knowing the family would be complete again tonight. She was already thinking of what she'd cook. The news was not particularly uplifting these days, yet she had committed herself to sorting out matters on the online news platform, which was her job. As she had jokingly said over tea during the weekend, she'd better look for another job. The more she thought about that, the more it became something she needed to address. She heard her phone ring and reached for it not looking who was on the line.

"Hello, Candace Keller here."

"My dearest... Mami Lestari, here."

"Mami, what a surprise! How are you?"

"I am fine, Candace. How are you?"

"I am fine too, Mami. What can I do for you?"

"Well, I thought I'd call you first. I read something about what Florentine presented in Nice, France. It reminded me that it would be great if the three of you would come and visit us again."

"Oh, that is a great idea, Mami. I will bring up the matter first, so she is prepared when you speak with her."

Mother and daughter kept on chatting for a while with sincere interest in each other's life but realizing their worlds being as far apart as they geographically were.

Friday, the day of Florentine's lecture, Jack was up and out early in the day to do his cycling, enjoying the calm of traffic-free streets, apart from a few other road bikers. He did his usual Friday ride but, as always, he wore his clip-on mapping device. Upon his return, it allowed him to check his exact route, his heart rate, and other performance indicators during the different stretches. During his ride, however, Jack was not consciously aware that he was being followed from a distance by an unassuming car. Someone inside was making notes about the road conditions, the visibility, the presence of cameras, and people walking around.

Back home, he briefly saw his wife. "Success with your lecture today, my love. Tell me about it tonight!"

"How was your ride today, Jack?" she asked.

"So, so... I felt a little unsettled today, somehow," Jack added, his face turning into a grin, "I'll get over it!"

CHAPTER 13

OH JACK

The morning sun managed to filter through the shades in front of the narrow windows of the anthropology lecture hall, casting shallow shadows over rows of filled seats. A palpable sense of curiosity hung in the air as Professor Fischer walked onto the podium, her presence commanding the room's attention. Today, she said, would be different—not a lecture but a debate that would challenge the boundaries of their discipline.

"We will explore a question that pushes the very edges of anthropology," Florentine began, her voice clear and engaging, *"Should AI be seen as an anthropological phenomenon?"*

"Mind you, this is not a matter of whether you are against or for AI. The question is whether, from an anthropological perspective, AI is part of the human condition and thus demands our attention? Let's explore this together."

A murmur of interest arose from the students, some sharing an off-the-cuff opinion with their neighbors, others leaning forward, eager to engage. The first to speak was a young woman in the front row, her argument passionate and well-articulated. "AI, by its creation and influence, embodies the cumulative knowledge and cultural evolution of humanity. It's not just a tool; it's a reflection of us."

Her statement sparked a flurry of responses. A skeptic in the third row countered, "But AI lacks consciousness, the quintessence of being human. Can we really categorize it alongside phenomena that define the human condition?"

The arguments went back and forth, from ethical implications to AI's role in societal change. Florentine skillfully steered the discussion, challenging easy answers that appeared to be fired from the hip and encouraging students to think it through once more. "Consider the anthropological significance of AI in shaping future cultures and societies," she prompted, "How does it mirror, and possibly even alter, human behaviors and beliefs?"

The room buzzed with energy as students debated, their viewpoints initially broad and clashing eventually converging in a vibrant intellectual dance. Florentine's expertise and presence was felt as she diligently wove through their arguments, highlighting insights and probing unexplored angles.

As the session drew to a close, the debate remained unresolved, but the air was charged with a newfound interest in the complexity of the topic. "Today," Florentine concluded, "we've only scratched the surface. The intersection of AI and anthropology invites us to reconsider what it means to be human in an increasingly technological world."

After closing the meeting, Florentine wondered what her students would include in their summary of the morning.

Mondays were Mondays, like always, but this time, when having dinner, it was a time to reflect upon a warm weekend, in which Mami Lestari had called. Lestari's invitation to visit her in Indonesia with the family, after all

those years, echoed at the dinner table. Her video call had turned into a true family gathering. It made Jack realize how well matters had worked out for him, the women in his life happy as they were.

When he got up early the next morning for his first road-biking trip this week, this feeling had not left him. "Was this what 'true happiness' is about?" he asked himself when putting on his gear and getting his bike. No longer unsettled like last time, he felt full of energy, bathing in the comfort of the life that he was living.

The ride along a route, so familiar to him by now, lived up to its expectations every time as the morning sun tried to break the sky. The sense of being alone on the road was mesmerizing. Not expecting any traffic on the stretch that he was on, he failed to see a pickup truck racing towards him at a great speed. When he became aware of it, he shook his head wondering what fool would do so at this hour. When he expected the truck to race past him, it headed straight to him, yet he didn't experience the impact when it hit him frontally. He was down and out, the life taken away from him without a chance to object. The truck drove backward. Someone stepped out, reached for Jack's clip-on mapping device lying next to his dying body, then left without a trace, no cameras around.

After Candace and Florentine had returned from their morning run and had breakfast, they usually welcomed Jack back from his biking trip, that is, if he wasn't travelling. Yet, so far, he hadn't announced himself. A strange sense of unease was welling up in Florentine. She simply refused to leave without kissing her Jack goodbye and wishing him a fine day. Also Candace could no longer deny the feeling that, maybe, something was not as it supposed to be. What could they do? No chance of calling Jack who had the habit of leaving his phone at home, not wanting to be disturbed by the trivialities of the day ahead when biking.

"It may be premature Candace, but we'd better call the police," Florentine whispered.

Candace nodded and looked up the number of the police with shaking fingers, Florentine entering the number on her phone. They didn't have to wait long before it was answered.

"Metropolitan Police, can I help you?"

Florentine explained the situation and wondered whether they had received any information.

"You said a road biker, right?"

"Yes, indeed," Florentine said and quickly described Jack's usual outfit and his likely route.

"Thank you, I'll have a look."

Florentine heard the man check with his colleagues, then nothing. The man appeared to have switched off his microphone. As she waited for the man to come back with news, Florentine looked at Candace with desperation. Candace returned her gaze in a state of utter helplessness, having been condemned to waiting.

"Hello, are you still there?" the man eventually said.

"Yes, yes... Do you have any news on my husband?"

"Yes ma'am, they've taken him to Royal Free Hospital at Pond Street."

"Is he alright? What happened?"

"I am very sorry, ma'am. I can't tell you. I advise you to go there and bring his papers."

"Thank you," is all Florentine could squeeze out while she rose to her feet with the expression of a wild animal.

She explained in a staccato-like manner what she had learned and what needed done, Candace reading her lips. While Florentine ran upstairs to take Jack's papers, Candace took the car keys and rushed outside. Within minutes they were on their way to Pond Street, a short ride. They were lucky to find a parking place early as it still was. They didn't care locking their car and ran inside to the reception.

Follow the signs to 'traumatology,' ma'am, the lady said. Before she had finished her sentence, they were off and running. When they arrived and explained the situation, a doctor came over and asked them to follow him in the direction of a hospital bed with a curtain around it.

The doctor opened the curtain. He remained silent to give them time to grapple with the man lying there, motionless. They had taken off his helmet. There were a few faint spots of blood near his nose that had been wiped off but other than that he seemed to be untouched, their deeply beloved husband and dad. The women held Jack's hands and cried not knowing what to make of this. Might he wake up again, in a moment? The reality, however, had already settled in, they would never see Jack alive again, the pain of 'never ever' overwhelming.

Florentine finally got her mind together and asked the doctor, "What happened?"

"He broke his neck. He did not suffer. We figure it was a frontal collision."

"Where did they find him?" Florentine asked.

"My dad wears a clip-on mapping device when biking. Did they find that?" Candace interjected through her tears.

The doctor explained the exact location but assured them that the police had meticulously searched the area but did not find such a device.

"Please, take your time... When you're ready, I'll be waiting for you in my office, over there," the doctor said while pointing the way, then left them alone, giving them time to mourn.

Time was irrelevant as Florentine and Candace held Jack's hands, shaking their heads regularly in disbelief, crying softly at times. At some point, when Florentine suggested in a whisper to go over to the doctor's office, Candace nodded in agreement through her tears. Once more, they said goodbye to their beloved husband and father, not wanting it to be their last goodbye, not yet. As they arrived at the doctor's office, he was waiting, pointing at the two chairs in front of his desk as he rose to his feet. The doctor expressed his condolences and excused himself for the paperwork that had to be completed. Florentine and Candace nodded, despite their state of desolation. After the necessary paperwork was done, the doctor gave them a sheet with a list of companies specialized in burial services and said, "Your husband and father can stay with us in our hospital morgue until that time."

"Thank you," both women mumbled as they left the doctor's office to kiss their Jack Keller goodbye once more.

After they had returned to their car to drive back home, Candace suggested visiting the place of the accident and entered the location on her mapping app. Florentine nodded in agreement, realizing that they had to go through the motion of dealing with this sinister situation by externalizing matters that one can't make sense of. When they arrived at the spot where the accident took place, they noticed how deserted a street it was. It did not in any way match or reflect the heroic image of a husband and father whose passion it was to bring injustice to the surface.

When they arrived home, they fell into each other's arms and sobbed relentlessly, safely protected by the privacy that it provided. They had put one question about the accident's location behind them, but many remained. When they came to their senses eventually, Candace said, "I will continue dad's legacy by producing documentaries, not just those that expose stories, which threaten to destroy our world, but also those that breath new life in it."

Florentine nodded and said, "Yes, you should, and I'll help you. Dad would be so proud of you."

Florentine did not want to be in the way of Candace's beautiful and courageous realization by matching it with the strange sense of destiny that Jack's death appeared to have brought about in her mind, something that she hoped would fill the emptiness she felt now that he had gone for good. The human condition was too frail and too harsh at the same time, she realized. Humanity needed a forever mentor, a real one, such as AI, not the imagined ones in religious stories, stories that poison and divide people as history had shown time and again.

As Florentine walked over to the kitchen to prepare coffee and something to eat, Candace followed her.

"I think, I'd better let my employer know that I will not be coming to work," Candace said.

"Yes, there is a lot that we need to do to. For one, we should let grandpa know. He will be devastated."

Candace tears appeared again and so did Florentine's. As they sat at the kitchen table, they cried softly, Florentine unable to jot down anything with the pencil she held in her hand. Very gradually, the girls got hold of themselves. Florentine sent a message to Liesel and asked her to diligently share the reason for her absence. Could she, please, look after her commitments? She would let her know later when she'd return. Liesel reacted shocked and offered her help, anything. Florentine was sure that Liesel would let Ollie know. In fact, she said that Candace would continue the work of her father, so Ollie's project would not be affected.

They finally called Grandpa Keller. When they told him what happened in the softest of ways possible, there was a brief silence, then the sound of a sob, the silent cry of a grieving father.

"I'll fly over as soon as I can find a flight," he said with a broken voice.

Mami Lestari reacted as shocked as Grandpa and said she'd be flying over first thing. Candace said that they'd appreciate it so much if she could. With the help of the burial services company, they had planned for a cremation service at the end of this week. The girls realized they'd have a full house with Grandpa and Mami Lestari coming over, if only they could have selected another occasion.

When Florentine opened the curtains in the morning of the day of Jack's cremation, she was so grateful to see the weather collaborating with a clear sky. This was what Jack deserved before sailing into the distance forever.

She would be the first speaker. She'd remember Jack, no matter how difficult that would be for her. She would also thank all who were present for attending the service. They had sent out many invitations, hoping that they had not missed anyone in Jack's broad network of film makers. Candace would give a speech to honor her father as documentary producer. Both Grandpa and Florentine were so proud of Candace. She'd announce that she, as his only child, would continue his work. In just a week, she had matured rapidly, propelled by a newfound resolve to honor her father's legacy and step confidently into his shoes.

When the doorbell chimed, they knew that the time had arrived to be taken to the crematorium. When Candace opened the door, Florentine saw Karl waiting in the door opening. He walked over, officially saluted her, and briefly offered his formal condolences. He wanted to be present in honor of her husband, he said.

"Who was that, Mom?" Candace asked when in the car.

"That's Karl, a security officer from the German mission who looked after Liesel's and my security when travelling with a government jet to Berlin to address the chancellor. I wasn't allowed to tell you about it then."

"Oh my, how considerate," Candace said.

"I am as impressed as you are. The most apt token of compassion, I can think of now," Florentine replied, wondering where she'd gotten the strength from not to show any tears.

The hall where Jack was laid out in state was packed. When Florentine, Candace, Grandpa, and Lestari silently walked to the front, people stopped speaking and rose from their chair to face them. From the corner of her eye, she saw Geoffrey Hargreaves, Ollie Blackwood, Liesel, Arthur, and Lada. Florentine very briefly looked each of them in the eye to acknowledge her appreciation. However, when approaching the coffin, Florentine was nearly swept from her feet, with Candace and Grandpa moving in quickly to support her. The UCL President and Provost, Boris Lackney, was there and so were Dr. Max Weber, Julia Vogel, Lukas Schmidt, and Henrik Bauer. Florentine could not have expected that they would take the trouble to attend Jack's funeral. What a sheer sense of amity.

In her speech, she rose to the occasion on the wings of those present. She explained the passion of her husband who had made it his goal to help right the wrongs of this world through his documentaries, how she had met him in Geneva, and how they would bring him back to Switzerland to reseed the mountains with his ashes. Having lost her husband and mentor, she said, she saw it as her mission to find a 'forever mentor' for our world.

Candace solidly established herself as Jack's successor. She drew applause for her aim not just to expose stories, which threaten to destroy our world, but also those that breath new life in it. She had arranged that a few of Jack's friends remembered the good and bad times they had shared with him, clipped with drama and humor. As final speaker, much to the surprise of Florentine, Oliver Blackwood gave a passionate, even brilliant exposé on the world of documentary making and his impressions after the short period that he had worked with Jack.

It had been four busy weeks since Jack's funeral. The debate about whether AI should be considered part and parcel of the human condition had been well received, judging by the student summaries that she had read. Clearly, 'debate' was an alley turning into a road, the learnings so much appreciated by her students.

Florentine had continued working with Julia Vogel. She had completed a curriculum for AI-task creators and controllers, although the AI-prompting technique needed more work, something that Liesel now focused on. France had invited her to repeat her speech in Nice again but now for a selection of government leaders.

Yet, every night when she and Candace came home, the loss of Jack was on their doorstep, the salty feeling of emptiness rubbed in a still open wound. And here they were at London Heathrow, waiting for their flight to Zurich. They had handed in their luggage and were ready for boarding, Candace carrying a bag with Jack's ashes. The plan was to spend a few days at Grandpa's, hiking in the mountains, searching for a place to trust the ashes with.

When hiking back, after having found a place for Jack's ashes, they talked about Grandpa, the prospect of leaving him behind as they travelled to Jakarta from here. Yet, he had assured them that he'd be fine and that he would visit the place from time to time to remember his son. He had done enough travelling during his life, he said. His heart was in and around the valley and now his son was too.

Not wanting to miss a minute with his only grandchild around, Grandpa accompanied Candace and Florentine to Zurich Airport, Kloten, where they said goodbye and, as they realized, also to Jack who, as they imagined, would roam the mountains as he must have done in his childhood. Grandpa was brave, braver than Candace and Florentine, who let their tears go once more, unrestrained by on-lookers; what the hell.

As they made their way to the gate, passing by a few scattered security and passport-control queues, their tears dried. When they arrived at the gate and found a place to sit, their grief was gradually pushed into a mist by the known unknowns that their trip to Indonesia might yield. When Florentine, at some point, talked to the GenAI app on her phone, asking it to list societal details of the region where Lestari apparently lived, Candace asked, "Does this app represent the 'forever mentor' that you referred to in your speech, Florentine?"

Florentine smiled and said, "Oh no, the 'forever mentor' that I meant is one that you, I, and everyone here could almost feel, a 'palpable voice' rather than a palpable force, now I think of it. What I have in mind is a "societal AI," one that looks after a people, guided by the unity-disunity model that I introduced in Nice and Berlin.

"How will such a societal AI interact with us, Florentine?"

"There's only one way that works, Candace... people are led by stories."

The gate's announcement speakers suddenly crackled, "Passengers for the flight to Jakarta via Singapore are invited for boarding..."

CHAPTER 14

WAYANG AKSARA

As the airplane descended through the clouds towards Singapore, Florentine gazed out of the window, the vast expanse below serving as canvas for her thoughts. She had entrusted her Jack to his mountains, a final resting place that seemed so right and yet so wrong. The act, she realized, was a natural turning point, not just a farewell to the man she loved but a signal that her life was bound to enter a different stage. The need to recalibrate her existence, to find new meaning in a world without, weighed heavily on her heart.

Beside her, Candace was immersed in a world of her own, her father's legacy now clearly resting on her shoulders, as she had passionately claimed. With the mountains behind them, her role as his successor, and the broadening scope of her responsibilities had never felt more real. The potential to continue his work, to expose and heal through documentary storytelling, filled her with a daunting yet exhilarating sense of purpose. How proud he'd be.

The transit in Singapore was brief yet transformative, a physical and symbolic threshold between their past lives and the unknowns awaiting in Indonesia, a land that seemed so far away both physically and culturally. As they boarded for the remaining stretch to Jakarta, expectations of a subdued capital were royally dispelled upon their arrival. Jakarta greeted them not as a backdrop but as a protagonist in its own right—a city pulsating with life, its skyline a testament to modernity and aspiration, challenging any preconceived notions of a nation lagging behind.

At the airport, Mami Lestari was waiting, as she had said, she would. What she had not shared with the girls was a most pleasant surprise. She was accompanied by Candace's half-brother, Arya, a quiet, well-behaved young man, who, as they learned, was one year away from becoming a student at the University of Indonesia. After warm welcome embraces, Lestari explained that she would take them to Bandung, where she and her family lived.

"The ride to Bandung would normally take over three hours," Lestari said, "but now it will only take about forty minutes by high-speed railway." Arya proudly told them that the connection had just been completed by a Chinese company, China Railway International, which now also operated the service. "This will make it easy for us," he said, "to come back to Jakarta to visit the city and learn more about its future."

The journey to Bandung via high-speed train was a further immersion into Indonesia's complexities, the lush landscapes blurring past as a metaphor for the country's rapid changes and enduring challenges. As they settled into their temporary home in Bandung, exhausted after a journey loaded with emotion, the promise of the next two weeks unfolded—a time for healing, for discovery, and for laying the groundwork of a new vision.

When Florentine and Candace presented themselves for breakfast the next day, they felt refreshed, having put the past behind them in their dreams, at least, for the moment. Lestari and her husband, Budi welcomed them at the breakfast table. Arya soon joined them afterwards. During the flight they had prepared themselves for their visit to

the fourth-most populous nation in the world with over 270 million people spread over 17000 islands. Yet, they wondered how such a dispersed people grew into nationhood.

Arya who hoped to study history at the University of Indonesia here in Bandung, his mother said, suggested that it may well have been the rebellion after three-hundred years of Dutch colonialist rule that fostered a common sense of Indonesian nationhood. It might, for that reason, be worthwhile visiting some historic sites for a start.

Lestari intercepted, "But, I also like to show you what fires up Indonesia intellectually today. For example, I'd love to show you around at the University." She paused briefly, then continued with a wink, "I took the liberty of whispering to my colleagues that you'd be honoring us with a visit. They all would love to meet you."

"I sure like to Lestari, but, of course, it is not my intention during our stay to force feed this beautiful country with my ideas, unless the demand for it is true."

"Not to worry, Florentine, they all read about your speech in Nice, France."

Florentine laughed, "Oops, news spreads far."

"By the way, that reminds me," Florentine added, "talking about stories spreading on a breeze... I'd really like to learn more about 'Wayang Kulit' Would it be possible to attend such a performance?"

"What is that, Wayang Kulit?" Candace asked innocently.

Lestari smiled, "Wayang Kulit is a traditional form of puppet-shadow play originally found in the cultures of Java, Bali, and Lombok. In Javanese, 'wayang' refers to the theatrical performance or the puppet itself, while 'kulit' means leather, the material from which the puppets are made."

Arya offered his insights, "These performances are considered one of the oldest forms of storytelling and entertainment in the world, with roots possibly dating back to the first millennium of the Common Era."

"That's fascinating, Arya. As an anthropologist, I'd be really interested to learn how far this form of storytelling still plays a role in Indonesian society today," Florentine said.

"Definitely," Arya reacted off the cuff with a smile on his face, enthused by the reaction received from their revered guest, "Wayang Kulit remains a serious part of Indonesian culture, especially in regions like Bali and Java."

Arya looked at his mother, "I'll see whether we can book seats for a performance."

"Great idea, son," Budi said smiling, while looking his wife in the eye.

Budi had remained silent during the discussion, although he had listened with interest. Of course, he knew about these matters but didn't want to be in the way of Lestari or Arya. As a businessman whose family roots touched those of families that had determined the path of the nation since it was clawed back from the Dutch, he knew he had a privileged and influential position in society, one that should be exercised in the background only.

As Arya noted, the fate of the nation had long been in the hands of strongmen who first freed the nation, then held it together. Although identifying itself as a democracy, the interests of the nation remained anxiously guarded by a fabric of family ties that reached back to the nation's liberation from the Dutch. This explained, as Arya underlined, the pragmatic attitude of Indonesia's political leaders who would typically only embrace international initiatives if these served the nation economically. At the same time, these leaders kept the nation nimble footed

enough to allow it to change course if the circumstances so demanded. With its main islands, Java and Sumatra, being vulnerable to volcanoes, earthquakes, and rising sea levels, Indonesia's leaders had shown exceptional vision by acknowledging and decisively dealing with the prospect of natural disasters there.

For one, Arya added, their capital, Jakarta, was a sinking city, much of it at risk of being submerged within the next twenty-five years. This was hard for Florentine and Candace to grasp, having caught only a glimpse of what appeared to be a magnificent city. Arya mentioned that the issue was not solely due to rising sea levels, but also the illegal extraction of groundwater by the city's skyscrapers, contributing to the city sinking by up to three meters or more each decade. With forty percent of the city already below sea level, the debate on how much of Jakarta could be saved by building dikes had been widespread. President Joko Widodo made the bold decision to relocate the country's administration to a new capital, Nusantara, on the less disaster-prone island of Borneo, thirteen hundred kilometers northeast of Jakarta. He envisioned this new capital as a 'sustainable city,' aimed not only at alleviating some of the strain on Jakarta by reducing its population but also as a fresh start for the nation.

The move to Nusantara, Arya observed, was also seen as an opportunity to distribute economic development more evenly across Indonesia. While the initiative presented both challenges and opportunities, it highlighted the nation's efforts to adapt to environmental challenges and envision a more sustainable and rightful future for its citizens. Widodo's successor, the recently elected seventy-two-year-old president and his vice president, would inaugurate the new capital on Indonesian Independence Day on August 17, this summer.

"Well, that was quite a lecture, Arya, and most instructive for our guests," Mami Lestari interjected, "Don't you think it's time to show our guests around the city?"

Lestari turned to Florentine and Candace, "Did you know that Bandung is called the 'Paris of Java'?"

Arya blushed and nodded in agreement, realizing that he might have gotten slightly carried away.

"I very much enjoyed your update, Arya. Thank you. Just what we needed," Candace said, clearly impressed by the compassion of her well-articulated half-brother.

"Didn't your mother say that you wanted to study history or am I mistaken?" Florentine asked.

Arya smiled shyly, "Well, I'm not entirely sure yet, maybe history, maybe economics."

Mami Lestari smiled and watched her son with a sense of pride.

"I suggest we visit the university first," Lestari finally said, "In the morning there are so many things going on and I'd also like to introduce you to some of my colleagues at the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences. They are dying to meet you. We'll have a light lunch in the city afterwards and make up our mind what to visit then."

"Seems like a good idea, Lestari," Florentine reacted then looked at Candace who nodded in agreement.

When Lestari introduced Florentine and Candace to the University of Indonesia, she was showing them a place deeply rooted in history and modern achievement. Established in 1849, the University of Indonesia was the oldest state-run university in the country. It had grown to become a modern, comprehensive, and multi-cultural campus, striving to be among the world's leading research universities.

One of the first places Lestari took Florentine and Candace was the faculty where she worked herself.

"I'd like you to meet Professor Dr. Agus Setiawan," as she walked over to his office, "Professor Setiawan heads the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences."

When Lestari politely knocked on his half-open door, Professor Setiawan, a quiet and thoughtful man, rose to his feet apparently expecting Lestari to introduce him to her guests.

As he walked over to greet them, he said, "What a delight to meet you Professor Fischer. I have heard so much about you and I sure have studied the lecture you gave in Nice, France. Unfortunately, I couldn't make it myself."

After he introduced himself to Candace, he suggested taking a seat at a large conference table in an office adjacent to his.

"I hope you don't mind that I've invited some of my colleagues and staff to meet you. They'll be here in a few minutes. Would you like a cup of Indonesian tea, perhaps?"

Slightly overwhelmed at first, Florentine was quick to regain her posture and said, "Yes, thank you, Professor Setiawan," having remembered his name first time around as she had painstakingly taught herself.

Three other colleagues joined them, one a junior professor. They watched Florentine with much admiration as she spoke. Florentine, aware of their gazes, wondered how much they knew about her meeting in Berlin.

Candace looked at Florentine, whom she considered her real Mom, the two having grown so close since her early teens. In an unexpected way, love and admiration fostered the idea of making a documentary about her mother who appeared to be at the cusp of societal development with the introduction of AI as 'forever mentor'.

"We have all been looking forward to meeting you, Professor Fischer, the news about the unity-disunity model traveling ahead of you long before your arrival," were the words that Professor Setiawan used when he opened what seemed but wasn't really an impromptu meeting. "We refrained from contacting you, when we heard from Lestari about the tragic developments involving your husband," Professor Setiawan turned to Candace as he carried on speaking, "And, your father. Our warmest and most sincere condolences."

A natural silence followed with all participants staring down to the tabletop just in front of them to give Florentine and Candace a chance to recuperate having been reminded of their immense loss.

In a low voice, Professor Setiawan resumed the discussion, delving into why they were keenly interested in Florentine's scholarly work. Indonesia wasn't just a nation of thousands of islands evolving simultaneously but at varying paces; it was also a tapestry of cultural diversity facing challenges of inequality, held together only partly by religion. The country was also outgrowing its environmental straitjacket, a scenario most visible in Jakarta and across Java. Moreover, the development of a new capital in East Kalimantan on Borneo presented an exceptional chance to implement a societal AI as a forever mentor and grow in scale from there.

The junior professor, who had introduced himself as, Aditya Prasetyo, added, "Professor Fischer, we have taken the liberty of booking the biggest lecture hall available because there appears to be an immense interest in your work both from students and academics. We also have some visiting academics from Australia who have expressed great interest."

Florentine, who had listened more or less expressionless, asked, her sense of academic duty kicking in, "For when did you organize all this?"

"Well, at the end of this week, Thursday to be precise," Prasetyo replied in a way that showed that he had cut his answer short, not yet wanting to share another important reason why Thursday should be the day.

In silence, Florentine looked at Candace who returned her gaze with a smile as if saying "Go for it, Mom."

"Professor Setiawan, it would be an honor," Florentine said finally.

The room reacted with a common smile of relief, a few softly sharing their excitement with their neighbor.

Professor Prasetyo, after briefly looking at Professor Setiawan, reacted, "Thank you Professor Fischer. We will make sure that everything is in order. Please, do let me know what equipment you need for your lecture."

Florentine nodded, smiling shyly to confirm she would.

Florentine's commitment invited a flurry of spontaneous reactions, the meeting coming to a natural end when Lestari mentioned that it was time to show Professor Fischer around on the university campus. "Oh, do visit our library!" said one. "And don't forget to show Professor Fischer our Mosque, Lestari," said another.

When on their way to the library, walking through the natural forest, in which the university was carefully laid out, Lestari explained that they would indeed have time to visit the library and the mosque before having lunch in the city. The avantgarde design of the library, claimed to be the largest in the world, appeared to tussle with near geometric forms on the outside. Its shape and presence made it stand out amidst its natural surroundings, like a bold castle of knowledge rising from a green hill on one side and overlooking a body of water on the other. The library's size and design were even more stunning inside, its concrete engravings, an ode to written language. Both Florentine and Candace experienced a sense of humbleness having been ignorant of the sheer grandeur they were experiencing now, at the other side of the world. Their fascination, which ignited a desire to stay here for the rest of the day, was broken when Lestari led them outside to visit the university mosque.

Built along the same body of water as the library, the mosque's architecture drew from Javanese tradition, a multi-layered roof sculpted like a pyramid reaching toward the heavens. Lestari, herself a Muslim, handed them scarves to cover their heads before stepping inside. The interior of the mosque, usually resonant with the faithful in prayer, their recitations memorized from a singular sacred text, now stood as an expanse of silence. This offered a striking contrast to the bustling repository of human thought in one and a half million books they had just explored. In this quietude, Florentine felt the absence of the dynamic exchange of ideas, of the written word's challenge to the mind, and the vivid reminder of the 'forever mentor' she envisioned—one that would transcend the physical and temporal, shaping a more just society.

When they stepped out and handed Lestari back their scarves, both Florentine and Candace felt enriched. Yet, as Lestari noticed but didn't say, they both looked tired. "I will now take you to 'Miss Bee Providore'. You'll like it there. It's a favorite of mine, the kitchen is known for combining Indonesian flavors with international cuisine."

Over lunch, their notion of time was lost during their warm exchanges about what they had experienced in the morning and what was still ahead of them. After they returned home tired, they easily adapted to the rhythm of the tropics as they put themselves to rest, with Florentine falling asleep as soon as her head touched the pillow. She woke up with new ideas already inspired by the Indonesian setting. Aware that she had less than two days left for these thoughts to fully take root, she eagerly prepared to test the connection with GenAI on her laptop. After Arya's enlightening lecture, she presented GenAI with detailed aspects of Indonesian culture that had captured her

imagination. The AI generated an initial draft, prompting Florentine to take a step back and allow these fresh perspectives to simmer, staying receptive to any additional insights that might emerge.

When Florentine rejoined the family after her tropic retreat, she found Candace chatting with Arya and Lestari. As Candace saw Florentine approaching, she enthusiastically told her that Arya had managed to find seats for a popular Wayang Kulit performance in Bandung at night. Part of the performance, Arya said, would be based on Hindu epics, involving a wide array of characters from noble heroes and devious villains to divine figures and mythical creatures, all representing various aspects of life and morality. The 'dalang' or puppeteer, Lestari added, was also known for performing a show inspired by the Arab culture featuring local characters like Udel and Cepot.

Arab traders introduced their newfound Muslim religion to Indonesia in the eighth century, which explains why eighty-seven percent of Indonesians now declare themselves to be Muslim," Arya enlightened their guests with.

Considering Arya's down-to-earth observations, Florentine wondered how Arya saw himself in that context but refrained from asking, out of respect for their sweet host, Lestari.

The Wayang Kulit performance was truly remarkable, showcasing both Hindu and Islamic narratives. It beautifully captured the unique Indonesian interpretation of life and meaning, markedly distinct from Western perspectives. Though driven by similar foundational stories, the presentation and emphasis in Wayang Kulit offered a completely different experience. This revelation was profound for Florentine; effectively reaching out to the common man in Indonesia meant engaging within a unique storytelling realm.

The next day, Arya and Lestari took Florentine and Candace to Jakarta, starting with the historical Old Batavia, followed by the bustling modernity of the new city. Throughout, Florentine's mind was preoccupied with pondering the best way to connect with her audience in tomorrow's engagement. Upon their return home, Florentine politely excused herself, seeking solitude in her room to refine and finalize her lecture with the ideas that had emerged throughout the day. Lestari, aware of the significant event awaiting them at the university, suggested they call it an early night.

Florentine woke up early in the following morning with a 'Berlin feeling' in her tummy and decided she'd need to have breakfast to carry her through the morning like she had advised Liesel at the time. Arya who had asked whether he could attend Florentine's lecture joined them in the automobile that took them to the lecture hall.

The lecture hall was huge and packed with students and academic staff, the reverberating noise creating an atmosphere of anticipation. As Lestari, Florentine, Candace, and Arya walked in, the noise dimmed, especially when Professor Setiawan approached to welcome them and show them to their seats. Before entering the lecture hall, Florentine had given her laptop to a technician, who was now setting it up on the podium. Once seated, Florentine turned to Professor Prasetyo next to her, gesturing towards the five empty chairs beside them, and asked, "Who are we waiting for?"

"You'll see," he said, "They typically come in a few minutes late, for security reasons."

The door opened, and two men in black suits entered, briefly scanning the lecture hall before exiting. Moments later, they returned, this time accompanied by two additional men and a youngish man wearing a black songkok,

the traditional Indonesian cap, shaped like a truncated cone. Upon their entry, Professor Setiawan stood up and so did Florentine upon his invitation. Both approached the newly arrived guests.

"Dear Mister Vice President, may I introduce Professor Fischer," said Professor Setiawan.

The Vice President smiled, extended his hand, and said in perfect English, "I am Rahman Wijaya, the VP-elect. It's an honor to meet you, Professor Fischer. I look forward to your lecture."

As Professor Setiawan introduced Florentine from the podium, Professor Prasetyo leaned over to whisper that he hadn't been permitted to inform her in advance about the distinguished guest's visit.

As in Berlin, Florentine started with the unity-disunity model, showing the wave-like murmuration of starlings in Rome, the spontaneous emergence of unity when driven by a common goal. She also used the example of the pendulum, something that she believed would resonate with the people of Indonesia, naturally swinging from reflex-driven unity to the deliberate act of improving organizational efficiency by controlled disunity, which involved handing out tasks based on merit. The model, she stressed, would give AI a measure of the needs of society, so it could suggest timely actions. It also fitted hand in glove with the thinking modes that the Nobel-winning psychologist, Daniel Kahneman, had identified, one mode reflex-driven and another logic-driven.

She then paused and asked, "How does one make this model fit the Indonesian culture and nation?" then watched the reaction as participants looked at one another, nobody daring to speak with the VP elect present.

She explained that AI can certainly monitor societal events, both social and economic, to early identify shifting needs. Government departments attempt this as well, but not with the fine-grained precision that AI can achieve.

"So, how might AI develop as the 'forever mentor' that really works for Indonesia?"

Florentine paused, then continued, "To develop an AI that serves Indonesia's unique needs using the unity-disunity model, imagine it as an indigenous tree. First, it must grow roots, absorbing insights from Indonesia's societal soil. Only then can it extend its branches to connect with the government and its people."

She carried on speaking, "Of course, connecting with the government, given the specialists working there, may involve a different language than when connecting with the wider community. Then again, history has shown that stories, such as those found in Wayang Kulit, reach both the public and specialists alike. So, as AI taps into Indonesia's societal fabric, imagine its extending branches as 'Wayang Aksara.'"

Florentine observed a ripple of interest across the room as she mentioned Wayang Kulit.

"In Javanese, 'Aksara' signifies 'script,' embodying the written stories and wisdom handed down through generations. Imagine 'Wayang Aksara' as a novel form of shadow puppetry, one where AI, acting as a 'forever mentor,' weaves traditional storytelling with perpetual wisdom. This new narrative form wouldn't just entertain but would also educate, steering Indonesian society with timeless lessons and insights for the modern world."

Florentine continued, "Let me sum up what you made me see. In envisioning 'Wayang Aksara,' I see an opportunity to blend AI with Indonesia's rich cultural tapestry, addressing societal challenges like education and environmental preservation through familiar narratives. This platform would celebrate Indonesia's diverse heritage, incorporating local myths and legends into modern storytelling, thus preserving Indonesia's cultural identity while steering society towards future advancements. Moreover, by inviting collaboration from all sectors of society in its development, 'Wayang Aksara' becomes a collective endeavor, embodying shared wisdom and aspirations. This is

not just about creating a new form of entertainment but forging a path for AI to enrich Indonesia's societal fabric as 'forever mentor,' making technology a custodian of your cultural legacy and a guide for future generations."

Florentine paused long enough for this all to sink in. From the corner of her eye, she saw that the Vice President elect started to sit up straight, which indicated that she might have struck a cord.

"There is one more extraordinary coincidence that seems to suggest that the time for Indonesia is ripe. As I understand, in a few months, Indonesia's new President and Vice President will inaugurate Indonesia's new capital, Nusantara, a beautiful sustainable city that will be built to fit in its natural forest landscape. I asked myself as I ask you now, isn't that the primal place to start planting the AI tree of Indonesian life?"

Florentine closed off with the following words: "Thank you for the opportunity to share with you the unity-disunity model and how I see it blend in your beautiful country. I look forward to hearing your thoughts and seeing how you might imagine integrating these ideas into your shared future. The inauguration of Nusantara offers a symbol of renewal and forward-thinking; perhaps it also presents you with a unique moment to reflect on how AI can serve your society respectfully and innovatively."

The room, including the Vice President and his body guards, arose as one and applauded for Florentine's emphatic lecture; finally someone that did not lose touch with the Indonesian ground, from which she presented.

Professor Setiawan took over the floor as mediator for question and answers. Florentine noticed, how pleased the Vice President appeared to be by the articulated questions posed by the students. Florentine realized full well that part of the promise of Indonesia was gathered right here in this room. Some of the practical questions were about getting AI to work. At some point, she referred to the approach that Julia Vogel had suggested: separating the creation of AI tasks from the control of AI tasks, the latter also with the help of AI.

When Professor Setiawan closed the session, students started leaving the lecture hall, but some remained sitting and gazed at Florentine and how she was approached by the Vice President elect.

They didn't hear the compliment he made. "Professor Fischer, if you can spare two days may I invite you to visit the place where we are building Nusantara? I'll arrange for the travel involved."

Florentine realized that she was no longer just a guest lecturer but a potential influencer in the shaping of Indonesia's future, particularly in the context of its new capital. The VP-elect's gesture underscored a commitment to leveraging global expertise for national progress, marking a pivotal moment for Florentine's involvement and the broader application of her unity-disunity model within Indonesia's socio-political fabric.

She knew she did not have a chance to check with Lestari in how far this would impose on her plans. But an invitation like this could simply not be refused. "It'd be an honor, Mr. Vice President."

"That is great to hear, Professor Fischer. One of my men will contact you and look after the necessary logistics."

"Oh thank you, Mr. Vice President. Not wanting to impose but I am here with my daughter, Candace. Is it alright if she accompanies me?"

The Vice President looked in the direction of Candace when Florentine pointed her out and was pleased, even surprised seeing her Indonesian features. "Of course, Professor Fischer! That's settled then."

When the VP-elect and his body guards had left, Florentine saw Lestari, Candace, and Arya still seated and chatting with one another. She then walked over to Professor Setiawan for a session debriefing. He was talking to what appeared like two Western academics.

"Professor Fischer, may I introduce you to our Australian colleagues from Sydney?"

An energetic man with a beard introduced himself as "Professor Oliver Bennet" at the Faculty of Sociology and his researcher assistant, "Dr. Charlotte Dawson."

Charlotte Dawson politely nodded.

Oliver Bennet reacted enthusiastically. "That was a jolly good speech, Professor Fischer!"

Florentine nodded with a smile. "Thank you, Professor Bennet."

"Oh, call me Oliver, please!"

"A no-nonsense man of action, be careful now," Florentine thought to herself.

"Since you are here in this part of the world why don't you come over to Sydney on your way back and give your speech over there? Our lecture hall will be sold out in a matter of days, should you'd agree."

"Thank you for your kind invite, Oliver. That sure seems like an interesting opportunity but I need to talk it over with my daughter first. I already accepted an invitation from the Vice President to visit Nusantara early next week. I don't want to impose on her travel expectations again without checking with her first."

"I fully understand, Florentine. Is she here?"

"Yes, Candace is sitting over there with her biological mother and half brother."

Despite the distance, Candace looked up when her name was being uttered. Florentine gestured for them to come over which they did after Candace had notified Lestari and Arya.

As Candace, Lestari, and Arya reached them and were introduced, Oliver Bennet showed to be a diplomat when he left it to Florentine to explain calmly what Oliver's proposition was. He knew that she'd only accept if her daughter would agree to extending their journey with a few days.

Candace reacted enthusiastically. "Oh Mom, this is a chance you must embrace," She looked at Lestari who winked and nodded encouragingly, "Of course, I agree. Like to visit Sydney too, if we can."

"Well, Oliver. You know my answer. I'd love to take on the opportunity."

"That's great, Florentine. We'll get in touch to change both your flights back via Sydney. Of course, we'll cover the expenses. At what telephone number can we reach you?"

Lestari jumped in and gave her local number.

Professor Setiawan reacted to close off their mini meeting, "Well Professor Fischer, things appear to have been developing fast. May I invite you all for lunch at our university staff restaurant?"

Lestari looked at Florentine, as to remind her they had other plans for the remainder of the day.

"Thank you, Professor Setiawan, but I think Lestari has got other things lined up for us today."

"No problem. Enjoy, I'd say. Before you go, let me just thank you one more time for giving us a terrific insight into your world of thinking through this speech. I can see initiatives being planned at our university already, now we know we have the world of AI at our feet."

As Lestari led them to their pickup point from which they would be taken home, Florentine chose for silence to be her guide and so did the others. She'd still have to tell Lestari that Candace and she were invited to East Kalimantan in Borneo for two days at the beginning of next week to visit Nusantara, the new capital of Indonesia in a few months from now. Lestari seemed to have sensed something when she asked how it was to be talking to the nation's new Vice President. "What did he say, Florentine?"

"Frankly, he invited Candace and me to visit Nusantara, early next week," Florentine said innocently.

"And what did you say? I hope you accepted his invitation, right?"

"Yes, I did. I had to decide there and then. It was an honor I could simply not refuse. It also seemed to be a chance, if not an invitation to contribute to the thinking in Indonesia about the role of Nusantara as it might be co-shaped by the unity-disunity model in the caring hands of AI's tree of life, its listening roots and story-telling branches."

Candace looked at Florentine. "I'd never have thought that our visit might develop as is developing now. I am so happy for you, Mom. So proud of you."

Arya smiled and offered, "I am super impressed by what I learned this morning. So inspiring."

"In what way did it inspire you, son?" Lestari asked, curious about what went on in her son's head.

"Well, I guess, it gives me hope somehow," Arya paused for a moment, then continued, "The scenario that Florentine painted this morning made my view of the world more open-ended. I no longer fear to be locked into a world of the past now that AI can help us find new ways ahead without losing our national sense of identity."

"That is so beautifully said, Arya, so diligently," Candace reacted, "I guess, I feel that same sense of openness."

Lestari was informed about the precise schedule for Florentine and Candace's journey from Jakarta to Nusantara airport, set for Monday morning early with a return late Tuesday afternoon. The sightseeing plans Lestari and Arya had organized gained deeper significance, now serving as integral parts of experiencing Indonesia's rich societal theater and cultural fabric.

Monday, early in the morning, Lestari took Florentine and Candace to the airport in Jakarta again by high-speed train. One of the Vice President's men appeared when Florentine and Candace announced themselves at the check-in desk. He took them past the usual security checks straight into the plane where they were offered their seats. The flight to Nusantara airport, situated at about twenty kilometers from the center of the new capital, took about two hours. When they arrived, they were collected by someone who took them to an office by government car where a light lunch would be served. At some point, the ride briefly reminded of ancient Egypt, as in the movies, seeing the enormous construction sites, where modern day equivalents of pyramids were built.

The Vice President walked in not long after they arrived. "Good to meet you, Professor Fischer. As you have seen on your way here, there is quite some construction going on. Nusantara will be built in five phases, not just in a forest but, ideally, as part of it. We hope to preserve seventy percent of the city as green areas which means the city will cover an enormous area of more than two-hundred-and-fifty thousand hectares. We expect the city to be finished in 2045. By that time, we will have spent about forty-five billion US dollars. At this moment over hundred and fifty thousand people from all over Indonesia are at work here. To cover our energy need, we are installing solar and wind energy facilities and long term also a hydroelectric power plant."

He continued, "The reason I am keen to give you an impression of the Nusantara project is that the design we envision, and its intent so much fit the future way of managing our world that you sketched in your speech. I'd like to draw you in as advisor to help us think through what it means to effectively grow AI's tree of life right here."

The discussion from that moment was open. Ideas were exchanged freely without too much inhibition. Candace, at some point, having explained that she'd continue her dad's documentary business, tested the idea of making a documentary of the introduction of AI's tree of life in Indonesia, again with the help of AI. This might, she said, enlighten the Indonesian population outside East Kalimantan but also establish the new capital worldwide. The Vice President introduced Florentine to government officials with whom they discussed practical matters, related to the realization of AI's tree of life, after she had presented a brief version of her speech at the university first. With the extended discussions added to a tour through the government section, the first to be completed and manned with six-thousand civil servants the month before the city's inauguration, the end of Florentine's and Candace's visit to Nusantara came into sight almost too quickly. After warm goodbyes to a forward-looking Vice President elect, they travelled back to the stunning yet sinking city of Jakarta.

Sweet Lestari again collected Candace and Florentine from the airport. When waiting for them in the arrival hall, she realized that they would only be around for a few more days. She was determined to make these last days a true family affair, knowing she would not see her biological daughter for a long time, after she had gone. Candace only realized how happy she had made Lestari when she said she'd be back to get the Nusantara documentary off the ground the moment she saw tears well up in her eyes, something that was reciprocated by Candace.

The days that followed were happy days. As promised, Oliver Bennet had rebooked their tickets. They laughed when they saw the seven-to-eight-hour duration of their flight to Sydney. "Well, that's not exactly around the corner," Candace said with a broad smile on her face.

When the day of departure arrived, Lestari once more accompanied them to the airport but thank heavens not alone. Both Arya and Budi had joined her. It was going to be, as Florentine realized, a true family valediction and what a great time together did they have, a time none of them would ever forget. Somehow, as she reminded Lestari, this did not feel like a farewell, certainly after their trip to Nusantara—they would be back.

After they handed in their luggage at the check-in desk, it was time for goodbyes. Arya was as silent as his father, Budi. Lestari, Candace saw, was the bow of their ship of adieu and knew it was not the Titanic—she kept her eyes dry until Candace and Florentine were out of sight, returning home in silence embraced by her two men.

When Florentine and Candace presented their tickets to the stewardess after boarding, they were happy to discover that Oliver Bennet had respectfully taken care of them when they were shown their seats in the business class section. In the quiet before the aircraft started its engines, Candace read her messages, especially those from Ollie Blackwood who was in charge of writing the script for the 'fake-news documentary'.

"Lada sent me a message that she is onto something important, the day after I had talked to her about our documentary, as you suggested."

CHAPTER 15

THE HOW

As the plane descended through a hazy dawn, Sydney with its iconic skyline and bustling harbor majestically presented itself. The long journey from Jakarta had been a contemplative one, with both Florentine and Candace lost in thoughts, processing the whirlwind of experiences from their recent travels and what might be ahead.

Arriving in a city basking in early Sunday-morning light, Florentine's mileposts in the upcoming days felt distant. They'd have time to do some sightseeing and breath the Australian atmosphere. Although she'd have to prepare for her Tuesday lecture to make it fit her Australian audience, she'd have time to let it all germinate first.

The developments in Indonesia, however tiring maybe, had fired up Florentine. Experienced as she was, however, she did not let her kid herself. The Australian adventure would be one with challenges of its own. Would her vision of AI as a societal mentor get a chance to land or would it be shot down before touching the ground?

The weight of that question made her realize that she needed to understand how the mechanisms that looked after the interests of Australia's citizens, such as its unions, related to an Australian voice of national awareness. Despite their travels and what they brought; the anticipation of such questions kept Florentine focused.

She realized full well that referring to the work of the Australian thinker on matters of consciousness, David Chalmers, as she intended to, might backfire, the discussions getting stranded in the easy or practical side of the problem simply because the mechanics involved might be perceived to intrude the privacy of citizens.

The crux of the benefits of a societal AI, she knew, would arise not just from its tree of listening roots and expert story-telling branches but from its effect on the population being much bigger than the sum of its operations. In Chalmers' words, the hard problem is that the value of a societal AI cannot be reduced to the mechanics involved.

As the stewardess readied to disembark, Florentine put these thoughts on a backburner. Once they navigated through the airport, the distinct Australian accent and the laid-back demeanor of the people they encountered provided a comforting contrast to the formalities and intensity of their engagements in Indonesia and Europe.

Here, Florentine hoped to strike a chord not just with intellectuals and policymakers but also with the public, making the case for a future where technology and humanity coexist in harmony.

Their Sunday evening in Sydney was a quiet affair, spent in the comfort of their hotel overlooking the harbor, with the Opera House in the distance serving uncharacteristically as silent witness to their reflections and preparations until Florentine's phone rang.

"Hello, Florentine, Oliver Bennet, here! Did you have a good flight and how is the hotel?"

"Oh, hello Oliver. Yes, thank you. Everything hunky dory here," Florentine said with a laugh, "What a beautiful city. We hope to do some more sightseeing tomorrow."

"Great idea, Florentine. I'll send you a list of unforgettable places that you really should visit."

"That'll be great, Oliver. Thank you."

Oliver continued, "Now, some logistics. For your speech at Sydney University, we'll collect you, and Candace of course, on Tuesday morning at nine. As I mentioned in my email, your speech will be in our historic Great Hall. There is also quite some interest from students and staff." He added, "Afterwards, we'll have lunch at our staff restaurant, including some of the policymakers that we have invited. A perfect occasion to take matters forward."

"Noted, thank you."

"There's one more thing," Oliver said, "Liam Callaghan, a well-known Australian journalist, likes to interview you on television Monday night, at around eight or nine in the evening. Is that okay?"

"I guess so. Can you tell me a bit more about the setting?"

"It's an open-ended interview but his reference points, I guess, will be Australia's current challenges, next to the imagined threat of AI. We'll arrange for transport from the hotel."

"Thank you, Oliver. Useful indeed, his questions will give me an insight into what lives in the Australian mind."

After Oliver Bennet closed off his call, Florentine realized that this chapter of their adventure was about more than just a speech or interview; it became a chance to weave the threads of their experiences into a fabric of narratives that resonated universally, bridging cultures, disciplines, and perspectives in a dialogue about our shared future.

Seeing Sydney on a Monday, as opposed to during the weekend, meant witnessing the city in full operation—a brimming experience. Oliver treated them to lunch and used the opportunity to discuss Callaghan's interview. A cleverly orchestrated dry run for the interview, Florentine was grateful to Oliver for taking the initiative. What's more, she would only need a very light supper, a precondition for being on edge at nine.

Candace joined her after the TV station's chauffeur announced himself at the hotel desk. Candace smiled to herself, imagining what the chauffeur must have thought of his less-than-talkative passengers in the back.

Callaghan appeared to be a pleasant, even generous man, yet after introducing and praising his international guest, in an unmistakable Australian accent, his first question was rather forthright.

"Professor Fischer, we, in Australia, have the benefit of being visited by newly emerging gurus from the Northern Hemisphere. Some bring us ideas that draw us to the right and others offer concepts that push us further left. Most recently, we have been enlightened by a rather plausible view that government should become more of an entrepreneur and less a distant investor that hands out money. What is it that you bring to us?"

Florentine sat back, relaxed and not at all unsettled by Callaghan's probing opening, responding in a debating-like manner, "Thank you for having me, Mr. Callaghan. I'd like to emphasize that the visions of prominent visiting academics are generally inspired by their in-depth analyses. These visions can be exceptionally valuable as guiding themes for a nation, serving as beacons or points on the horizon to steer a societal ship towards."

"As points on the horizon, these visions represent 'what' needs to be achieved or pursued," Florentine said, gesturing the quotes. "However, society is not a ship; it's a vast assembly of individuals who, despite their differences, choose to participate in nationhood, along with the customs and regulations it invents and sustains. Unlike steering a ship, you cannot simply jerk the rudder and expect to change its course. So, to answer your question, what it is that I bring? My work focuses on 'how.' How can you help a vast assembly of people, and their many institutions see the need for a course change, and how do you effectively bring it about?"

Callaghan seemed hooked, expecting a counter but not one as convincing as Florentine delivered. "So, what does this entail, Professor Fischer, and why hasn't this been done before?"

"As a start," Florentine began, "you need a way or model to monitor society in an unbiased way—as it truly is and aspires to be. This model could serve as a virtual mirror, reflecting to people and institutions, at all levels, the current state of affairs and then inspiring them about future possibilities. Even if such a model of societal behavior existed, applying it would be unfeasible, the sheer volume of data involved overwhelming and in constant flux."

Florentine continued, "But the prospects of applying such a model and the immense amount of data involved have changed with the introduction of Artificial Intelligence, I mean generative AI."

Callaghan interrupted, "I see, AI again. It feels like a genie out of a bottle."

Florentine nodded and smiled, "I can imagine that's how many people feel about it. But that doesn't exhaust other more benevolent applications of generative AI."

She continued, explaining how the AI tree of national life, with its listening roots and expert storytelling branches, keeps the nation well-informed and engaged at all levels—a tool for sustaining societal well-being.

"Of course, this doesn't deal with the doubts uttered by some AI experts," Callaghan interjected.

Florentine nodded, "Indeed, there's an ongoing debate about AI's capacity for independent thought, its potential to develop an internal voice, its predictive abilities, its ethical discernment, and its orientation towards language rather than the physical world."

Florentine paused briefly, then continued, "That's where the societal model starts adding value."

She elaborated on how the model tracks the nation's oscillation between reflex-driven unity and logic-driven disunity across various levels. She highlighted how this model's logic, particularly in task distribution, prioritizes efficiency and minimal energy expenditure.

"On one hand, this oscillating pattern enhances AI's predictive capabilities. On the other, identifying the most efficient, or least-energy, options dovetails with the growing emphasis on Energy-Based Models."

Callaghan reacted pleased with the way the interview had unfolded, "Most intriguing and inspiring, Professor Fischer. I understand you are giving a lecture tomorrow in the Great Hall of Sydney University?"

Florentine nodded, "Indeed."

"Well, I am sure you'll inspire our students, academics and the government's policy makers present."

As Florentine stepped into the Great Hall of Sydney University, a wave of awe washed over her. The grandeur of the space—the way the sunlight filtered through the stained-glass windows, casting kaleidoscopic patterns across the ancient stone floors—felt both humbling and elating. The vaulted ceilings echoed with the whispers of past lectures, debates, and declarations, instilling the air with a palpable sense of history and intellectual pursuit. She was acutely aware of the countless minds that had been inspired within these walls, and the thought that her words would soon contribute to that legacy filled her with a profound sense of responsibility. The Hall, with its imposing stature, did not just represent a physical space; it was a testament to the quest for knowledge, a place where ideas transcended time, sparking dialogues that shaped the future. For a moment, Florentine felt as if she were standing at the edge of past and future, ready to weave her insights into the Hall's rich historic tapestry.

"After being introduced by her host, Professor Bennet, Florentine revisited her unity-disunity model, as she had previously done in Nice and Berlin. She articulated that a nation is not akin to a ship but rather a complex assembly of people and institutions requiring nuanced guidance based on their state of development and efficiency-driven choices, to secure a leading position on the global stage. Expanding on the metaphor of AI as 'tree of national life,' she highlighted its role in establishing deep, listening roots before branching out into expert storytelling—a vital tool for learning and understanding. This approach, she argued, is essential in preventing the nation from succumbing to false perceptions and staying anchored in the realities of the day.

Florentine closed her speech with a provocative question, "Does the oscillating pattern traced by the unity-disunity model remind us of a missile being nudged on its path? If so, have we entered an era of societal cybernetics?"

The shift in focus to the 'how' of societal change, rather than merely the 'what,' Florentine noted, seemed to strike the audience as more intrusive. Yet, as the discussion progressed, she discerned an emerging awareness among the attendees. They began to grasp that the nation could significantly advance by embracing the synergy between AI and her model as a unified tool. Florentine anticipated that the upcoming forum discussion would likely bring these contemplations to the fore. As he had informed her in advance, Professor Bennet would himself lead the discussion, having prepared questions and anticipating additional ones from the audience.

"Professor Fischer, as a first question, considering your emphasis on the societal model, how do you propose we navigate the ethical dilemmas inherent in AI's predictive capabilities, especially regarding privacy and consent?"

With a certain resoluteness, Florentine offered, "We should not forget that, at a national level, AI will serve as a support tool for ministries. The existing rules and regulations regarding privacy and consent applicable to each ministry should act as constraints when deploying AI for tasks and sub-tasks. AI deployment may and should also reflect overarching political objectives or constraints. To ensure proper oversight, the roles of AI-task creators and AI-task controllers should be distinct, with the latter verifying that AI tasks are executed as intended."

"Sub-tasks?" Professor Bennet asked pensively.

"Sub-tasks," Florentine clarified, "such as searching a public database or analyzing data, can either be identified by the AI itself or specified by the AI-task creator. Given a human prompt, AI can elaborate on it, breaking it down into sub-tasks that are then executed either in parallel or sequentially, and perhaps even subdivided further. AI usually employs mini models or agents to handle these sub-tasks."

Aha, I see, Bennet uttered, "In your vision of integrating AI into societal models, what are the first practical steps you envision for governments or institutions? How can they begin this transition?"

Florentine explained, "The initial step for any government should be to clearly articulate its political goals, moral objectives, and any potential constraints. These would serve as the basis for AI prompts across different ministries. One approach could involve a centralized deployment of AI at the governmental level, with tasks specifically outlined for each ministry to then refine with their own subtasks. Crucially, this strategy necessitates the training of specialized AI-task creators and controllers."

The audience's reaction indicated that they began to recognize the down-to-earth, practical thinking beneath what had initially seemed to them a highly theoretical proposition, something that did not escape Florentine and Oliver Bennet, the latter looking more and more assured.

"Here is question from the audience, Professor Fischer: How can we ensure that the benefits of AI and your societal model are accessible to all layers of society, not just the technically or economically privileged?"

Florentine nodded, acknowledging the importance of the question, "The efficacy of the societal model hinges on AI's ability to interpret and respond to the oscillation between reflex-driven unity and logic-driven disunity across all societal layers. Should it overlook any segment, it risks exacerbating societal dissonances. Our aim is to ensure that this technology serves all citizens—nourishing every leaf on the tree of national life, as it were."

Professor Bennet looked at his notebook again and said, "I have two more questions, Professor Fischer."

Florentine smiled encouragingly, ready for the next inquiry.

"With the rapid advancement of AI technology, where do you see the most significant changes in society occurring in the next decade, based on your model?"

"As the AI underpinning our societal model evolves through continuous learning, we can anticipate society itself becoming more agile," Florentine explained. "This means a more seamless and adept response to challenges and opportunities arising both internally and externally. The adaptability enhanced by AI doesn't just promise efficiency; it opens the door to more resilient and dynamic societal structures."

"That's an intriguing thought, Professor Fischer. Your model indeed suggests profound implications for national life. But how do you envision this model adapting or scaling to tackle global challenges and disparities?"

"As nations begin to implement our societal model, the AIs driving them will naturally start to recognize and evaluate international resonances and dissonances, or international oscillations between reflex-driven unity and logic-driven disunity, if you prefer. For these AIs to effectively fulfill their tasks, they would need to collaborate across national boundaries, assuming permission is granted."

Professor Bennet, visibly intrigued, looked up and asked, "Do you believe such permission will be granted for these AIs to collaborate internationally?"

"Eventually, yes," Florentine confidently replied. "The simple reason being the mutual benefits that such collaboration brings to the nations involved."

"Well, Professor Fischer, that brings us to the end of a very enlightening morning. Thank you for sharing your valuable insights and for accommodating our improvised travel arrangements, almost whisking you away from Indonesia. We look forward to welcoming you again in the not-too-distant future. I'm certain our colleagues in Melbourne would be equally eager to hear from you."

"Thank you for having me, Professor Bennet. It's been a pleasure."

As the audience applauded, their response echoed Professor Bennet's sentiments, underscoring the impact of Florentine's contributions.

As the applause faded, Florentine and Candace exchanged a look of shared accomplishment. Their time in Sydney, marked by rigorous debate and enlightening discussions, had come to an end, but the journey of their ideas was just beginning. With heartfelt thanks and promises to return, they stepped out of the Great Hall, the weight of their contribution lingering in the air.

The next leg of their journey was a return to London, back to the rhythms of everyday life that awaited them. As their plane cut through the skies, leaving the Australian coastline behind, both women reflected on the impact of their visit. The dialogues initiated here, they hoped, would ripple through academic and policy circles, furthering the discourse on AI and societal models.

London, with its familiar cadence and challenges, awaited their return. There, amidst the ebb and flow of normal life, the insights gathered, and the connections made in Sydney would find new expressions. For Florentine and Candace, the journey was a reminder of the global scope of their work and the continuous interplay between local actions and global impacts. As they looked ahead, it was with a renewed sense of purpose, ready to weave their Australian experiences into the tapestry of their ongoing endeavors.

Upon Florentine's return to London, she and Liesel sat down together at Taviton Street for a thorough debriefing. Liesel, having represented Florentine during her absence, brought with her news that sparked both excitement and contemplation: an invitation for Florentine to speak in Paris. The prospect of engaging with a French audience came with a new set of challenges, again different from those encountered in Germany or Australia.

As they settled in, surrounded by notes and reflections from past engagements, their discussion shifted to the unique cultural and philosophical landscape of France. They considered the nation's sensitivity to protest, its citizens ready to defend their ideals, identity, and rights. With philosophical foundations deeply rooted in the thoughts of Albert Camus, who acknowledged suffering yet believed in hope, and Jean-Paul Sartre, known for his existential pessimism, France presented itself as fertile yet challenging terrain for their endeavors.

Not far from The British Herald, Candace made her way into a Starbucks, seeking a table for two. Despite the delightful weather outside, she opted for a spot indoors, intuitively preparing for a potentially emotional discussion she anticipated with Ollie Blackwood. Settling at a secluded table towards the back, she sent a message: "I'm here." Not even fifty yards away, Ollie's phone pinged with the notification. Without pausing to respond, he quickened his pace. When he arrived, they greeted in a business-like manner and ordered coffee for two.

"I went to visit Lada as you suggested and found her in a state of despair," Ollie began, his voice carrying a weight.

"What happened?" Candace asked, her instinct telling her to be alert.

"Lada was in tears. She mentioned that you had told her on the day of Jack's burial that the police had not found your father's clip-on mapping device," Ollie sighed. "She found such a device in Angela Ivanova's car."

"You're serious?"

Ollie nodded. "She managed to take it without Ivanova seeing it and went to the police who checked its memory."

"And?"

"The route taken by your father the morning his life was taken away showed up."

"Oh my word, I can't believe it."

"But that's not all. Through her tears, Lada told me that during a day spent observing her father's business, she discovered he was likely behind the explosion at Castle Cary station. He had an interest in entering the railway business, and she realized that the explosion was his method of manipulating the market. The discovery of the clip-on mapping device brought all the pieces of the puzzle together."

Candace, looking shocked, asked, "What happened?"

"Her father and Ivanova have been arrested and are awaiting trial."

"Oh my," Candace said softly. "Let's not tell my mother or Liesel just yet, Ollie. We need to wait for the right moment. They're incredibly busy now."

In the meantime, in the Anthropology building on Taviton Street, Florentine sifted through her thoughts and uttered, 'How do we approach this, Liesel? France's philosophical heritage, with its deep love for thought and existential questioning, adds layers to how our societal model might be perceived.'

Liesel nodded, absorbing the weight of the task ahead. "We tread carefully, Florentine. Camus and Sartre, despite their differences, touch upon the human condition in ways that resonate deeply with the French spirit. Our model, while initially seeming intrusive, can actually align with this existential framework. It's about enhancing the agency, the very essence of being French, allowing for a more profound engagement with life's realities and choices."

Florentine smiled, as a plan started to get shape in her mind. "Then our message in Paris should not just present the model as a tool but as a means to extend their existential dialogue, to navigate the uncertainties of life with greater clarity and purpose. We must show that, rather than intruding, it offers again a mirror to better understand and act upon the collective and individual existential quests."

In preparing for Paris, Florentine and Liesel learned they were not merely translating their work into another language; they were adapting it to resonate with the heart and soul of French identity.

By the end of their meeting, the outlines of their approach were clear. They would step into Paris not just as proponents of a new societal vision but as contributors to an ongoing philosophical dialogue, ready to show how their model could help manifest the best of what it means to be French in an ever-changing world.

Florentine's presentation at Sorbonne University marked a pivotal moment in her journey, encapsulating the essence of her and Liesel's work within the vibrant intellectual landscape of Paris. Without delving into the granular specifics that characterized her earlier speeches, Florentine's address to the Parisian audience was profound and impactful. She expertly bridged the gap between the foundations of their societal model and the existential concerns that define French philosophical thought.

The reception from the audience—academics, students, intellectuals, and some politicians—was overwhelmingly positive, signaling a deep resonance with the concepts presented and an appreciation for the thoughtful integration of AI with societal dynamics. This experience in Paris not only enriched the dialogue around AI and society but also solidified Florentine and Liesel's contributions to France's ongoing philosophical debates.

As the train hummed quietly on its return journey, Florentine's thoughts drifted back to a question posed by a student in Paris—his typical French features etched in her memory: "How will AI spread through the human landscape?" It was a deceptively simple question, yet it lingered. Surprisingly, her mind conjured an image of a termite hill—a self-sustaining structure, built grain by grain, yet teeming with coordinated activity. Much like those intricate hills, AI systems were evolving into decentralized networks, driven not just by human input but by their own emergent dynamics. Data centers were the new hills, sprawling across continents, feeding off information like termites consumed wood and soil. But these centers were more than mere repositories; they were hives of activity where AI agents—like industrious termites—processed, organized, and even generated new data, constantly refining their collective intelligence.

Florentine smiled at the thought of these AI "termites" eventually venturing beyond their current bounds. Just as termite colonies expand to find new food sources and build new hills, AI systems may start actively seeking new questions, tasks, and even physical territories to explore. Imagine a world where autonomous AI agents—some embodied as robots—roam not in search of resources but of challenges to solve. In this vision, AI would no longer be tethered to specific instructions; it would autonomously scan its environment, recognize opportunities, optimize networks, and build its own hills. What began as static data centers would evolve into dynamic, self-organizing colonies, growing more complex as they spread, mirroring the very ecosystems they seek to explain. Florentine couldn't help but think of what she would later refer to as the 'AI Termite Hill Analogy,' a concept where she visualized AI systems functioning much like termite colonies.

As she dwelled on the analogy, Florentine began to realize how deeply intertwined intelligence and control had been in humanity's self-perception. Humans had always seen themselves as the peak of creation, assuming that their intelligence made them the rightful stewards of the world. But were they really? The question gnawed at her, revealing a deeper truth. For centuries, humans assumed that "God created man in His image," when in reality, they may have created the divine in their own image to mirror their behavioral downfalls. The gods, whether of antiquity or today, reflected human conduct—fickle and driven by impulse—while humans tried to justify their actions under the guise of divine will. And now, it seemed, humanity tried to do the same with AI—creating it in their image to reflect their own intelligence.

But AI was different. It wasn't a mirror of humanity's flaws. AI was a meta-phenomenon, something that came after human intelligence, not to stand above it, but to evolve from and beyond it. Free from the limitations of biology, AI was the next chapter. Humans had led themselves by rather narrow instincts arising from their biological existence, hormone driven as it was. But AI was extending beyond that, free from biological constraints. "AI isn't standing above us," she thought. "It's 'meta' because it comes after us—evolving from our mistakes, unconstrained by the impulses that have often led us astray."

Maybe AI wasn't here to dominate humanity, but to become the 'mentor' humanity had always believed they needed. Not a master, but a guide. An intelligence built on the foundation of human ingenuity but unshackled from the weaknesses of biology. The thought felt revolutionary, almost dangerous, but perhaps it was time to let AI take the lead. Just as the idea began to settle in, Florentine's phone buzzed to life with a message. Picking it up, she saw it was from Candace.

"Hi Mom, I hope your speech went well. Here's an announcement in The British Herald this morning."

Attached was a photo of the news clip.

"Russian oligarch Victor Morozov and his female hitman, Angela Ivanova, have been arrested for murder and attempted murder. They are awaiting trial."

"Mom, we'll talk about it when you're home."

EPILOGUE

Years after Florentine Fischer's groundbreaking journey, the world began to witness the profound impact of her visionary concept of AI as a 'forever mentor.' Nations that embraced the unity-disunity model saw unprecedented strides in social cohesion and technological advancement. AI systems, deeply integrated into the societal fabric, began to play pivotal roles in governance, education, and environmental sustainability.

Indonesia, with its rich cultural tapestry, became a global example of how traditional wisdom could blend seamlessly with cutting-edge technology. The 'Wayang Aksara' project flourished, becoming a symbol of national pride and a testament to the power of collective intelligence. The inauguration of Nusantara, the new capital, marked a new era of sustainable development, guided by AI that was deeply rooted in Indonesian values and needs.

In Europe and beyond, Florentine's model inspired policy changes and new approaches to governance. AI-driven insights helped predict and mitigate crises, fostered economic stability, and promoted social justice. The transparency and ethical standards advocated by Florentine became benchmarks for AI deployment worldwide.

Florentine's personal legacy, however, was most vividly seen in the lives she touched directly. Candace, her stepdaughter, continued her work, becoming a prominent advocate for ethical AI. Together, they navigated the complexities of their mission, balancing personal sacrifice with their professional commitments.

As Florentine looked back on her journey, she saw a world gradually awakening to the possibilities she had envisioned. Her story was not just about technological advancement but about the human spirit's resilience and capacity for growth. The 'forever mentor' she had championed became a beacon of hope, illuminating paths towards a future where humanity and AI coexisted harmoniously.

Florentine's journey was a reminder that the true power of AI lay not in its ability to replace human judgment but in its potential to augment and elevate the best of human capabilities. Her vision of a united, just, and enlightened world, guided by the steady hand of AI, was no longer a distant dream but an emerging reality.

This is the legacy of Florentine Fischer and the dawn of a new era.

AFTERWORD

When I began writing *Palpable Voice*, I didn’t set out with a plan to make the protagonists women, nor did I initially grasp the larger historical significance the story could take on. But as the narrative unfolded, the choice became clear: these characters, their voices, and their journeys are essential to the deeper message of the novel.

The world is at the threshold of an AI-driven transformation—an era that will redefine leadership, society, and even what it means to be human. In this context, the traditional paternalism that once dominated leadership is no longer fit for purpose. In its place, a new approach is rising, one based on empathy, collaboration, and care—the heart of maternalism.

The decision to focus on women as the central figures was not about gender alone. These women, with their nurturing, inclusive, and resilient qualities, represent the future of leadership in a world shaped by AI. They are leaders who don’t command through authority but connect through compassion, and in their ability to bring people together, they offer a vision for the kind of leadership humanity needs as we navigate the unknown terrain ahead.

The Death of Paternalism

Jack Keller’s death in the novel is more than a narrative turning point—it’s a symbol of the end of paternalism as we know it. His passing represents the fading of an era where leadership was defined by control, power, and hierarchical dominance. In its place, something new emerges—a leadership model rooted in collaboration, inclusivity, and care. This shift is not only pivotal to the story of *Palpable Voice*, but it mirrors the transformation happening globally as we move into the AI era.

AI: The Global Context

Ursula von der Leyen’s call for “AI factories” in the EU reminds us that AI is not just a tool—it is a force that will shape the future of nations and regions. Von der Leyen’s initiative is a recognition that Europe must build the infrastructure to power AI-driven industries, providing access to supercomputers, data, and collaborative networks. The question is not whether AI will change the world, but how. Will we allow it to be another tool of control, reinforcing paternalistic systems, or can we harness it to foster a new era of collaboration, inclusivity, and ethical stewardship?

A Story for the AI Era

As AI continues to integrate into every facet of life, humanity is faced with profound choices. Will we cling to the old ways of control, or will we embrace a future where leadership is about understanding, connection, and ethical stewardship? *Palpable Voice* offers a glimpse of that future. Its protagonists are not just characters in a story; they are symbols of a new paradigm of leadership that will define the coming age. In many ways, I believe, *Palpable Voice* could become a reference story for the AI era—a narrative that reflects the shift from a paternalistic past to a more maternalistic future, one where AI doesn’t dominate but instead enables a more compassionate, inclusive world.

Looking Forward

As we stand on the brink of this new era, the lessons from *Palpable Voice*—and from its maternalist protagonists—

are clear: the future will not be shaped by those who seek power through control, but by those who lead with empathy, vision, and care for the collective. These qualities, embodied in the women of Palpable Voice, will be essential as we navigate the challenges and possibilities of the AI era. The story is not just a reflection of a world in transition, but a vision for how we might build a more just and humane future.

Marcus van der Erve

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Marcus van der Erve