

1: A New Dawn

"Come on in, John. Sit yourself down. You look quite flustered. Take a few deep breaths and then tell me what's on your mind".

"Thanks, Jim, I..."

"Pardon?"

"Sorry, sir. Thank you, sir".

"I have told you about that before, haven't I? You can call me Jim in public, when it's appropriate, but not in private, and definitely not in *my* office. Familiarity breeds contempt, my dear old father used to say, and I agree with him, but it is good PR, say I. Nevertheless, that's all it is - PR".

Jim made a point of looking out of the huge picture window behind him, clicked a remote handset and waited for the drinks trolley to motor over to him. He poured two shots of Martell Chanteloup XXO and pushed one across his desk

"My youngest daughter, Jeannie, bought me this for my last birthday. Cute, eh? It works on GPS. It homes in on the location of the remote but stops two feet away from it. I love gadgets, don't you? Anyway, the sun's almost over the yard arm", he said not needing an excuse since he was the CEO, president and sole remaining founder of the world's largest online media retailer - My Media. He had been in the top three of the richest people in world for a decade.

"Come on, man, spit it out", he said pouring another tot for each of them.

"Yes, sorry, sir. You are computer literate, but er..."

"There's no need to flatter me, John - just get to the point!"

"Yes, sir... well, have you heard of AI?" John looked up to see his boss nodding with a certain amount of irritation on his face.

"All computers employ a form of AI. 'If... then' flip-flops are a form of AI, aren't they?"
"Er, yes, sir, those flip-flop circuits are a very primitive form of AI, but there are rumours of secret projects working on super-advanced AI... the likes of which very few people have thought achievable during this decade. These systems could be using a range of advanced techniques such as neural networks, probabilistic reasoning, and reinforcement learning that go beyond simple logic gates and memory circuits".

"You have my full attention, John. If this new AI impresses my Chief of Research and Development, then I am all ears. Tell me what you've got, son!"

"It's not much, to be honest, sir", he replied hesitantly. He was worried. His news was having the opposite effect on his boss than he had expected. Jim topped them both up again.

"This latest iteration of AI is so powerful that you can have meaningful conversations with it on any subject, and if it has a blind spot, it will absorb all the data on that subject that is available on the Internet, and remember it for next time. Not only that, but it remembers conversations, so that the inquisitor can go away, act on the information, and return several days later to pick up the conversation where it left off, even if there have been dozens of queries in the meantime..."

Jim had taken the significance of this conversation in immediately. "That must be very worrying for the search engines. The guys at Google must be passing bricks!" A broad grin spread across his face as he poured more drinks. "Unless they are in on it... Are they?" He was becoming rapidly more serious.

"We don't know, sir. I heard news of this new generation of AI 45 mins ago - literally", he said looking at his solid gold Rolex.

Jim's eyes followed those of his employee down to his wrist. "So, what you are telling me is that some of the top firms in the Internet/computer world have probably beaten us to a technology that could be the next giant leap forward in our sphere of influence".

"We just don't know, sir. My guess is that the US military complex is behind it, but it could just as easily be the Europeans, The Russians or the Chinese... It would have military applications, as well as commercial uses... It could also be that Microsoft and Google have bought up some minnow companies to do this research for them so as to stay beneath the radar".

"Great! So, now you're telling me that a couple of shrimps or a bunch of squadies know more about the next generation of technology than we do?!"

John chose to study the surface of the large, highly-polished, mahogany desk rather than give his boss an answer.

"Tell me, John. Do you consider that I pay you enough". Jim was looking at John's watch which was just poking out from under his jacket sleeve.

"Yes, sir. I am very happy with my remuneration package".

"Yes... do you think that you earn it all?"

"I like to think that I give good service, sir".

"Mmm, well, maybe you do earn your wage, but an employer likes to make a profit on everything and everyone, and I'm not sure that I'm making anything on you, after what you just told me. So, you are a researcher, I want you to work out what you are worth to me, and then reduce it by 10%. That will be your new wage. Have your recommendation on my desk before I get in in the morning.

"Also, organise an emergency meeting in the boardroom for 9:30 a.m. tomorrow. Inform all the relevant bodies. Oh, and it is hush-hush, so don't go through the secretaries, and make sure that everyone knows what you just told me... move, man!" John didn't need to be told twice. He was glad to be getting out of there.

Jim walked him to the door, and as John opened it, he said, "Well, thanks for dropping by, John. That was most informative. I'll see you in the morning". John looked at his boss rather nervously. Jim nodded almost imperceptibly and blinked.

"OK, Jim. Thanks for the drink. See you tomorrow". Jim nodded, smiled and allowed the door to close itself.