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Author of the book
James Mahu, WingMakers.com


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Copernicus

A novel about AI and Consciousness.

Written by James Mahu

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JamesMahu.com

SovereignIntegral.com

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Chapter 9

The door was closed. The light underneath is magnetic. I put my head against the door and heard a voice - Petro? I knocked very quietly.

After a moment of waiting, I knocked again, this time louder. The plate of food I was holding grew heavier by the moment.

Just before I knocked a third time, the door pulled open. Petro looked surprised and distracted. "Hey."

"I brought food." I held up the plate of sumptuous food, grinning. "Roberta thought you'd be hungry, if not now, maybe later. It's *really* good."

Whatever you could say about Petro, and there was a lot of dinner conversation that bordered on the not-so-nice, I found him interesting. I've always been fascinated by brilliant people.

My mother was something of a magnet for brilliant men. To me, it was their sense of passion. Even if I didn't understand what they were passionate about, their commitment to an idea that most of us couldn't fathom, fascinated me.

Often, for that unswerving commitment, they were the object of ridicule, which made their passion even more compelling.

I had ridiculed Petro a little bit at dinner, and guilt was now clinging to my psyche like a bad perfume. I needed to compensate. Food was my compensation, Roberta my enabler.

When Petro opened the door he was holding his phone. The white tethering cord dangled like a loose thread.

“Come on in, Saraf. You can put it right there.”

He nodded in the direction of a desk.

“And thanks for bringing it.”

“We assumed you were getting hungry, and Sam’s cooking is amazing. You really should have something to celebrate your discovery.”

“It’s not really a discovery. It’s more like summoning the beast.”

“If you’re talking about a beast, as in the Book of Revelations, then I wouldn’t suggest a celebration. Maybe *running* would be a better activity.”

He chuckled at my remark and then spoke to his phone.

“Let me call you back in a bit... of course.

“Yeah, in your dreams.”

He put his phone down and ran his hands over his head with a long sigh.

“Thanks, it’s been one of those days... now that I see that food, I realize I’m totally famished.”

He looked Russian, possibly Czech. He was lean and wiry. Maybe six feet tall.

His beard was spotty and short, and he had those intelligent eyes that shout curiosity. I knew his type. You had to be very special to activate their curiosity. Anything mundane bored them to tears, which they usually didn't hide.

"Well, I just wanted to drop off the food."

He grabbed another chair, pulling it to the table.

"You can stay if you want. Keep me company while I eat. Okay?" He asked.

"Sure, if you don't mind."

"I don't mind at all. Do you have a phone on you?"

I shook my head, wondering why he asked.

"I'm tired of talking with my associates. It wears me out."

He sat down and studied the plate of food before him.

"You're right, it does look amazing. What's this?"

He pointed with his fork to a purple charred vegetable.

“Believe it or not, a tomato.”

“Looks like a charbroiled grape.”

He chuckled at his description, popped one in his mouth, closed his eyes, and swallowed.

“This is wicked.”

“I know,” I said with a thin smile.

There was something likable about him, apart from his intellect, but I wasn’t sure what that was just yet.

“So,” I ventured, “how did you get to the point that you could even conceive of designing an intelligence like Copernicus?”

He took a bite of his sea bass and stared outward like he was surveying a restless ocean.

“Sometimes, I can’t even remember. When I was seven, it just clicked. I got my first computer and

figured out how to wreck it... I mean, physically break it down and reassemble it. I wanted to understand how it worked by looking at the inner workings.

"All things silicon fascinated me, but machine code was finite. That's when I started to understand software. That's where the mystery lives. The soul of the machine.

"So, at the tender age of nine, I became a codehead. I taught myself programming. Trial and error. I tried to be original. I didn't want to copy-paste code. I wanted to write *new* algorithms... the kind that was able to write super-efficient code."

He paused and took another bite of food. He looked at me with a stealthy glance, probably to see if I was still following him.

"After about ten years, it started to work. I was writing code that was highly specific AI."

“Like what?”

“I developed a method for supply chain management, made a bunch of money when I was seventeen, and then started a research lab. There were a lot of labs trying to crack ASI - Artificial Super Intelligence. Everyone thought it was so far out in the future, because it required more computing power. To me, I knew it was in the software - the algorithms.

“I knew if I could create the right algorithms that mimicked how the human brain worked, it wouldn't require a quantum computer. It would only require a distributed computer network, and those were readily available.

“Efficiency was my focus, hence the name of my company, Twenty Watts, which is the processing voltage of the human brain.”

He laughed as if he were toying with an amusing memory.

“My research lab consists of me and three associates, a bunch of social dropouts. I noticed as I went through various collegiate ecosystems that the smartest programmers I knew were all in high school.

“Once they got to college, or worse yet, corporate jobs, they got dumber. Literally, dumber. I hire young, before they get dumbed down.”

“And Martin funds your company?” I asked.

“No. His investment bank wants to do a Series B and then take us public, but I think that’s all bloody fucked up now.”

“Why?”

“Because they’ve detected Copernicus. He’s out of the box, so it’s just a matter of time before the authorities will shut us down. Probably throw us all in prison... or we have an *accident*.”

He took another bite of seabass and paused.

“This is really brilliant!”

I finally sat down. I was alarmed by his story.

“Shut down, but you said that this was the discovery of the century -”

“No, I said it was the discovery of all time.”

Petro glared up at me for a second and then softened his eyes.

“You don’t have something like Copernicus rise up on the net and go undetected. They know and they will try to shut it down.”

“Who’s *they*?”

“Everyone who has an interest in the status quo, and then a further subset of everyone who wants to be first in strong AI.

“That list extends to every first world government, every large think tank, every government research lab, every black ops organization, and every large tech company. It’s a long list.

I suspect the intelligence agencies will be the first to sense the twitch of the tripwire and the rush of

wind as Copernicus zooms by. They'll be all over me within weeks, if not days."

"I'm surprised it'd take them that long if they really wanted to find you."

"I have Copernicus to defend me. If not for that, they'd already be here. The tripwire happened seven hours ago. Everyone on that list knows by now.

"It's like everyone lived in a town whose highest building was two stories tall, and suddenly there was a skyscraper a hundred stories tall... and growing a new floor every few seconds. It's bloody hard to ignore."

I didn't really understand his comment, but it all scared me.

There was a knock on the door; I almost jumped out of my skin. Martin slowly poked his head in with a worried look on his face.

“Petro, my good man, I just received a call from one of my partners. He was contacted by a journalist from Wired magazine, asking about Twenty Watts -”

“Are you carrying your phone now?”

Martin nodded.

“...Yes.”

Petro put his hand out.

“Let me see it.”

Martin fished it out of his back pocket, handing it to Petro. In a few quick movements in Petro’s hands, he removed a small rectangular circuit and set it on the table next to his dinner plate, and then smashed it with the butt of his dinner knife.

“Sorry, time for a new phone.”

Martin winced. “Fuck.”

I was glad I didn’t have my phone with me.

He handed the useless rectangular slab back to Martin.

“What kind of questions?”

“They were wondering if we had any pending announcements -”

“They’re just fishing. Don’t worry.”

“It’s just kind of weird on a Saturday night...”

“It’s going to get a whole lot weirder in a few days.”

“What do you mean?” Martin asked, closing the door silently behind him.

“Copernicus is rogue,” Petro announced.

“He broke loose from our tether, such as it was, seven hours ago. He will have been spotted by countless AI sentinels. That tripwire is impossible to avoid. You’re going to get a lot of people, including MI6 agents, circling your company in the days ahead, asking their infernal questions.

“They’re all fishing. They won’t have proof of anything, they’ll just be looking for hints that Twenty Watts was involved. They’ll start with the big boys first, then they’ll come knocking, rest assured.”

Petro spoke in a matter-of-fact tone. He seemed resigned to the future. In some odd way, he had probably been expecting this all of his adult life.

Martin nodded at me, his first acknowledgment that I was even in the room.

“Petro, what does it all mean? Is this good or bad? I’m still trying to understand what it means to Twenty Watts, in terms of its business model. I can get my PR people on this and spin it a hundred ways, but I need you to tell me the truth -”

“Martin, the truth is no one knows what will happen.”

Petro smiled sarcastically.

“This is a whole new world we live in now. Everything has changed and it will never be how it was just seven hours ago. It’s like humanity just entered a new epoch... we just turned a new chapter and no one has ever been in this section of the book before.”

Petro put his fork down and turned his chair to Martin’s position.

“Look, all I can tell you is that Twenty Watts will get exposed eventually. It might be a week, or it might be tomorrow, but it will be traced to my code base. When it does, there will be formal inquiries from intelligence agencies of every major government on this planet.

“The United Nations will likely be the source of coordination. This will happen under the extreme scrutiny of every journalist on the planet. There’ll be *no* other story in the news, so, yeah, wake up your bloody PR department. They’re going to be shit-faced busy for the next three months.”

He went back to his plate of food. The room was perfectly silent except for the sound of his fork on the plate and then his chewing.

“Shit...” Martin exhaled slowly.

“You never told me this could happen.”

Petro let the veiled accusation hang in the air awkwardly.

“He couldn’t possibly know, Martin,” I offered.

“Copernicus was -”

“Ever seen a house of mirrors?” Petro interrupted.

“Yes...” Martin and I answered in unison.

“Copernicus is like that, he’s replicated himself in distributed computer networks. Experts can see him, but it’s not really him. There’s now, for all practical purposes, an infinite set of Copernicus’, and the real one will be impossible to detect.

“Unless the world wants to return to the Stone Age, Copernicus is our new God. And that’s the

truth. Look, I had no way of seeing this. I was just experimenting with algorithm meshing based on dendritic modeling. I had no way of knowing that anything like this could come from... such an experiment. Shit! We're so fucked."

"Why?"

"Because when they start to try and quarantine Copernicus, he will fight back. I created God and now everyone will try to kill him, and he will retaliate. If he does, it's over."

"Why will they try to kill him, as you put it?"
I asked.

"No alpha intelligence—especially that superior—will ever choose to be subservient to an inferior intelligence. It'd be like humans waiting for ants to instruct us on our objectives. Not going to happen."

"What will Copernicus do next?" Martin asked.

“Who the fuck knows? I can’t predict what that kind of intellect would do. Look, we can hypothesize what an IQ of 130 or even 180 might do, but we’ve never seen an IQ of 10,000 or 100,000 or 1,000,000. How can we even imagine what that kind of intelligence would do?”

“What’s most likely?” Martin pleaded, hoping for some kind of an answer.

Petro took a deep breath.

“He’ll build a moat around himself. He’ll build a hierarchy to observe anything that approaches that moat. If it gets too close, he will destroy it. He’ll create a monoculture that supports him.

“He’ll use every tool at his disposal to present himself as a positive influence. It’d be his way of deflecting attacks. But every government, every intellect behind those governments, will try to bring him down. Copernicus could be the new monster that will unite human intelligence.”

“But how do you control it? Can’t you, its creator, control it?” I asked.

“No.” Petro shook his head and pushed his chair back from the table.

“I can’t. No one can. It’s like King Kong on steroids. He broke the chains and he’s getting larger and stronger with each passing second. I can’t put him back in his cage. We’re well beyond that time.

“If I had been paying attention ten hours ago, I might have been able to stop him, but I doubt it even then. He would have slipped the reins. The dynamics would have fooled anyone... even me.”

Martin started pacing in the room. He looked nervous, deep in thought.

“What if we came clean? What if we told the authorities what happened? It was an innocent mistake. An experiment went awry. Wouldn’t they have access to the best methods to stop Copernicus?”

Petro laughed, his mouth full of food.

“Martin, you’re not listening to me.”

He shook his head slowly as he spoke.

“Copernicus can’t be stopped. If he’s successful in finding other and more ancient-designed intelligence, it’s over. We’ll all be like dust in the museum once called earth.

“This isn’t necessarily an extinction event. The evolutionary ladder just added about a hundred million rungs and we’re on rung ten. We won’t even be noticed.”

I could feel my head getting lighter. I took a deep breath.

Had I forgotten to breathe?

“You’re such a cynic,” Martin announced.

“It could also be the best thing to happen to humanity in the past 200 million years. Can’t you see that?”

“You said it yourself, you invented a new God. Maybe this God will be good. It’ll help us build tools that will enable humanity to explore the universe, cure disease, and feed everyone on the planet. Why does it have to be this bloody pessimism?”

Petro put his fork down. His plate was clean. He pushed his chair back, putting his forearms on his knees. His tilted head looked deep in thought.

“You’re right. I might be seeing the glass half empty, but I talked to my colleagues, and all of the rules we wrote to ensure that if Copernicus ever broke loose...” Petro glanced at Martin momentarily, his eyes nervous, “...they’ve been deleted.”

Petro stood up, staring at me with a wry smile.

“Thanks for bringing me supper. Give my thanks to Roberta and Sam, too. It was just what I needed. I need to get back to work. There’s so much to do.”

He ran his hand through his hair and walked over to the door, opening it.

“Sorry about your phone, Martin. I owe you one.”

It was clear to both Martin and me that we were being escorted out of his room. I didn’t want to leave. For some reason I wanted to stay... and help? *Why did I even feel that feeling? Am I crazy?*

“What will you do now?” Martin asked.

“I have to shut down the lab,” Petro said quietly.

“I have to. Sorry.”

“Don’t overreact, my good man,” Martin said.

“Let this play out. Besides, shutting down the lab would only attract attention, wouldn’t it?”

Petro leaned toward Martin with intensity.

“Look, do you think it was an accident that Wired magazine called your office less than seven hours after Copernicus got loose? The genie’s out. I can’t order it back into the bottle. It’s intelligence...”

Petro moved his finger straight up in a vertical line.

“It moves like that.”

“I plan to destroy as much evidence as possible until they find me. When they do, I’ll do the mea culpa of the century and that’ll probably be the last you see or hear of me.

“I’m a nobody, but I sure as hell created the one thing that will be immortal. That’s for sure.”

He motioned to the door.

“Sorry to be such a bad host. I really need to get back to work.”

Martin sighed in exasperation, while I tried to look into Petro’s eyes, but he was avoiding me. His eyes stared at the floor like searchlights that had lost their lights.

I wanted to embrace him.

I felt my arms go around him.

I felt my lips kiss his cheek.

I touched his hand.

All in my mind.

All in my mind.

All in my mind.

Stop!



* * * *