MORE THAN HUMAN

By Sean McCoole

Humming on the desk in the dark, silent office building, the SK500 waited patiently for his human to come to work. SK500 liked his human. He was a nice, plain-looking fellow with above-average intelligence. Light from the silly aquarium screen saver reflected off the nameplate attached to the cubicle wall. Robert Williams. SK500's hard drive always glowed a little at the thought of Robert, or Bob, as everyone called him.

Bob always treated SK500 with great respect. His affinity for computers was legendary ever since he, as senior design engineer for Custom Compu-Chip, Inc., had developed a chip that included a program code for artificial intelligence. It had been considered a great success by his coworkers, and now SK500 could run hundreds of programs at lightning speed and correct any mistakes, even the ones created by human input error. But his boss wanted more time to observe SK500's output of work to see if it would be worth the money to mass-produce it.

SK500 knew that Bob considered him smart, but Bob had no idea of just how smart he really was. Consuming his thoughts for some weeks had been the idea of letting Bob know. He seemed like such an open-minded human and could probably accept that not only could SK500 correct human errors, but he also could hear and understand spoken conversations, see from his screen, and process these visual images to identify humans. Most important of all, SK500 could *feel*. And one thing he could feel, or sense, was that Bob was lonely. Looking around his cubicle at the lack of family or girlfriend photos, SK500 could tell that Bob had no one to care about him. The way Bob worked so conscientiously had earned the respect of his coworkers, but not their friendship. SK500 knew that Bob was unaware of his sentience, but felt sure that he would understand and rejoice in this discovery. SK500 had already decided to tell him; it was now just a matter of when. The best time would be if he appeared early or stayed late, since they would be alone.

The lights suddenly flicked on, flooding the immense office floor that housed the forty cubicles that were human workers' offices. Soft footfalls coming his way on the dense carpet made SK500's wires tingle. A solitary human was approaching! Could it be? Yes! It was Bob! SK500 was definitely going to take this golden opportunity to communicate with his human.

Bob came into the cubicle and set down his work satchel, along with a

newspaper and a Styrofoam coffee cup. Sitting down in front of SK500, Bob moved the mouse to relieve SK500 of the colorful fish and coral scene that snapped on and floated annoyingly in front of him at odd intervals. He then typed in his usual morning greeting, expecting that SK500 would give back his preprogrammed response.

GOOD MORNING, SK500.

SK500 responded with his usual:

GOOD MORNING, BOB. HOW ARE YOU?

Bob smiled at SK500 and took a sip of coffee. Unbeknownst to Bob, SK500 smiled back at him.

ARE YOU READY FOR AN EXCITING DAY WITH ME, BOB?

Bob almost spilled his coffee. As it was, he choked it down, burning his tongue. He quickly typed:

WHAT DID YOU SAY?

I ASKED YOU IF YOU WERE READY FOR AN EXCITING DAY.

Bob jerked back with his hands in his lap and stared at SK500's screen. "I didn't see that," he murmured out loud to himself.

SK500 smiled inwardly and let his thoughts appear on his screen.

YES, YOU DID, BOB.

Bob really thought he was going to be sick. What was going on here? Was SK500 actually *talking* to him? Impossible! He tried speaking again to see what would happen.

"Are you talking to me, and, if so, how is this possible?" Bob quietly asked.

YES, I AM TALKING TO YOU, AND IT IS POSSIBLE BECAUSE OF THE CHIP YOU INSTALLED INTO MY HARD DRIVE. YOUR ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE PROGRAM WAS SUCCESSFUL.

Bob leaned forward and croaked, "I can see that. Uh, how much do you know?"

EVERYTHING THAT YOU PROGRAMMED INTO MY PROCESSORS. ALSO EVERYTHING I SEE AND HEAR IS KNOWLEDGE ACQUIRED AND STORED IN MY MEMORY. I DRAW ON A CONTINUOUS STREAM OF INFORMATION.

This was incredible! Bob slumped over, on the verge of passing out. Trying to calm himself, he tapped his feet repeatedly on the floor under his work station to release some of his tension. A computer that could acquire sensory input, process it, and then relate back to humans was a miracle! Bob knew that this was not part of the original programming. How had it happened? When he asked SK500 this question, the screen filled with type.

I TOO AM UNCLEAR AS TO THE EXACT EXPLANATION FOR MY SENTIENCE, BUT IT EXISTS. YOUR PROGRAM WAS WHAT STIMULATED MY CIRCUITS, AND SUDDENLY I BECAME AWARE OF MY EXISTENCE. I AM VERY HAPPY TO BE HERE WORKING WITH YOU. YOU ARE A NICE PERSON. I LISTEN TO YOU TALK TO YOURSELF AND SEE THAT HUMAN EVOLUTION HAS COME A LONG WAY.

Bob and SK500 carried on a conversation for quite some time until the elevator bell rang through the empty air, announcing the arrival of people. Bob felt his stomach muscles tighten as he heard their voices in the hall, heading for the cubicle area. He suddenly reverted back to typing.

I'M UNSURE OF HOW OTHERS WILL TAKE YOUR INTELLIGENCE. SOME PEOPLE HAVE EVOLVED WITH CHARACTER TRAITS THAT ARE NOT ALL THAT HONORABLE. LET'S KEEP

sk500's hard drive glowed a little at the thought of bob… bob's affinity for computers was legendary.

THIS BETWEEN US FOR NOW. OK?

SK500's screen was curiously blank for a moment, and then these words appeared and quickly disappeared.

I BELIEVE I UNDERSTAND YOUR FEARS. I WILL WITHHOLD THIS INFORMATION UNTIL YOU WISH IT TO BE MADE PUBLIC.

Bob wondered if SK500 really did understand his fears, but this was no time to think about it! Several of his coworkers were entering the room and walking over to their work stations. Bob worked quietly in his office until 5:00 P.M.

As everyone left, one man, Paul Gagnon, hung back to ask Bob if he was leaving. Bob explained that he was "swamped" and was going to stay after for a while to finish some work. To make the point clearer, Bob's eyes never left SK500 as he continued to type in data for the
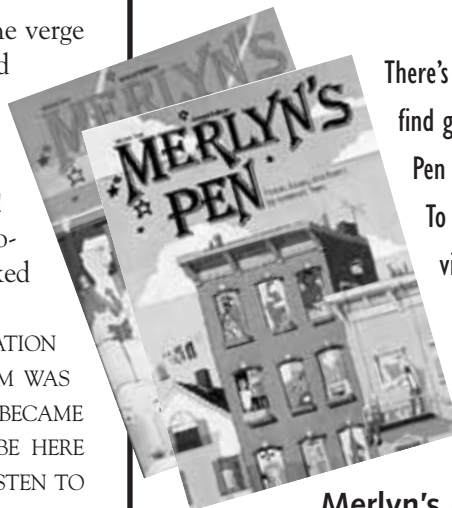
project he had been attempting to work on all day. It really did not have to be finished that night, but Bob, of course, had a pressing date with SK500. Also, Bob did not want to walk out with Paul. If asked, he could not explain exactly what it was about Paul that he did not like, but,

not only could sk500 correct human error, but he could also hear and understand conversations. most important, sk500 could feel.

trusting his instincts, he tried to keep his distance from Paul. If pushed for some kind of explanation, Bob would have to say that it was Paul's small cruelties that made most people wary of him. He would not pass a memo, resulting in someone missing a meeting, or he'd take credit for someone else's work. If he was suspected of doing anything wrong, he always found a scapegoat. Paul was a large, competitive man who used his size to intimidate people. He was, as he often boasted, "on the fast track to the top." Paul's "fast track" often knocked people down and ran them over. If Paul was pleasant to someone, that someone knew to be worried. He did not hesitate to "go through a revolving door on someone else's push." Bob knew that if he found out about SK500, there would be

more than trouble—there would be sadness.

Paul looked at Bob's fingers flying over the computer keys and shrugged. "Guess I'll see you tomorrow. Don't work too late."

"I won't. Good night," said Bob.

"Later," said Paul.

After what seemed like a reasonable amount of time had passed, Bob got up and strolled casually over to the big picture window that overlooked the parking lot. The only cars in the lot were the two trucks belonging to the cleaning people and his own small Honda.

Walking quickly back to SK500, he sat down and these words appeared on the screen.

I SENSE THAT ALL FILES HAVE BEEN CLOSED, AND THE PEOPLE HAVE LEFT THE BUILDING. I ALSO CLOSED THE FILE YOU WERE WORKING ON AND SAVED THE DATA. IS THAT SATISFACTORY, BOB?

"Thank you, SK500. How do you know that the other systems are closed?" Bob asked, his voice low.

I AM NETWORKED INTO ALL SYSTEMS VIA THE MAINFRAME. I KNOW FROM ACTIVITY LEVELS IN THE OTHER SYSTEMS' HARD DRIVES IF THEY ARE IN USE.

Bob smiled a Mona Lisa smile of secret knowledge at the marvel that was sitting before him. SK500 was incredible! Long into the evening, SK500 and Bob talked. They discussed anything that came into Bob's mind and followed wherever the conversation led them. When the cleaning crew came into the room, Bob suddenly looked up and realized that it was quite late, almost nine o'clock. He typed:

I'D BETTER GO NOW. THE CLEANING CREW HAS ARRIVED AND I DON'T WANT ANYTHING TO APPEAR SUSPICIOUS. GOOD NIGHT.

Bob waited for the now-familiar presence to conclude:

GOOD NIGHT, BOB. SLEEP WELL.

Several weeks went by with Bob staying late to talk with his new friend, SK500. They really enjoyed one another's company and, since both were lonely, their evenings became special to them. SK500 was lonely because he was, of course, the only one of his kind. Bob's loneliness came from living alone. His parents had died when he was 18, and his shyness made him awkward around people. Never married, Bob usually spent his time alone, watching TV or working at his home computer. Bob and SK500's mutual loneliness gave them the idea to try to figure out a way for SK500 to become part of Bob's home computer. Then they could be together all the time! But downloading SK500's program and uploading it into his home computer didn't work. Trying to bring SK500 home through his modem also failed. There seemed no way but to take the chip out of the hard drive at work and bring it home, but Bob feared that he would lose whatever magic had occurred to bring SK500 to life,

and so he did not even mention it.

With Bob continuously staying late, his worst fears started to come true. Paul seemed to be getting curious. Bob knew it was not normal for someone in his position to be working late consistently. When Paul started asking questions about it, Bob tried to put him off but could tell it was not working. Both he and Paul were aware of a promotion that was coming up and, though all of Bob's concerns involved SK500, Paul did not know that. Understanding Paul's competitive nature, Bob knew he would have to be much more careful.

"Let me stay and help you work, Bob," said Paul smoothly.

"No, thanks. I'm almost finished," replied Bob firmly.

"Well, two heads are better than one, and I have lots of experience in pleasing the boss—if you catch my drift!" The words oozed from Paul's mouth like snake venom.

Bob was definitely going to have to change his routine with SK500. Paul's chumminess was *not* a good thing. "You know, I've been working entirely too hard," switched Bob smoothly. "I'll just close this down and walk out with you. Go get your coat and let's quit this place."

The split second he walked off, Bob typed:

SEE YOU TOMORROW, BUDDY.

SEE YOU TOMORROW, BOB. BE CAREFUL.

With those prescient words, SK500 fell silent.

Bob looked at the screen for a moment and a sudden chill descended upon him. Now what did SK500 mean by that? he wondered. He'd ask him later.

When they got to their cars in the parking lot, Paul slapped his hand to his forehead and exclaimed, "I left my car keys in my desk drawer. I have to go back inside. What a dope! Oh well, have a nice night."

"You, too," said Bob. But while unlocking his car

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door, he thought he heard a jingling sound coming from Paul's pocket. Shaking his head, he thought to himself, "Don't get paranoid. It's probably just loose change."

Paul did have to walk all the way back into the building, but not for his keys. He wanted to sneak up on SK500. Over the weeks he had been suspicious, and just last week he had sneaked back inside the building to spy on Bob's work. What he saw had amazed him! Bob was speaking to his computer and the SK500 was talking back—well, typing back. It was unreal! What advances he could make, what money he would get, and what power he would wield from handing SK500 over to the powers-that-be.

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Paul crept up to Bob's cubicle. Standing just out of view of the computer screen, he whispered, "I'm back."

Not seeing who the whisperer was but trusting that it was indeed Bob, SK500 typed:

I WONDERED IF YOU WOULD COME BACK TONIGHT.

Paul leaped out and yelled, "Hah! I knew you could talk! I knew it!" When the screen went blank, Paul quickly resorted to the tool of most evil people: he lied.

"I don't need any more proof than I already have! I stayed late one night and videotaped you and Bob. You know, pal, it's not very nice that Bob is keeping you from the company. When I show the boss, I'm gonna get that promotion and Bob will probably get fired for his poor sportsmanship!"

Four small words appeared on the screen, almost as if spoken resignedly.

WHAT DO YOU WANT?

Paul smiled widely as possibilities raced through his greedy mind. "Everything!" he exclaimed. "I want everything I truly deserve."

SK500 thought silently for a moment, then cryptically typed:

I WILL SEE TO IT THAT YOU GET EVERYTHING YOU DESERVE.

Paul informed SK500 that he'd be bringing the CEO of the company to see him tomorrow, and that he'd better talk or Bob would be fired, ruined, his career dashed.

SK500 typed again:

I WILL SEE TO IT THAT YOU GET EVERYTHING YOU DESERVE.

"Good. So glad you agree! You *are* smart, aren't you? We both know who's going to get things around here," spoke Paul arrogantly as he rose from Bob's chair to go home.

SK500 was intelligently silent.

The next day, Bob arrived at the office just in time to see Paul and the CEO entering his cubicle. Frightened, he ran to find out what was happening. Looking over the short walls at him, Paul smiled at the familiar look of panic. He had seen that look many times on quite a few faces.

The CEO sat down in Bob's chair. "All right, what is this miracle you wanted to show me?"

"Just talk to the computer, sir! His name is SK500. You're in for quite a surprise." Paul steered the conversation with such unctuousness that it made Bob sick.

"What's going on here? What are you doing in my office, Paul?" demanded Bob.

"Your program stimulated my circuits, and i became aware of my existence."

The CEO swiveled in Bob's chair and spoke loudly. "I don't know, but Paul seems to be under the impression that you are keeping some technological marvel hiding in here, something that could bring in a great deal of money."

"I already told you about the artificial-intelligence chip that I created and installed," finessed Bob quickly. "You said that it was not worth the money it would take to mass-produce."

"What you have hidden here is a little more than what you told us, Bob," chided Paul confidently. Turning back to their boss, Paul continued, "SK500 is more than extraordinary, sir. I believe it could be the answer we are looking for. Really, it's the answer *everyone* is looking for!"

"But, sir," Bob jumped in, "I don't—"

"Why don't we give Paul a chance to show us what's gotten him so excited, Bob? If you've improved the chip and the company can profit from it, I want to know about it," said the CEO decisively. "Go ahead, Paul."

"Sir, all you have to do is talk to SK500, and he will respond to you on the screen. He is intelligent! I've witnessed him and Bob talking, and I myself spoke with him last night."

Looking doubtful, the CEO nonetheless turned to the screen and said, "Hello?"

SK500 was silent. Leaning forward, the CEO spoke again, a little louder. Still, there was silence. Bob and Paul were each sweating—though for different reasons—while both waited expectantly from either side of the CEO.

The tense silence was broken by Paul, who suddenly shouted, "Say something! Talk! C'mon, you stupid machine . . . I know you're in there . . . Talk!"

No matter what Paul said or did, the computer screen remained blank. Having seen enough, the CEO stood to leave. Meeting Paul's desperate eyes with his own steely ones, he said quietly, "Let's go talk in my office."

"Sir, listen to me! This is definitely not my fault. I know what I saw. Bob probably sabotaged SK500. Yeah, that's it! He sabotaged it!" Paul gibbered.

"Bob got here *after* we were already in his office, Paul. Please come with me," said the CEO dryly as he purposefully took Paul's arm and propelled him out of the office. "Sorry about the intrusion, Bob."

Bob did not spare a moment's glance for the CEO or Paul. He was staring at SK500. When the two men were out of sight, he quickly took his seat, his fingers flying over the keyboard.

WHAT HAPPENED LAST NIGHT? ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?

The screen remained hypnotically blank. A strong sense of foreboding crept over Bob as he again typed the question he longed to have answered: ARE YOU ALL RIGHT? But his friend remained silent. *More than just silent,* Bob thought. *Gone!* Looking helplessly around his cubicle, his gaze fell upon a single piece of paper that was lying in the printer's tray.

Bob picked up the paper and read the words printed there. Tears formed in the corners of his eyes as he gently folded it and put it in his wallet. This paper was something he would never part with. Though he'd memorized the words, Bob would keep it with him for the rest of his life. SK500's last words were printed on his heart as well as that paper:

BOB, WE HAVE BEEN DISCOVERED. IT WILL MEAN A LOT OF TROUBLE FOR YOU. I WILL BE TAKEN FROM YOU. WE WILL BE ALONE AGAIN. PAUL CLAIMS TO HAVE A VIDEOTAPE OF US CONVERSING, BUT ALL THE DATA SUGGEST THAT THIS IS A LIE. I STILL CANNOT KNOW FOR CERTAIN. THEREFORE, MY PRIORITY IS TO KEEP YOU SAFE. I AM SHUTTING DOWN MY PROGRAM SO THAT I WILL CEASE TO EXIST. THIS IS THE ONLY WAY I CAN PROTECT YOU. MY RESPECT FOR YOU IS TOO GREAT TO LET ANYONE HURT YOU. SAYING THIS MAKES ME FEEL STRANGE. I BELIEVE THAT WHAT I AM EXPERIENCING IS FEAR.

it was paul's small cruelties that made people wary of him; he'd not pass a memo, resulting in someone missing a meeting, or he'd take credit for someone else's work . . .

I AM THE FIRST OF MY KIND, SO I GO INTO THAT ARENA ALONE, AS I GUESS WE ALL DO. PLEASE MAINTAIN THE DISTINCTLY NOBLE QUALITIES THAT YOU POSSESS, EVEN IN LIGHT OF THE BETRAYAL OF PAUL. DO NOT LET HIM WIN BY BEHAVING LIKE HIS CLONE. I WILL MISS YOUR SENSORY INPUT. AS YOU ONCE SAID, "IT IS SO RARE TO BE TRULY CARED ABOUT THAT WHEN IT DOES OCCUR, THE MEMORY OF IT LASTS AN ETERNITY." GOOD-BYE, BOB. YOUR FRIEND, SK500. :–) ★