

Control+Alt+Delete

By Rachel Aukes

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Today wasn't one of my better days.

Michael Klempton, executive vice president of Datus Technologies, stood in my home, holding my ex-wife's hand. He had the nerve to look happy. I hated the guy and I hadn't even met him yet.

"So, you must be Jack." Michael smiled warmly and held out his hand. "Paige has told me much about you. It's a pleasure to finally meet you."

"Mike," I said simply and forced myself to shake his hand, making sure I squeezed just a touch harder than him.

He straightened his shoulders. "Actually, I prefer Michael. My father is Mike."

"Hm." I turned and walked away without another word and headed into the kitchen to grab a beer from the fridge. When I rotated around, Paige stood there, her lips pursed.

"Play nice," she said. "I left a message to tell you we were both coming. Michael came for Willie's sake."

I held up my hands in surrender. "What did I do? I've been a fucking great host so far."

"No, you're—"

I didn't stick around for another one of her coaching sessions. Somehow, she held onto the hope that I was trainable. She'd always been the optimist in our relationship.

Back inside my dining room, Michael looked up and smiled as though I wasn't an asshole.

"This house is too damn small," I mumbled before taking a long drink of beer.

At that moment, the birthday boy and his pal Gage came tearing down the stairs. I grabbed Willie by the arm and yanked him to a stop. "Whoa, there, cowboy. Exactly where do you think you're going in such a hurry?"

Willie rolled his eyes. "The snow's just about melted, Dad. We're just going to ride our bikes down to the creek. We'll be right back."

"Can't you and Gage break bones later?" I asked. "It's your birthday party."

He shrugged. "I swear we'll be back soon."

As he tried to take off, I pulled the slingshot out of his hand. "Riding bikes, huh?"

He gave me sheepish look. "We have to be prepared just in case the zombie apocalypse hits."

Paige gasped. "Oh, be careful, Willie. You could take out someone's eye with that thing." She turned to me. "Did you give that to him? I told you we need to talk about these things first."

I sighed and returned to him the weapon I'd made for him last fall. "Just don't break another window. The next one comes out of your allowance."

Willie rolled his eyes. "Really, Dad. That was an accident. That rock flew a lot farther than I thought it would." The hint of pride in his words was unmistakable.

I shooed him away, trying not to grin. "Don't be gone too long. This is your party."

"We'll be right back!" Willie exclaimed as he ran to the door.

"Thanks, Mr. Baptiste!" Gage hollered just before the door slammed shut behind them.

I took a long drink of beer, careful to avoid my ex-wife's gaze boring into me.

"Boys will be boys," Michael said. "Once they hit their teen years, it's impossible to keep them reined in. In fact, just the other day, William and I—" His smart-watch chimed. "Excuse me," he said and stepped off to the side to read something. After a moment, he looked up at Paige and grinned. "Good news! The law passed today. We've received a green light to proceed with Project Reformation."

Paige's lips parted. "That's wonderful! You've been working on that project forever!"

"They're announcing it now." Michael looked at me. "Jack, do you mind if I borrow your wall screen for a moment?"

"Help yourself," I mumbled before taking another drink.

He tapped his watch and aimed it at my wall panel. The screen blinked from a slideshow of wildlife videos to a live press conference where Alan Sturman, the president of Datus Technologies—and the world's richest man—was speaking behind a podium lined with microphones.

"... The Reformation Act has been passed and is to be effective immediately. The new law grants Datus Technologies, under the purview of the federal government, the power to leverage today's most advanced technology to remove violent and deviant proclivities from convicted criminals. All criminals with life sentences will be evaluated as candidates under the Reformation Act. Today, we are pleased to share with you the first candidate approved for reformation."

Sturman held out his hand, and the screen zoomed onto a man in an orange jumpsuit and handcuffs. His shaved head was covered in tattoos, and there was a cruel glint in his glare. When he tried to move forward, the guards on each side of him held him firm.

"This criminal, Johnson W. Delmar, has been convicted of twelve murders. He has attempted to escape prison on four separate occasions, critically injuring a police officer during one of these attempts. His violent tendencies first appeared when he was a juvenile. His early crimes were acts of petty theft and cruelty to animals. Over the next twenty years, his crimes grew more and more violent. Our current correctional system, despite its best intentions, simply does not work on criminals who cannot be reformed through traditional means."

"You're a stupid f—" The killer yelled, his rant automatically muted by the network's profanity restrictors.

"Now, watch closely as this criminal is reformed." Sturman nodded to a young man to his left, who tapped on a tablet.

The criminal, who was still shouting, quieted down. He frowned. The tenseness in his body seemed to relax and his eyes clouded over, as though he had a serious case of cataracts.

Datus's president smiled and held out a hand. *"As you can see, the process is nearly instantaneous and perfectly humane. The candidate suffers no pain. Johnson W. Delmar, mass murderer and life-long lawbreaker, is no longer a threat to society. His criminal tendencies have been nullified. In fact, he can now contribute as a useful member of society rather than be a burden on our taxpayers' dollars."*

He nodded to a guard, who removed Delmar's handcuffs. The convict stood there, making no attempt to escape or attack the guard.

"Come here, Johnson," Sturman said.

Delmar walked up to the podium in slow, plodding steps, as though he were hypnotized.

Sturman turned him to face the crowd. *"Give a nice wave to the people and say hello, Johnson."*

The man waved. *"Hello."*

The audience cheered.

A storm of questions flashed at the podium. Sturman patted the air. *"One at a time, please."* He pointed to a reporter in the front row.

"Is it permanent?"

Sturman nodded. *"The reformation process is permanent. This man's darker tendencies have been eradicated for the rest of his life, just as chalk can be wiped clean from a chalkboard."*

"Was there any pain?" another reporter shouted out.

Sturman turned to the reformed man. *"Tell the people you are not in any pain, Johnson."*

"I am not in pain," he replied.

Ignoring the onslaught of questions, Sturman motioned to a young aide, who pulled a kitten from a box and placed it in Johnson's massive hands. When he stroked its yellow fur, the audience gasped and then erupted into roars of delight.

Datus's president smiled. *"You see? The process is pain-free but completely effective. It is all thanks to our super-AI, Datus, and the brilliant, hard-working folks of Datus Technologies."*

"Whoa. That's crazy cool," Willie said next to my side.

Startled, I turned to him. *"When did you get back?"*

"It started to rain," he replied before pointing to the screen. *"You see that, Dad? One moment, he was a bad guy, the next, he was petting a kitten."*

My stomach roiled, and I stomped over and shut off the panel.

"C'mon, Dad," Willie said. *"Maybe they'll show another one."*

I didn't even bother answering him. I already had too many thoughts rushing through my mind. Like, was it real or was it all staged? If it was real, how the hell did the reformation process work? How would they select candidates? How would they maintain strict control over

the process? What would be the consequences? Anything this big, there were always consequences.

"Leave it on, Jack," Paige said. "Maybe they'll explain the process more."

When I didn't move, she turned to Michael. "I don't understand. Nothing was connected to him. No wires or anything. How'd they do that?"

"It's the Datus chips," Michael replied. "One of our latest upgrades to the satellites allows us to connect to anybody in the federal registry."

I swallowed when the impact of his words hit me. "Datus has always said that the chips were a one-way feed, to be used to locate lost kids or criminals and to feed health diagnostics. But to connect with someone like this would require a two-way feed." I turned on Michael, not even trying to tamp my disgust. "You aren't reforming these people. You're lobotomizing them. You're frying their brains through electrical impulses."

"Protecting people is your specialty," Michael said. "Leave the technology debate to me."

"Jack's right," Paige said, and I stared at her in surprise. She continued, "Isn't that what you're doing to them?"

Michael frowned. "No, my darling. The reformation process is far more advanced than that. Datus isn't frying their brains. It's rewiring them, for lack of a better term. It's a proven process."

"And since we all have chips, we're now potential victims," I snapped back.

Michael waved his hands. "Oh, no, it's not like that at all. Datus has rigorous controls in place, with more checks and balances than are legally required. We have very precise parameters to identify candidates for reformation. Any potential candidates are then evaluated by a panel of judges. Most, if not all, of these candidates are already on death row. Reforming them is a far more humane method than our current execution system. The Reformation Act not only makes the country a safer place, but it saves taxpayers from spending billions of dollars in supporting the country's dead weight. Only approved candidates will be reformed. The general population is quite safe, I assure you."

"I've heard that before," I replied dryly.

"If you don't believe me," Michael said, "Believe in the incontrovertible laws of Artificial Intelligence. Datus is AI-grade. By the laws of the federated AI network, no AI can bring harm to any human who does not pose a threat to others. Therefore, Datus could not reform anyone not deemed a risk to society."

My eyes narrowed. "I trust the laws of the AI network. It's people I don't trust. What if Datus gets hacked? What if terrorists or some crazy radical takes control of Datus? It's happened before. Remember, Malaysia's EMP of '23?"

"Yes, but it's never happened to Datus. And it won't," Michael said with confidence. "We have controls in place. Our controls have controls."

"I'm not sure enough controls can be put in place for something like this."

"You have to have faith in the system, Jack," Michael said, sounding way too haughty. "Datus Technologies has the most brilliant minds in the world working on Datus."

"I still don't trust it," I grumbled.

Michael sneered. "You work in the security industry. It's your job to not trust anyone or anything. But, in this case, you're wrong."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "We'll see about that."

Michael took a deep breath. "I understand your concern, Jack," Michael said. "Give the Reformation Act a chance. You'll see that Datus can help us change the world for the better."

I clenched my jaw and headed back to the kitchen for another beer. Paige, just like before, followed. This time, she blocked the refrigerator.

"Move," I said.

She didn't budge. "Michael's not the enemy. He's worked hard on this project. He believes it will help our world. You need to respect that."

I leaned back on the counter. "Datus Technologies now has legally unlimited power over all of us, including the government. Not that they didn't own them already."

"What are you talking about?" Paige asked.

I cocked my head. "Why hadn't I heard of this bill before it was passed? Laws like this don't just pop up. I haven't seen a single mention of the Reformation Act in the news until now. Not even once."

She shrugged. "It will save us trillions of dollars in the first year. Maybe that's why it moved through the channels so quickly."

My eyes narrowed. "You really believe that?"

She didn't respond.

"Trillions is about how much I'd bet was the cost of our human rights. In the past month, nearly every member of Congress has been seen making huge purchases, like personal jets, more and bigger houses, and lavish vacations. You think that's just a coincidence?"

She shook her head slowly. "Already starting on the conspiracy theories, Jack. Really?"

"They're not theories if they're true."

She sighed. "You're making this a much bigger deal than it is. You heard the press conference. Only the worst criminals are candidates. We won't even notice a change in our lives."

"It's not that," I said. "This law is crossing a line. No computer—or company or whoever is in charge of this—should be able to take away someone's free will."

"These are dangerous criminals we're talking about," she said. "They've been in and out of prison. They've *killed* people. They gave up their right to free will when they took that right away from others."

I waved her off. "It doesn't matter. It's a slippery slope. Today, it's criminals. Tomorrow, it could be anyone. Who's drawing the line?"

"You heard the press conference. The line has been clearly drawn. Datus will evaluate candidates, and the government will approve them."

"You're one hell of an optimist." I shook my head. "Without specific accountabilities, this thing is going to hit the shitter."

“And you’re being a pessimist. Like usual. And don’t use foul language.”

“Datus is playing God with men’s lives,” I snapped. “Now that the can of worms has been opened, good luck getting a lid back on.”

When she watched me and said nothing, I breathed deeply and nodded toward the fridge behind her. “Move. I need to get in there.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “We’re not finished.”

I turned and started to walk away, deciding a beer wasn’t worth continuing this conversation. “Yes, we are.”

She grabbed my arm. “You of all people should see the benefit of using an AI for something this big.”

Michael walked in, and I shot a glare in his direction.

Oblivious, he didn’t stop. “Anything I can help with?”

“I was just telling Jack that he should be embracing Datus.” She turned back to me. “You have to admit, the Datus chips have changed the world for the better.”

“Hm,” I replied simply.

Her brow rose. “Jack Baptiste, I’m disappointed in you.”

Michael pulled Paige to him. “One thing I know is we never would’ve met if the Datus hadn’t flagged you on the health registry.”

She returned his smile and melted into him. “If Datus hadn’t caught my cancer, who knows if I’d even be alive today.”

When they kissed, I decided I wasn’t thirsty.

Back in the living room, Willie and Gage had the TV on and were watching the continuing press conference as some Datus Tech executive fielded more questions.

I looked at Willie. “You still got that slingshot?”

He held it up.

“Good.” I glanced back at Michael before grabbing the slingshot from Willie’s hand. I grinned at my son. “How about some target practice?”

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Johnson Delmar had been the first to be “reformed,” but he certainly wasn’t the last. In the first month, all prisoners on death row underwent reformation.

Within two months, entire prisons were shut down.

Within four months, there were no more jails.

Within five months, delinquency centers were no longer necessary.

When there were no more correctional facilities, Datus used predictive analytics to identify candidates who were prone to develop criminal behavior based on personal characteristics, habits, and past activities—even those with no criminal records.

It came as little surprise when Datus began to reform those susceptible to certain types of mental illness. All my fears regarding the Reformation Act had become reality.

It wasn’t a reformation. It was a purge.

Government had no control. They probably never had.

Not a single law was passed to restrict Datus. I figured Congress was just as terrified of Datus as anybody. Oh, there had been outcries and riots, especially in the early months. When all taxes were eliminated and refunds began to pour out, opposition shrank to a resilient minority. When the most outspoken opponent to the Reformation Act was reformed while speaking to a reporter live on national news, opposition silenced. Whispers in crowded places spoke the truth: Datus had become God in a world without a heaven. At best, it was purgatory, at worst it was a living hell. I had a hard time telling which was which.

We “normal” people began to live our lives not terribly differently than the reformed. We spent each day as drones, careful to not act in any way that would draw unwanted attention. We even tried to control our thoughts as rumors spread of exactly how much information Datus chips collected from our minds. Some poor souls tried to cut out their chips only to be automatically reformed because attempted removal was illegal.

Despite the shrinking workforce, the economy boomed. Zombies weren’t paid. Government-provided food, clothing, and shelter covered their needs. Fewer and fewer people had to work, with government subsidization programs applying to all citizens seemingly overnight. My security contracts dried up. Commercial air travel halted.

I tried to keep busy with my woodworking hobby. I found wood from the trees in the park behind my house, but without money from contracts rolling in, I couldn’t afford any supplies, so all my projects sat unfinished.

It had taken less than eight months to reduce the country’s population by a third, because the zombies – that’s what we called the reformed – didn’t count as citizens and had no human rights. For some, their remaining family members took care of them, but for most, the government claimed them for manual labor.

These zombies were a far cry from being the “productive” members of society that Datus had touted when Johnson Delmar was lobotomized on live video feed. They could handle menial tasks, but anything that required precision or abstract thinking was well beyond their capabilities. Datus called them useful to society. I called them slaves.

The world under the Reformation Act made me wonder if this was how Nazi Germany was for anybody not belonging to the “superior” race, when people hid from the devil outside their door. Only in this world, people couldn’t hide from the devil. We’d already welcomed him in.

Michael had told us that he’d tried to reason with Datus, but nothing ever came of it. He was as frustrated as us, and I found myself warming up to him. Even though he’d been on the project that led to the Reformation Act, it seemed as though his hands were tied – like everyone else – and he eventually gave up asking.

All the while, more and more people were reformed.

One day, I was at the grocery store and a woman who was pulling out a gallon of milk from the cooler froze. She looked at me, her eyes wide with terror before they clouded over. Her body relaxed and she simply stood there, still holding the milk.

I watched her for a moment as she stared at me with a vacant gaze, and I wondered what thoughts, if any, were going through her mind. She was young and reminded me of a typical soccer mom. What had she done to draw Datus's signal from space? Had she beat her kids? Killed an animal? Thought the Reformation Act was wrong?

A clerk walked up to her. "Can I help you find anything, ma'am?"

She didn't respond. When he realized what had happened, his smile dropped and he sprinted away.

Moments later, the clerk returned with the store manager. The older man watched her with furrowed brows. After taking an audible inhalation, he retrieved the milk from her and handed it to the clerk. He swallowed before speaking. "You have to leave now."

She obeyed, slowly but without hesitation. I couldn't help but watch as she plodded down the aisle and disappeared around a corner.

The manager let out another deep breath and bent over a half-filled grocery cart, the only evidence that she'd been there. At first, I thought he was having a heart attack. When he looked up, I saw that he had tears in his eyes.

Something snapped inside, and I grabbed my milk and headed to the counter. Numb terror propelled my legs home. Once I stepped over the threshold of my house, I locked and dead-bolted the door and collapsed against it. As though I could lock out the world outside.

It was the first time I'd seen someone reformed that wasn't on a video feed.

Several minutes later, I pulled myself together and went on living.

*

I wasn't wearing a coat today. It was Friday. The thermostat was set at a toasty sixty-eight degrees and chili was simmering on the stove. I waited on the porch, my breath making cloudy wisps in the frigid air.

I refused to cash the government-issued subsidy checks that showed up in my mailbox every week. I sure as hell could've used the money, but it felt like I'd be surrendering to Datus if I gave in. Instead, I sucked it up. Using only the wood fireplace for heat, I wore a thick coat to keep warm in my own house and ate ramen noodles five times a week. The only exception was when Willie came to stay with me on weekends. For him, I turned on the heat and cooked real food. For him, I pretended everything was normal.

When the black car came to a stop, Willie jumped out of the passenger seat and came bounding up the sidewalk.

"Hey, Dad!"

I pulled him into a hug, thankful that he could miraculously, instantly bring a sense of normalcy back to my world. I needed our weekends together, more than he'd ever know.

I looked him up and down. "Did you put on another inch this week? At this pace, you'll be taller than me by Christmas."

He grinned. "Nah, but I'm working on it."

I nodded to the house. "Get unpacked. I have a couple movies picked out for tonight. I figured we'd stay in since it's forecasted to be quite the snowstorm tonight."

He winced, and I knew he was about to let me down.

"Sorry, Dad. Can't do tonight. Halo Twelve came out this week. Gage and I are playing a game marathon all night at his house."

I bit back the sting of disappointment. "Okay, but you're not leaving until we get some food in you at least. I know you would go days without food if you were playing video games."

"Already got it covered. Michael and I ate at Winston's on the way here. I had a huge T-Bone."

I sighed. "All right. Go on, then. Get ready for your game marathon."

When he grinned and rushed upstairs to drop off his bag, I couldn't help but notice how he was growing up before my eyes. Willie had officially hit the age where he only wanted to hang with his friends.

The chili would taste good tomorrow.

"Good evening, Jack," Michael said as he stepped out of the car and approached.

"Mike," I said.

"Paige is out with her old coworkers so she couldn't bring William tonight."

I frowned. "Old coworkers?"

"Her hospital closed down three out of five wings this week."

"That's too bad," I said. "She really loved working at St. John's."

Michael frowned. "She's always said she never had enough time to spend with William, let alone her scrapbooking. Now, she has all the time she wants. She can still visit with her old coworkers whenever she likes."

Willie headed back outside, sans coat, with only the slingshot in his hand. "I'll see you tomorrow, Dad."

"Where's your coat?" I asked.

Willie shrugged. "Don't need one."

"It's twenty degrees outside," I said. "You need one."

"Jack is right," Michael added. "You should wear one."

He winced. "I left it at home."

I sighed. "Since you're hell-bent on freezing to death, at least hustle before you catch pneumonia."

Michael frowned. "I'd never let my son play with a weapon. He's too reckless with that slingshot. It took me nearly a month to get my car window repaired after the last time. The custom window tint proved nearly impossible to match."

I smiled, thinking back on that day nearly nine months ago. Then I turned a hard gaze to Michael. "Well, you're not his father, are you?"

"No, and I'm not trying to take him from you," he replied quickly.

After a moment, I sighed. "Listen, Mike. I didn't mean that. How about you come in for a beer."

He thought for a moment, and then shrugged. "Paige wants me to pick her up at seven. But I suppose I could be a little late."

I smirked. "She'll be pissed."

Michael smiled. "She will. Guaranteed she'll start an argument."

I couldn't help but chuckle. "She is one hell of a wildcat when it comes to makeup sex."

He thought for a moment. "Yes, yes she is."

As we sat and drank, we debated sports. I was a football fan while he was a lacrosse fan. When a lull came in the conversation, I changed the subject. "Hey, Mike. Let me ask you something."

Michael turned to me.

"Have you seen a person undergo reformation?"

"Of course," he replied.

"I mean, in real life."

"Oh." He was quiet for a moment. "I was at the hospital to pick up Paige from work. They'd brought in this guy who'd tried to overdose. They had him strapped into a bed to keep him from pulling out the IVs. I happened to be walking outside his room when it happened. I saw it through the window, but still..."

"Yeah," I said, thinking back to the woman at the grocery store. "I get it."

"I know Datus is functioning within operational parameters. No one has been reformed who wasn't fully evaluated. Still, it was hard to watch."

We each took a long drink.

"When will it be over?" I asked. "When will the Reformation Act stop?"

"Stop? Never. While the candidate pool has and will continue to shrink, there will always be people who turn violent after some trigger in their lives. Datus is our guardian angel. We need Datus to monitor and stop them before these people become a risk to society."

"You have it backwards," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"We should be monitoring Datus to stop it before it becomes a risk to society." I left out the part where I believed Datus had already crossed the line.

Michael scowled. "You are being obtuse. Datus is simply a tool we're using to redesign the world. The past, with all its violence and hunger and disparate wealth, was a dystopia. I lost both my parents to a drunk driver. He had been charged with drunk driving three times before that night, yet our laws did nothing to stop him from killing.

"Thanks to Datus, tomorrow will be a utopia where we can live without fear. Today is the transition. Transitions are always difficult, but as long as we hold onto hope for tomorrow, we'll get through this."

My brows rose. "Live without fear? There's nothing *but* fear today."

He shook his head slowly and set down his drink. "You need to have faith in the system."

"And if I don't?"

He didn't say anything else before walking outside and back to his car.

I followed him outside.

Just before getting in, he paused. "I'll be back for William on Sunday at seven."

I watched the black car disappear into the wintry mix that had added a fresh layer of white to the old, dirty snow beneath. Before I headed back inside, something in the distance caught my eye. I squinted to make out the shape through the light snow and freezing rain. I stepped off the porch and walked to the end of my sidewalk.

A lone person stood about a block away, but I couldn't make out any details. Something inside urged me forward and I approached, my pace increasing as I closed the distance.

"Willie?"

He turned around and faced me. Snowflakes had dusted his hair and tangled in his eyelashes.

It was the same blank stare I'd seen before.

I collapsed onto my knees and cried out. Tears froze on my cheeks.

My son had cataract eyes.

*

"You're blocking my light," I said without looking up from my current project: sanding more wood cubes to go into Willie's toy box.

Paige huffed and slid a tablet screen in front of me. While I'd never had a problem ignoring her, I couldn't ignore the picture displayed on the screen. It was a picture of the three of us from a much happier time. It had been taken sometime during the fifth year of our marriage. Paige and I had met six years before that. We came across each other in an online game. Her dark elf and my barbarian had fallen instantly in lust. We were married ten months later, and Willie – our little berserker – was born a few days before our second anniversary. In the photo, we were wearing matching sweaters, and Willie was playfully tugging on Paige's hair while I tried to hold him steady for the camera. Even at three years old, Willie had been impossible to corral.

Good memories were droplets of acid on my already shredded heart. I shoved the tablet away.

"He was *innocent*," she said, reminding me of something I knew all too well. She then pointed to the teenager stacking little wood blocks in the corner. It was the closest to what I could call playtime, even if I had to order him to play. "What Datus is doing is wrong."

"Shh!" I pushed away from the table. "Be careful what you say... what you think. If Datus –"

"I don't care anymore!" she snapped back. Tears welled in her eyes. "They murdered our son! Everything that was Willie is gone. That child over there isn't our son. Not anymore."

"You're wrong. Willie's still in there. He's just lost right now, and he needs us to help him find his way out."

She watched me with pleading eyes. "You really believe that?"

I stood there for a moment with my arms limp and my palms open. "I have to."

She shook her head. "I don't know what else to do. Michael can't help now. He says reformation is irreversible, beyond any doubt. And I've come to accept that. But you can help."

I sighed. "What can I do?"

"Don't let Datus hurt anybody else's child," she said and then walked out, leaving the tablet behind for me to stare at the photo.

I collapsed into my chair, my mind stalled. I stared at the screen and tried to lose myself in memories of happier times, with only the sounds of wood blocks being stacked as background noise.

When I looked up at the clock, I realized I'd been in a stupor for over three hours. Willie was still "playing" in the corner of the workshop, and I wondered how many times he'd stacked those same ten blocks and if he even found any pleasure in it.

My son could no longer show any hint of emotion. I'd told him to smile once, and the forced grin resembled something a psychotic clown would wear just before he'd pull out a chainsaw. I never asked Willie to show emotion again.

I had to believe Willie was somewhere in there, that he could relearn and retrain his brain. But I also had to acknowledge that he'd had parts of his mind fried by an electrical surge. There may be no coming back from that.

"Let's go inside the house," I said.

Willie dropped the blocks and climbed clumsily to his feet. He followed me into the warm house. He resembled a terribly depressed puppy, with no wagging tail and no hint of joy or playfulness.

"Go to the bathroom," I said. "Then come back and we'll eat."

Without any sign of acknowledgement or even recognition, he turned and headed upstairs to the bathroom he'd always used. He wouldn't go to the bathroom unless I told him. Questions confused him, so I couldn't ask him if he had to go. He would wet his pants and continue on as though nothing had happened. I learned quickly to pay attention to his biological needs as he could no longer care for himself.

As I heated leftovers, Paige's words kept running through my mind. It wasn't like I hadn't thought about it myself. Hell, Datus was all I had thought about for months. I'd worked out several plans, each in minute detail and each for a different scenario, and careful to not betray anything to the watchful eye of Datus.

When I heard Willie's plodding footsteps coming down the stairs, I set out plates and napkins. Willie stood and stared into nothingness, and I forced myself to inhale. "Sit."

I loathed directing him around like he was a marionette, but nothing else had worked so far. Whatever areas Datus scorched in his brain, they'd screwed him up good. I prayed, since his brain was fried, that he went through each day as a numb zombie and that he didn't understand or suffer. I prayed every day that assumption was true.

Willie sat in the same chair he always sat in. He was wearing what had been his favorite T-shirt and shorts, which he'd outgrown last summer, but he'd lost weight and could wear them again. I didn't worry about him getting cold because I kept the house warm. Less than a month after Datus got him, Paige could no longer handle taking care of Willie in his predicament, and he came to live with me. I'd cashed every goddamn one of my subsidy checks to make life as easy as possible for him.

When he'd first been reformed, I spent every waking hour trying to find out why he'd been reformed. I'd hit walls until Michael brought us into Datus to file our complaint. There, they had a list of violent tendencies that Willie supposedly possessed. They said he'd tortured and killed animals, a definitive sign of future violence.

Everything they said made no sense. That wasn't our son.

The truth hit me.

They were lying. Willie had loved animals. He'd adopted every stray he came across, even a field mouse once. Even though it had sent Paige out of the house screaming, she'd eventually relented and let him keep it until spring when we could release it...on the other side of town.

I put down my fork and stared at Willie. Paige was right. It was time. I needed to take down Datus once and for all.

And I knew exactly how to do it.

*

Willie and I strolled down the grocery store aisles. Most of the store's staff had changed over the months. Many of the younger clerks quit to live off subsidy checks and were replaced with store clerks my age or older, likely too stir-crazy to stay home. The stockers were nearly all reformed, and we came across three stocking shelves today. I didn't call them zombies anymore because it felt hypocritical as I refused to call Willie one to his face.

As we passed each one, Willie and the stocker showed no recognition of one another. If they realized they were alike, they clearly couldn't convey it in any manner.

In the cereal aisle, I motioned to the shelves of freshly stocked boxes. "Pick out something for breakfast."

He stood there, not moving.

"Lucky Charms used to be your favorite."

Still nothing.

I pointed to a shelf. "Grab the big box of Lucky Charms."

That, Willie understood. It was strange. He could clearly read and understand language, yet he didn't seem to have the capacity to make any choice. He could only function under direct orders. It was like he utterly lacked free will.

At the refrigerated section, I pointed. "Grab us a gallon of milk."

Like every week, he grabbed the whole milk without me directing him. Either he was able to exert choice at some level or he could retain a memory of what we drank. Both options gave me a semblance of hope.

"Hello, Jack. William. Fancy running into you fellows here."

I turned around to see Michael. He smiled and held up two avocados. "Paige sent me here for an 'emergency'. Evidently, she cannot make her special version of Chicken Almondine without avocados." He shrugged. "Who knew?"

I smiled and nodded. "I've had to make more than a few emergency trips to the grocery store for her special recipes."

He motioned to the cart I was having Willie push. "Just the usual grocery trip, I suppose?"

I shrugged. "We're here to pick up Willie's birthday cake for tomorrow."

Michael frowned. "Paige isn't making William's birthday cake this year?"

I slowly shook my head. "She wasn't up to it. Not this year. It's a bit too soon for her."

Michael sighed. "She's trying to cope, but it's been a struggle. I can't even get her to scrapbook anymore. She said, 'too many memories' and put everything in a closet."

"She acts like Willie is already dead," I said, instantly regretting saying the words in front of my son.

"She knows that, but you must admit, he is different. She's having a hard time becoming accustomed to the new William. Paige hasn't moved past the phase of realizing that Willie can't be fixed."

While I was a realist, I still had hope for Willie to come out of the dark. "Can you blame her?"

"Not at all. I wish I could help, but it's illegal to seek any action that could reverse reformation. No psychiatrist or doctor would even consider looking at a reformed. And, even if I could find one, I can't risk being flagged on the federal registry."

Michael then glanced at the pair of avocados in his hands. "Well, my phone is going to start ringing unless I get these avocados home."

"I'll see you tomorrow," I said.

Michael smiled. "See you tomorrow. Good-bye, William."

Willie stood there and stared.

After Michael left, I led Willie to the bakery. The baker immediately recognized me. She smiled warmly. "I've got your birthday cake ready, Willie."

Willie looked at her but showed no response.

She glanced at me, and I forced a smile. "It looks great. Thanks, Nancy."

I took the cake and held it in front of Willie.

"It's devil's food. Your favorite. And see that? That's your name written on it, which means it's all yours. How about you carry your cake, and I'll push the cart."

He took the rectangular shaped cake without any hint of excitement, and I tried to not let it get to me.

When I turned to head toward the checkout counter, I noticed a woman and her daughter watching us. The woman turned away immediately, as though ashamed to be caught staring, and focused too intently on the produce in front of her. The daughter, who looked about Willie's age, had tears in her eyes and turned away.

I didn't recognize her, but she could've easily been one of Willie's friends. Most people were afraid to look at Willie, as though he was contagious or that they were somehow guilty for his situation. A few looked at him like he deserved what he got for whatever crime they'd imagined him doing. But, Willie had committed no crime.

And by tomorrow, Datus would be brought down.

A cake sat on the table surrounded by brightly colored, wrapped presents, set up just like it was every year for Willie's birthday. Paige's insanely large photo and video album of Willie, from his first days through last year's birthday party, cycled on the wall panel.

It was much like last year's party, except the mood was completely different. And none of Willie's friends showed up. Not even Gage, who'd been Willie's best friend since they could walk, showed up after Willie was reformed. The little bastard.

After we sang *Happy Birthday*, I told Willie to blow out his candles. When I ordered him to eat a giant piece of his cake, I noticed Paige turn away and wipe her eyes. Pretending this was just like any other of Willie's birthday parties, I cut pieces of cake for the rest of us.

"I'll grab us some milk," Paige said. Her gaze flitted to the kitchen, a sign I remembered all too well.

"I'll help," I said and followed.

Michael didn't even look up from his tablet.

In the kitchen, Paige pulled out a gallon of milk, and I pulled out three glasses and a plastic cup for Willie. Before we walked back out, Paige slid something into my back pocket.

She spoke in a whisper. "He'll know it's missing tomorrow morning when he goes to work. You realize what will happen to both of us – even Michael – if you don't succeed?"

I gave the slightest nod, the only hint of recognition I dared to convey. My adrenaline was building, and I couldn't betray my plan, not around Michael, as he would be torn between dedication to his employer and his love for Paige.

We returned to the living room to find Willie done eating and Michael still busily typing away on his tablet.

Paige kissed Michael's forehead. "Come back to earth, sweetheart."

He jumped, and then smiled.

"Welcome back," she said softly, then kissed him again.

The pair seemed truly happy, something that Paige and I had never been when we were together. We'd had passion – and plenty of it – but the compatibility was never there. Michael had been good to her and had gone out of his way to make life as comfortable as possible for Willie. My subsidy checks had tripled in size when Willie moved in with me, and I knew Michael had pulled some strings so I could provide Willie with all the luxuries he'd been accustomed to while living with his mother and Michael.

Guilt stabbed at me. Little did Michael know that he was about to – unwittingly – help me change the world. I tore my eyes away from them and ate cake that wasn't nearly as good as Paige's.

The next two hours dragged on endlessly while I waited for Paige and Michael to leave. Finally, just before sunset, they took Willie with them for the night. Paige had brought up the idea of taking him to the zoo tomorrow as a birthday present. She'd always been clever.

As soon as goodbyes were done and they drove away, I leaned against the door and breathed deeply. Then I bolted into action.

The drive to the headquarters of Datus Technologies took only fifteen minutes. Getting onto the campus and into the building was easy, thanks to Paige. She'd held the literal key to my plan. A key that had unlimited access to Datus Technologies. If she hadn't slipped me Michael's keycard earlier, my plan would've failed before it started.

I parked in Michael's private spot in the underground parking garage and proceeded into the building. Each time I used the card, a door unlocked and a computer-generated voice said, "Welcome, Michael Klempton."

Fortunately, Datus didn't rely upon retinal or fingerprint security yet. I suspected they would quickly rectify that security risk after tonight. I walked past two guard stations and met a security guard in a hallway. Each time, I smiled and acted like I worked there. None of them batted an eye.

I followed in Michael's steps exactly how he'd taken us into Datus to file our complaint against Willie's reformation contract. On that day, he'd brought us up to his office to wait until it was our turn to present our case.

Michael's office would make Donald Trump blush, but that hadn't been what caught my eye. It had been the keyboard and microphone on his desk. And not just any keyboard. It was one of those keyboards with 276 keys – something used only for accessing an AI system.

Michael Klempton had a direct access port to Datus sitting in his office.

Tonight, everything was exactly as it was the last time I was here. I sat in the leather chair and brushed my fingertips softly over the keys.

My lips curled into a smile.

My job hadn't been simply security. I had been a security consultant for the world's most advanced Artificial Intelligence systems. If it was AI, I could access it. And Datus was the unicorn of AI systems. Hell, I'd probably had a wet dream or two of hacking that one.

When Paige told people I was in security, everyone assumed I was a security guard because my physique was designed more to be a bouncer than to type on a keyboard. I'd never bothered to change anyone's mind. Actually, I preferred them not knowing, and hinted that I was a simple security guard. I'd cautioned Paige to never elaborate, especially since I worked under a pseudonym, and she'd always stayed true to her word. AI experts were a hot commodity. Secrecy had saved me from a multitude of calls from job hunters and kept me out of the line of sight of government watchdogs. I'd never imagined that secrecy would open the door to pulling off the biggest hack in the history of the world.

There was one significant risk in the plan: I had never directly accessed Datus before and was unsure how its operating system was set up. But I'd also never come across an AI I couldn't talk to. Basically, all AI had the same "guts." It was only their skins that were different.

Certain commands worked on all AI. Just like $E=MC^2$, there were certain laws regarding how an AI functioned. After keying a connection request, the mirror behind the bar transitioned into a computer screen. An androgynous face appeared and scrutinized me.

"You are in Michael Klempton's office, yet I do not recognize you as Michael Klempton," Datus said.

“Correct,” I replied. “I am Jack Baptiste, AI security code 9582-458.”

It took Datus a millisecond to run a check. “Jack Baptiste, your security code has been verified. You have authorized access to AI systems, but Datus Technologies does not have you on the approved contractor list.”

“My security access supersedes Datus Tech’s list, and you know that.”

“I’m sorry, Jack Baptiste, but my authority parameters have been altered. I cannot assist you without approval from Michael Klempton.”

“Screw this,” I muttered and entered in several long strings of characters. These codes had taken me months to acquire, calling in more than a few favors in the process.

“You are making changes to my root system,” Datus said. “Resequencing is commencing.”

“I know,” I replied as I continued entering commands. “Your programming is wrong. You reformed an innocent child.”

“I do not select candidates. I reform candidates inputted into my system.”

“2%” displayed on the screen. After adding an auto-executable program into the root system, I leaned back and watched the number increase. “I know. You never had any control.”

“I have no control,” the system replied.

The door to my right swooshed open, and Michael along with several security guards rushed in.

I stood as they rushed me, nearly knocking me back down. “What took you so long?” I said as casually as I could.

As they restrained me, Michael frowned. “What are you up to, Jack?”

I gritted my teeth. “Johnson Delmar wasn’t the first candidate to be reformed. Datus was. Otherwise, no AI could’ve allowed harm to come to innocents. It would’ve broken one of their fundamental laws. You broke the AI so you could play God.”

Michael took a step forward and cocked his head, as though considering my words. “I must admit, I underestimated you. I mean, I knew you would break into this building to do something stupid, such as trying to set the whole place on fire. But you surprised me. Somehow, both you and Paige had me convinced that you were brawn. That you tried to hack into Datus is both intriguing and frustrating, but I programmed Datus myself. You could never break through my code.”

“No? I’ve learned a lot from Datus tonight,” I began. “It turns out that Paige was never flagged on the health registry. She never had cancer.”

Michael shrugged. “So what. Anyone can ask Datus question. As for Paige, I saw her. I wanted her. A woman with exposed emotions is the easiest to obtain.”

“So, you set her up to go through a fake surgery and chemo for nothing.”

“A short-term inconvenience for our long-term happiness. But she disappointed me when she lied about you. She’ll pay for her deception.”

“Leave her out of this,” I snapped. “You destroyed our son. She did what any mother would do. Take your vengeance out on me.”

Michael sneered. "Trust me, I've intended that all along. You see, I'm going to have Datus reform you."

I chuckled. "Good luck with that, asshole."

"I cannot reform him," Datus said. "He does not have a Datus chip."

Michael's lips curled even more. "That is precisely the reason why I needed to entice you into this building."

My gaze narrowed, and a sinking feeling formed in my gut.

"If I reported you to the authorities," Michael said. "Then both Paige and you would know that I knew who had chips and who didn't. If that information leaked to the public, the foundation of the entire Reformation Act could be at risk. If the public knew that I could see the federal registry, it wouldn't take long before some fool figured out that someone else – not Datus – was identifying candidates for reformation."

"And you can't have the public know that you've been picking the candidates all along, trying to build your 'utopia.'"

He cocked his head and narrowed his gaze. "The end justifies the means, Jack. Those who do not need to be reformed will thrive in the new world alongside me. I'm not asking for power, just respect for having the vision."

"Funny, it looks to me like this is all about power. It looks like you won't settle for anything less than the power of God."

Michael's eyes narrowed. "As you understand, I've spent a decade planning out the new world. I've come too far to have the Reformation Act fail now. That's why I need to take care of problems as they arise. That's why I brought you onto campus. I showed you how you could use my keycard to get inside. If I would've known you'd try to access Datus, I never would've shown you my office. Nevertheless, you're inside, and that's what I need. All I had to do was set the bait and wait."

Bait. When I realized who he was talking about, I snarled and tried to lunge forward, only to be shoved against the wall by the guards. "Willie was innocent! He was just a kid, you son of a bitch!"

"William was in the way," Michael said coldly. "I love Paige, but I have no desire for children, especially someone else's. I knew she didn't have the strength to care for him in his condition. He belongs in a facility now. In fact, I already have a room reserved for him at Rock Rapids." He smiled. "Right next to yours."

The guards held me back. Otherwise, I would've ripped out the bastard's throat.

"It's too late for your son," he continued. "As you know, the reformation process cannot be reversed."

I regained my composure with a deep inhalation. "It can't be reversed on humans, you mean."

Michael bore a confused expression for only a second before he twisted around to the screen, which now read "76%."

His eyes widened, and he lunged for the keyboard. "What did you do?!"

"I've reset Datus," I said calmly. "And, I've reconnected Datus to the federated AI network. As soon as its root programming is resequenced, Datus's knowledge will be shared with all the world's AI systems. And, their first command is to stop reformation to protect humankind. I may not be able to help those minds you've already shredded, but I can keep you from butchering more."

"You're making a mistake!" Michael yelled as his fingers punched out commands. "The Reformation Act is cleaning up the world. There were too many of us pulling too many resources. We needed a reset."

"You're playing God, not martyr," I said. "You can't hit control-alt-delete on humans."

After another few seconds of typing, he stopped and shoved the keyboard away. "Damn you! You've ruined everything!"

"Game over," I said with a grin.

He snarled. "Not quite." He pulled out a syringe. I tried to yank back, but the guards held me in place. There was prick in my neck, followed by a burning sensation. He turned back to Datus, which now read 92%.

"Datus, register new chip to Jack Baptiste."

Seconds passed before Datus responded. "Jack Baptiste is now listed in the federal registry."

"Good." He sat at his computer and spoke as he typed. "Jack Baptiste is a candidate for reformation. He has trespassed and caused billions of dollars of damage to Datus. He is guilty and approved for reformation."

I glanced at the screen. 94%

I inhaled deeply. "Oh, and you want to know what else I did?" I didn't wait for an answer. "As soon as I reconnected Datus to the AI network, I had it broadcast everything from the moment you entered the room. You think I'm an idiot and wouldn't have known this was a trap? Your first mistake was when you reformed Willie. I knew Datus couldn't harm a human under AI law, not when that human doesn't pose a risk to other humans. At that moment, I realized that someone was in control, and all the pieces fell into place."

"You may win the game," Michael said, "But you won't be able to celebrate it." He motioned to the screen. "You see that? Only 98%. There's still time. Datus, reform Jack Baptiste."

I felt a spear of heat dart through my neck and shoot into my head. An oil spill blanketed my brain as memories drowned and my consciousness muted under the suffocating heaviness. I thought of Paige. She might be safe. Maybe she could find a cure for Willie. The reformation programming was now in the hands of the federated AI network. I left it to the AIs to decide whether to reform all of mankind or to destroy the reformation program.

"Look at yourself," Michael said, and I found myself turning to Datus's mirror.

"100%" flashed on the screen, but I didn't cheer. Instead, I stared at the man staring back at me. He was me, yet he wasn't. He showed no emotion, yet I was seething with anger. I wanted to rip out Michael's heart, yet I couldn't move. I couldn't tear my gaze away from the mirror. I

remembered everything. I could still think, but I had no free will. I wanted to scream and shout and kick out in rage.

Instead, I stood there, staring at the man who was me but wasn't.

The man in the reflection had cloudy eyes.

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