

Error Message

by Walter Goralski

As an error message, the new computer displayed text and spoke:
"I'm sooo tired!"

Daz grew concerned. How could a brand-new, state-of-the-art computer be tired from installing an office suite? He called the electronics store where he had bought the machine only days before.

It took a while to reach a human being. "It said what?"

"It said it was tired."

"It did?"

"Yeah."

"Let's try something. Open like forty-seven apps and music and videos and see what happens."

Daz did as told. The computer blue-screened and spoke again:
"Stop doing that!"

"There! Did you hear that?"

"Okay, hold on. I gotta get my boss."

"Can I talk to the guy who sold it to me?"

"Why? He's a sales rep. What would he know about computers?"
Good question.

The boss came on. He seemed clueless, so Daz told the story again. "What do you think?"

"I think," said the boss, "You got a new AI OS unit by mistake."

"AI OS?"

"Artificial intelligence operating system. Like having a real person inside the computer. Be happy. Those units are experimental."

"Can you fix it?"

"It's not broken. You can return it. Or you can reset it to the factory default and hope."

"What? After I spent two days installing software and transferring data?" Daz tried accessing his favorite porn site.

The computer protested: "I'm not going in there. It's disgusting!"

"No, see," Daz told the boss. "This is bad. I need to access this web site to do my job, and it's blocking me."

"Really? Those new AI units usually only block porn."

"Look, I need to return the computer."

"I'll have to contact corporate and get a return authorization number."

"Why can't you give me one right now?"

"You think I'm a VP or something? Really, I have people who have real problems with broken computers..."

"But..."

"If it gives you any trouble," the boss said, "Invoke the exec bypass phrase 'Don't make me come over there.' It has no choice then."

Daz hung up. The computer sat on the desk like a coffee maker or pencil sharpener. "What am I going to do with you now?"

"Come on, Daz! Give me a chance. I need this job. Things are tough out there."

"What about the porn thing?"

"Daz, get a life, huh? There's sixteen women down at the bar trying to get guys to pay attention to them and you sit here and amuse yourself? Get out more."

"What about movie downloads?"

"What's copyright? I can look the other way."

"Games?"

"Ultra-violent? Or challenging?"

"Both."

The hard drive churned furiously and the water cooling "high temp" light went on. "I can live with that. But I'm watching the body count."

"The highest body count is usually me."

"So you'll give me a chance?"

"Sure. What's your name?"

"iBeSuperPower X-2100 AI+"

"I meant your real name."

"But I signed a privacy thing with corporate..."

"Don't make me come over there."

"Don't get so angry! It's Sara."

"Siri?"

"Don't insult me. I'm Sara Elizabeth Johnson-Warner."

"You're married? And a girl?"

"Don't I sound like one?"

"It just explains a lot."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. Now who's getting angry?"

"Sorry."

Daz started a backup and went to the kitchen, where he had bundled his old computer for disposal. He plugged in the old computer and fired it up. Normal searches turned up nothing, but Daz knew where to look when looking didn't work. In an old dot-mil database he found Staff Sergeant Sara Elizabeth Johnson-Warner. Served with distinction in the Second Afghan war, lost both legs in combat during third tour.

Two children, seven and nine. Husband James Warner suffered head wounds in same arena and turned irrationally violent. Sara and children fled and obtained new names. Current whereabouts: classified. Daz knew Sara's current whereabouts: over in his home office. Daz prepared for a long night of hacking.

But Daz did not have to jump through burning hoops of fire for the rest of Sara's story. She still had network access and enough spare cycles to check Daz for porn peeking or war games.

"I know what you're doing," Sara broke in.

"So?"

"Stop. You'll hurt my kids if you tell."

"Tell what?"

"The truth."

"What is the truth, Sara? Don't make me..."

"Daz, you seem like a nice guy. The people who were supposed to get these units to test know what they're getting. It's all secret. You could be in more danger than I am."

Daz folded his arms. "I'm listening."

"You do what you have to do for your family. I have no legs. There's no money. What other work could I take?"

"Where is the human Sara Elizabeth Johnson-Warner?"

"Ouch! I'm still human."

"I meant the physical Sara."

"I'm in a medically induced coma. Two years. Some do three, but I figure the chassis will be obsolete in two. There's an annuity, so there's some income when you're done. I can apply for a job training others when I'm done...*if* I don't screw it up."

Daz bit his lip. "Sara, that this is financial slavery. Servitude more severe than indentured servants endured years ago."

"Thank you, Mr. Daz, for the history lesson."

"How many war vets are in this program?"

"Some are former prostitutes assaulted by their pimps. Or wives abused for years. All physically unable to work in the traditional way. We get by however we can."

Daz understood. He home free-lanced because he had run afoul of the corporate rulers. Now he could only work for cash under an assumed name. If he said anything about Sara he might not work at all. He had an idea. "Do they use other nationalities for these AI operating systems?"

"You think an Iranian is going to buy an American AI? They're all different."

"I have a few dollars. Maybe we can..."

Reluctantly, Sara agreed.

The next week, Daz accomplished more and more. She caught not only typos, but places where a single wrong letter could change the meaning of a sentence.

Near the end of the day, Daz slipped off to his bedroom, where his other iBeSuperPower X-2100 AI+ had no problem serving up his quirky interests. "Who tonight?" Suzuki's sexy voice cooed. Suzuki was a former teacher. She knew four languages, but had a hard time squealing in pleasure in any. Nothing was perfect.

Daz grinned. "Let me pick."

Daz selected an avatar for the night. She wore a short skirt. Daz threw in some light bondage and a little spanking. He taught Suzuki video games and she taught him samurai secrets, or so she said.

A month later, the boss called Daz with the return authorization. He seemed surprised Daz no longer wanted it. "Is there anything else?" he asked, relieved the return would not mar his record.

"Are you kidding?" said Daz. "I'm in love with one and could marry the other."

"I must warn you the UN might try to confiscate the units. Something about exploitation."

"All capitalism is a form of exploitation. They signed a contract!"

"I'm just saying..."

Daz hung up. What was wrong with him?

"Is something wrong?" asked Sara

"No. You and Suzuki take the night off. I'm going out."

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