

Fiction

The Closed System

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Adrenal glands primed, ears ringing, Sash opened eyes wide and choked. Braided cords filled her throat and nostrils. She pulled them out. Sash checked her general tracking implant. Habit. Five diodes glowed green beneath the skin of her right forearm. *Perfect health?* The ceramic cocoon was stifling, its transparent dome fogged in front of her face. Sash wiped at the steam; it peeled away. She stepped out of the pod and into the biotics lab. Bare feet found an icy floor. Chill air on bare skin intensified her awareness.

Ping ping ping

She scanned the room. *I was just . . . here?* Sash closed her eyes and regrouped. *Last memories . . . rendezvous in Ephyria System; right, yeah; pre-deployment brief with Max and local fixers, “drop in, neutralize the off-world tech, and get out”; blah blah; jury-rigged the rapid auto reinstigation protocols; whatever; breakfast with crew; blah blah; uploaded mind-state back—Shit. Uploaded mind-state back up.* Eyes opened, she stared at the floor for a time. *Adjusting to the cold? No.* Realizing. She stared at her toes a little longer. No reason, just delaying. *Did I get myself killed? I never do that.* Sash inspected her fingernails. *Too perfect. Well, shit.* She was prepared for such eventualities. She got over it. Sash turned to the steaming, humming biotics pod and blankly tapped the parted dome. It closed and began self-cleaning.

“Max?” Sash eyed the ceiling. She spoke to the room, “What is this? Load me into a new body and abandon ship? No one to welcome me back to life? Shit, Max . . . I don’t even get a robe? Even for you, that’s playing loose with operation protocols.”

She waited. Automatic systems blinked and whirred dumbly.

Wake up with a new body in an empty lab? Strange, but manageable. An unresponsive station AI? *Definitely not protocol.*

Ping ping ping

Sash found a console. She tapped the screen and it lit up. A soft orange glow appeared, encircling an aperture above the screen. It blinked and turned blue. A voice spoke from somewhere within the console. It was meticulously congenial, and synthetic at the edges. “Hello, Sash. I can see you but little else. Highly irregular. Starting diagnostics.”

“Max. Still running the station? You want to tell me what the fuck is up? If this is another prank . . .”

Max’s affectation was friendly, calm, and preternaturally precise. “What did they once say, Sash? If wishes were horses. I *was* running this show; but I appear to have been asleep. Moreover, I’m apparently locked out of the station’s systems. Seeing you through the console. But this rig’s AI-core is stuck in safe-mode. I can’t get anything else out of it. Amazing. I haven’t been shunted into a safe-moded AI-core since the Armitage Conflict. Sash, this is—embarrassing.”

Ping ping ping

Sash blinked and scanned the ceiling, then the console. “What the fuck, Max. I’m pretty certain I’ve got a new body and that I’m not . . . well . . . up to date. And you’re in . . . *fuckin’ safe-mode?*”

“Get yourself killed again, Sash?” The voice chuckled and sighed sympathetically, then continued in a more serious tone. “I’ve no idea why the rig is in this state. Throwing a core running a live AI into safe-mode is a last-resort countermeasure. It’s possible this facility was discovered and targeted. It’s possible they used electronic nerve agents, or a particularly sophisticated virus. We’re here to deal with contraband weaponry, after all. I can only guess. I’m no good to either of us stuck in this bolted-up AI-core—blind and deaf—locked in a box, so to speak. And—by the way—I can’t encode long-term memory to a safe-moded core. Read only, Sash.” Max paused.

Ping ping ping

Then continued, “You know the easy work-arounds as well as I. Transfer me to a jump-drive. Then format the AI-core—”

Rubbing her temples, Sash cut in, “—manually, from Engineering. And throw you back in. Checking stores and schematics now.” Sash smiled, leering, and added, “Hey, still have your *existing* memories, right, Max? Remember . . . how *you* got me killed in the Belt? Ya fuckin’ pee-see.”

The aperture’s glowing circumference flashed simpering pink. “Sash! No need for slurs. Now—you wouldn’t even *remember* the Belt operation if I hadn’t retrieved and so masterfully preserved your brain after the crash. I risked an interplanetary *incident*.” Synthetic chortling. And the ring went deep, honest blue. Max continued, “You know how I love working with you, Sash—all within mission parameters, of course. And I thought we’d agreed you weren’t going to take the Belt personally.”

Ping ping ping

“Yea. Fine, Max. *Sorry*.” Sash stared intently at the screen and went on, “No new memory, then? How long till reset? And what the *fuck* is that pinging?”

“Standard safe-mode guards. The AI-core will wipe short- and medium-term memory and put itself—and me—to sleep in eighteen point four minutes. In other words—get me on a clean jump-drive, Sash. Unless you’d like to have this conversation again.” Satisfied with Sash’s busy swishing and tapping, Max went on, “As for the alarm—no new information. But if you’d like another brute-force estimation from known quantities—eighty-six point three percent chance the alarm indicates a low-risk faulty subsystem.”

Ping ping ping

The voice feigned surprise and continued, “Given a seventy-nine point two percent chance that this station was recently evacuated—” Still working, Sash glowered and groaned. Max resumed, “As well as known faults with most likely installed equipment—seventy-six point nine percent chance the alarm indicates a false positive on a life-pod-bay interior door. Yes, we design these hard-coded indicators to annoy you biologicals. But, as you’ve not yet suffocated, I’d call this one low priority.”

Ping ping ping

Sash finished tapping. She huffed and said, “Corridors already open and yeah, this place still has good atmosphere. Stores have what we need. Going to grab a drive and some fucking clothes, then head to Engineering. ETA, maybe six minutes. Max, as soon as you get control, kill that alarm and turn the damn heat up.”

The aperture’s blue ring oscillated. Max affected dry sarcasm, “Of course, Sash. Checking logs, signals, and fields can wait. Shall I run you a bath, too?”

Sash left the console. “Do it all, darling!”

The voice called after her, “Twelve point six minutes till the AI-core ices me. Try not to get yourself killed, *again*, and I’ll see you on the other side, Sash.” Max chortled. A sparkling, strobing flash of good-luck white and green lit olive skin as Sash made for the exit. She responded to the light show with a mock dance and two middle fingers. Smiling to herself, Sash spun on her toes, and sashayed into the corridor.

Ping ping ping

Overhead lighting was out. Thigh-high phosphorescent tubes gleamed soft white along corridor walls. At intervals they blinked emergency orange, flaring in waves along darkened halls. Sash padded down long corridors and up flights of chill ceramic steps. Autopilot. She remembered her brief time at the station, before the presumed attack. It was to be a rapid, high-risk operation. Two cycles ago, some backwater faction on Ephyria-1b purchased off-world military equipment a few generations ahead of system-indigenous tech. Now they controlled half the planet. Things might get interesting planet-side. But this was routine staging. The station was utterly undetectable. *We should’ve never let those fixers on—*

Ping ping ping

Sash jerked back to presence, glowering through ceramic bulkheads at unseen amplifiers. A few steps later came an intersection. The store was down one last, long hall; Engineering a minute or so farther. The second path was an open portal presenting a steady red glow. Sash knew where it led. *Making good time, anyway*. She stepped through. Circular openings lined an extensive arcade. *All empty, great*. Status diodes above each opening gleamed white, except for the fourth, which glowed red. Below the red diode hung an ovoid plate, stuck part way into a narrow hollow above the cavity’s entrance.

Ping ping ping

The red light blinked along.

Sash was cold. She wanted to put some clothes on, and her head hurt. She closed her eyes.

Maybe . . . nine minutes left. Some time to spare.

She allowed herself brief lapses. A livable side effect of consummate professionalism was the sort of occasional neuroticism that caused one to run around

puddles while fleeing an orbital bombardment. *Goddamn Belt, what a debacle. Bad enough we had to use local-equivalent gear. They could've provided water-proof boots.*

She considered herself. *Sasha Eem Jay. You are a special operator. And you are alive. You have sixty seconds to kill this damn alarm, then back to work.* Sash pulled herself into the cavity that once held one of the station's life-pods. Bracing tip toes against the exterior door, which formed the floor of the cavity, she strained and groped blindly into the maintenance cubby, expecting a standard diagnostics pad. Her fingertips found the pad, which the life-pod's frantic final user had left showing two menu options:

[1] EXIT POD-BAY DIAGNOSTICS MODE. SHUT DOWN.

[2] RUN POD-BAY DIAGNOSTICS CHECK [#999999999]. RESET TO MENU.

An uncomprehending finger brushed the section of screen displaying option two. A buzzer rang. Sash cursed and jerked back a balled hand. The floor vibrated. Instinct told Sash to exit the pod-bay immediately. But the ovoid plate slid out of its hollow into the closed-and-locked position.

Sash shook her head and grinned at her dumb self. She planted bare feet firmly on either side of the now claustrophobic pod-bay. Concerned but not genuinely worried, Sash reassured herself. She looked for something to hold on to. The exterior door slid open and the vacuum sucked Sash out of the pod-bay. Arms flailed for the hull. Sash watched the exterior door slide closed in front of her.

Back inside the station, the interior door slid open and jammed. A red light blinked.

Ponggg . . . Ping ping ping

It was not cold outside. She knew it wouldn't be. Seconds passed. It seemed longer. The station appeared as a windowless sphere parked on the pitted remnant of an asteroid. *Wasn't it bigger?* The broken landscape was awash in light from Ephyria's distant red sun. A feeble grope sent Sash into a calm lateral spin, pointing her away from the station.

Her ears popped, and Sash locked eyes with a badly sunburned body drifting a few meters out. She recognized her own eyes, only glazed and blank. She didn't like their expression. The Sash staring back at her was smirking.

Sash blinked and her tongue burned. She had developed a splitting headache. But for some reason the twisted smirk annoyed her more. And it amused

her that it annoyed her. And Sash couldn't help but smirk herself. And that *really* annoyed her.

Just before her sight began to fog, Sash caught sight of others, each steadily twirling. They formed a tapered helix—a dim thread of charred flesh extending indefinitely into the interstellar abyss.

□

Some minutes later, Max conveyed, to no one in particular, the virtual equivalent of a resigned shrug. The station's AI-core wiped its short- and medium-term memory and went to sleep. Not long after that, the ancient station's closed-band hyperspace sensors pinged Sash's general tracking implant. The implant reported no life signs. Automated systems began spinning up the biotics pod, preparing an operator's stored mind-state for rapid reinstigation. The pod reported low precursor materials and dispatched a mining drone to the asteroid's surface.

Though antique, the station's near perfectly engineered systems could, using converted local matter, grow a humanoid body and download a stored mind-state in under a month, autonomously if need be. (As a rule, though, mind-states were precious. And leaving them subject to autonomous programming was not protocol.)

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Ping ping ping