

Quality Control

Written by Travis Olson

“Nope. That’s not right.” Sasha said out loud unconsciously. He flipped the glass shield up over the button and pressed the Halt without hesitation but the hesitation came as he took his hand away. There wasn’t any turning back now.

He took the Viewer Helmet off and waited. He kind of thought there’d be an alarm or an immediate intercom voice acknowledging the situation. He sat up in the zero G rig and looked to the door. The silence of the situation and the sweat beginning to form at his lower back urged him to seek someone, anyone, out.

Sasha walked out the door and went down the hallway to the quality manager’s terminal, a video display with an antiquated speaker box. He pressed the ping button to alert the manager of an issue. Once was sufficient as it would ring until answered and any additional presses would queue into a new quality file. Sasha felt obligated to press again.

It was an eternity dipped four minute wait before the Bioroid Mr. Smith lit up the screen and answered. “Log in is required.”

Sasha blinked back to life. “The game has...”

“Log in is required.”

“This isn’t a report.” Sasha complained, alienated by the procedure. “The game’s been...”

“This file is terminated.” Mr. Smith disconnected the video.

Sasha’s face reddened, the sweat forming at his forehead and pressure pushing behind his eyes. He felt righteous in his anger as he waited for the next queue to be answered. “Log in is required.”

“Halt has been initiated, Mr. Smith. Log in is not required as priority is directed toward management.” Sasha dictated procedure.

Mr. Smith looked offscreen and began processing the data, Sasha waited to be addressed again as he knew it wouldn’t be an apology. “Reason for Halt?”

Sasha hunted for the proper explanation. “Colossal graphic breakdown.”

“Confirm reason again?”

“I don’t know a better way to describe it, the game was fine and then the entirety of the visuals went to shit, sorry, the graphics were very poor.” Sasha’s anger was prejudicing his analytical wordplay.

Mr. Smith processed the report onscreen, then looked to Sasha. “Come up to the Twelfth Floor immediately.”

The screen clicked off and Sasha took two calming breaths before walking the L shaped hallway to the elevators. The doors opened as he got there and he entered, he didn’t have to press for his destination as the doors closed and he watched the lighted display highlight “express to 12”.

The doors opened and Mr. Smith raised his hand to direct Sasha to stay put. Mr. Smith entered the elevator and the display indicated they were still going up. Sasha was nervous now, the higher you went in this building, the worse the situation was. Mr. Smith made no indication or comment on the severity of the issue but Sasha wasn’t expecting comfort from the Bioroid.

The doors opened on the 24th floor with Mr. Smith’s twin waiting with a bob-haired female cyborg wearing wireframes, it seemed ironically. “You’re Mr. Smith from 12?” She asked Sasha’s riding companion.

“Correct.”

She lifted her thumb to her mouth and licked it, she pressed her thumb to an unsuspecting Mr. Smith’s forehead. Sasha saw that she had marked his forehead with a #12. “Okay, and you pressed the Halt?” She looked Sasha over unimpressed.

Sasha nodded yes concerned about what she would label him.

“Alright, you sit there.” She pointed to a one-legged couch next to the elevator. Her voice didn’t reveal any anger or clue as to what was going to happen to him. Sasha sat down. “Let’s go Twelve.”

Mr. Smith followed his counterpart and the cyborg lady down the hall to another elevator that swallowed them leaving Sasha in silence and solitude once again.

For the next two hours, Sasha witnessed several different operational managers arrive from one elevator and walk to the next. Some he knew from daily wanderings to his rig and some he never would have any reason to have met.

Another hour passed.

The elevator doors opened. A man dressed in tactical gear underneath a business suit exited and stopped. He took slow, methodical steps passed Sasha before stopping and returning to sit beside him. “You pressed the Halt?”

Sasha did not know this person and felt justified by following the protocol. “I’m not allowed to discuss Quality Procedures without my manager present.” The man smiled at whatever thought rebuttal he had but never delivered to Sasha, he left but the vibe he brought lingered.

Sasha was hungry, the attached hallway bathroom had kept him hydrated and gave him a walking break but his original adrenalin had long departed and the strain of staying conscious was taking it’s toll. He had been taking long blinks, so long that he didn’t see the cyborg woman return.

“Sasha?”

Sasha inhaled very audibly as he opened his eyes. “Yes.”

“I just need to ask a follow up question?”

Sasha couldn’t remember an original question but he tried to hide that snark as he answered. “Okay?”

“Before the Halt. Were any demands made?”

“No... There was just, like a blink, and then, everything looked... crappy.” Sasha felt like he had better words earlier in the day.

“Thank you.” The cyborg began to turn away.

“Do I still have a job, miss?” Sasha didn’t know he was going to be so blunt.

A confusion could be seen behind those wireframes as she looked at Sasha. “Has...?” She looked around for an unseen companion before she walked and sat down next to Sasha. “We were hit with an attack today.”

Sasha knew more was coming as he watched whatever had been unfolding from the other elevator was being relived for him.

“We’re not fully sure of the extent... Um, I’m not sure how to present... We have over Five Hundred Thousand players worldwide and during the attack there was Two-Seventy-Five K playing because of the... uh, the...”

Sasha knew. “The Maze-Stream Release.”

“Yes.” She paused.

“What happened to the players?” Sasha’s adrenalin was returning.

“When you pressed the Halt, you paused the attack and because of the nature of the icebreaker and it’s interaction with our operating system... The Players are currently stuck in the system...”

She may have said more but Sasha never heard anything after that. He didn’t know how he got home that day either. He seemed to wake up in a seated position with his legs over the side of his bed staring at the wall. It would still be six hours before he actually got out of bed and went to the bathroom to retch an empty stomach.

The stale-water smelling basin cooled his face as he stayed, braced along his forearm, until the beeping from the other room began to come into audible focus as the static from his ears was fading. With weak knees, he crawled the five feet from the toilet to the kitchen counter where his PAD had been discarded. He grabbed it and brought it to the ground with him.

His eyes overstimulated as the quantity of messages, protocols, and press releases had been alerting over each other and had consumed the display screen. In his current condition, all he could understand was the pain behind his eyes as it forced them closed.

His door alert sounded but Sasha couldn’t find the cognitive function to function. He just slumped forward with eyes closed.

“Well shit...”

Sasha heard the disappointed voice but not the door opening. He heard the boots make purchase as they approached, the fabric squished as the sonic vibrations also got closer.

“Oh, that’s good.”

Sasha felt the hands grab gently and turn him over. The fingers then began massaging his temples, rough fingers but kind as they worked into the pain. Sasha’s eyes opened gingerly and saw the vaguely familiar face of the tactical dressed man from the previous day.

“You coming back, bud?” It was five minutes before the man could sit Sasha up at the kitchen desktop/table.

“...Who...” Sasha weakly began but couldn’t finish. The man had finished wandering the two and a half room apartment.

“Hold on. We can begin in a minute.” The man was waiting by the drop. The alert sounded and he opened the drop and pulled a squishy, plastic bag from it. “Haven’t had to do this in a while, so, you know, bear with me...”

The man read the instructions before jabbing the adjoining needle into Sasha’s arm and attaching the bag like an ice pack. The bag’s contents worked fast as Sasha’s pain subsided and his thoughts began to return. “Better?”

“Mmm, yes.” Sasha nodded emphatically. “Sorry, who are you?”

“Here. We gotta follow protocol.” The man handed Sasha’s PAD to him. “You should have a release form to check.”

Sasha cleared the alerts to access his company terminal and found the meeting notification and release form. He read the name Gus Sandoval. “Are you Gus?”

“I am.” Gus identified while looking at his own PAD. Sasha tapped the release form’s acceptance, Gus’ PAD confirmed and he nodded with a smile. “Were you, in acting alone or conspiring with others, responsible for the attack on InCeptors Gaming Company?”

Sasha was surprised by the corporate-tinged straightforwardness of the question. “No.”

“Thank you.” Gus said as he pressed his PAD concluding the meeting, his demeanor instantly changed back to friendly. “You did fine. How you feeling now?”

Sasha shook off the bipolar vibe he was experiencing. “I’m... okay... What the hell was that?”

“InCeptors’ needed to formally eliminate you as a suspect.”

The righteous outrage was returning. “They thought I was...” As he relived every hour he’d worked there to justify his validity, a new connection formed. “Wait? Formally?”

“In cases like these, an insider is required to help a Runner sabotage the program, so the person with an astonishing amount of access but limited oversight would be sought after...” Gus finished his sentence with an index finger toward Sasha. “...I’m sorry to inform you that I had already completed an extensive dive into your PAD and communications before we talked yesterday.”

Sasha’s anger surpassed his ability stay outraged and he achieved numb compliance, he could now accept that this is life now and could better understand the actions as they transpired. “...That’s why no one came to tell me I could go home, right? I was written off, so I required no more attention.” Sasha could feel Gus watching him through this interpretation of operating procedure. “...And I bet, there’ll be a memo from Mr. Smith that explains what my current function is while they work through this problem.”

Sasha lifted his PAD and began scrolling until he saw the message posted, his sigh seemed to echo throughout the apartment upon discovery.

“I’m hired out by a third party, so I have the perspective from the outside...” Gus began after a slight pause. “I’ve gone through your job history and seen your performance records. You’re good, you could probably find a more rewarding opportunity out there...”

“I know the job pretty well and I make good cred. InCeptors needs a Natural to be able to view the operating system in real time and I can do it, until they decide a Clone could do it better...” Sasha could recite this as he told himself this everyday. “I’m not interested in getting augmented or modified. No offense, just had a bad experience as a kid, made me shy away from that stuff.” Sasha couldn’t tell what Gus might be or have but felt defensive.

“No, I get it.” Gus would offer no more free advice. “...The system you know...”

Sasha didn’t want to self-justify any further. “Hey, can I ask about the... attack?”

“You can, I’m not really in the room though.”

“Are the people that did this negotiating? I mean, all those people are stuck inside, I can’t believe InCeptors was ransom-compromised with their kind of equipment.” Sasha was happy he could address the issue more analytically than traumatic as before.

“Oh.” Gus’ ominous retort got rid of the analytics.

“What?”

“So what we’re dealing with started as an opportunistic attack, but when it went bad, the attack was abandoned... So now it’s just clean up...” Gus tried to soften the gritty truth.

“What?”

“Yeah.”

Sasha could see it all now. “So all those people are trapped in the game...”

“For no reason whatsoever.”

Sasha eyes were getting sore again, he lowered his face into his hands and breathed into his palms.

“I’m going to order you another bag to help you, uh, process this new information. It’ll be in your drop when your ready.” Gus began backing up. “I’ll get your status processed so you can get back to... work...”

Gus exited the apartment, Sasha heard the delivery alert and then sat for a very long time in his kitchen wondering what to do next.

The message from Mr. Smith instructed him not to return to work until notified to do so and to avoid making statements to the press or communicating the situation on any electronic device. Sasha knew not to discuss or post anything but the thought of free time during the work week was completely foreign to him. He had a routine for the weekend; eat at his local hole in the wall, then rest his eyes with audible movie-house rentals at a luxury suite. He had no clue what to do with his day.

He wanted to be helping. He had logged in to the niche reporters of connected gaming to learn any updates but the personalities hadn't picked up the story yet. The stock market had more information but it was more about the delayed earnings while the Halt was in place. No word on the extent of the attack, Sasha desired this information the most so that he could know if he could be helping. What use was his years of experience, if he couldn't apply them.

That was the thought that couldn't let him focus on the movie he rented at peak hours and that removed his appetite as he tried the new vending block that was usually closed for restocking during his old schedule. He took to walking the skyways that attached the retro malls along the beanstalk tourist trail. He'd not seen it from this altitude or in the smogless light.

A sneaking realization was beginning to push his previous conflicted thoughts with a new one. Had he been actually living in a constructed world instead of the real one. He'd spend the majority of the day watching others live and play in the InCeptors' city maps, then go home and ignore the passerby's he might interact with. A sad thought that Mr. Smith was his closest, and most worthless, commiserator.

Sasha thought about Gus. He had been the only other person to visit his apartment and he couldn't remember if he'd looked him in the eyes. Sasha would look him in the eyes if he got the chance to again.

Sasha learned about the recall by accident. He'd been returning home when he saw the bubble-like Tech-Gurney with an attached InCeptor player still connected to the console being removed from their apartment in his building. The player lived on a higher floor, though Sasha was certain even if they'd crossed paths before, he wouldn't have noticed.

The oddity of the recall was that it hadn't been formally announced. Sasha searched the NBN with careful, generalized, keywords but even the market wasn't concerned. This was a direct to consumer recall, this was careful and private. He knew the situation was worse and he relapsed into the paralysis of being unable to help.

He sent an inquiry letter to Mr. Smith about his return, the prompt reply of "when we tell you" let Sasha know it was an auto-reply instead of the Bioroid's usual tact. Sasha was beginning to wonder if he had a job still. The silence from work and his assumption of corporate cover-up made him order another squish bag as the desperation of trying to find another job in this field was settling in.

Even after the bag finished, his sadness remained. He began to actually think of the players that he'd watch. He knew the missions and achievements the designers had planned but watching the players interact and learn the functions of the design was addictive. He knew the elite players, he had to watch them first as they would be the first to win to test the design but then they'd also be the first to find the exploit to break it. He always thought of them as a part of his quality team. The novice players were helpful too. They would find the random design flaws on accident, he considered them water test.

After the general quality testing was complete, he enjoyed watching the intermediate players. They seemed to care but not care, to try to succeed and to intentionally fail horribly,

their random content was engaging to him. He'd, against protocol, follow random players for lengthy periods just to listen to the conversations. Sasha was professional but he was human, too.

He kept a quality file of his own considered "fun" players but as he was trying to remember their names, the thought of them laying in their purgatory consoles brought his nostalgic reverie to a crashing halt. The helplessness caught up with him.

Sasha was surprised Gus would meet with him. As dire as the situation was to Sasha, he assumed Gus was sanctified with compartmentalism. The two sat at a skyway viewpoint eating kiosk noodles watching the sunset elevator launches at the Beanstalk.

"Thanks for... well, this." Sasha broke the silence unsure how long it had been quiet for.

"No problem." Gus slurped the final noodle from his sticks. "I take it you're still struggling?"

Sasha nodded yes absentmindedly but then he remembered who he was with. "Wait? Are you still monitoring me?"

"I am." Gus smiled revealing all. "Your PAD's been cloned, I saw you re-upped the health bag order."

Sasha annoyance arrived but it made sense and he discarded the emotion. "I thought I was formally eliminated as a suspect?"

"Formally clears the paperwork." Gus set his noodle container on the seat next to him and leaned back to get comfortable in his seat. "You're going to be monitored unofficially for a while until you are, I guess, Unformally cleared... So, what's up?"

Sasha wasn't going to let that statement be glossed over. "How long?"

"If I give you any quantity of time, then I'll have to multiply that by two, and you'll be monitored for twice as long, do you really want me to give you a number?" Gus laid it out as casual as a friend could.

"...I guess not." Sasha was defeated on that one.

"Good. Cause I'd have had to double that number too for giving out the formula..." Gus said more to himself than Sasha. "So... what's up?"

"I don't know, I want to ask about the stuck people but now I'm worried it makes me look guilty."

"Sasha." Sasha looked Gus in the eyes. "You're the one person that refers to the consumers as people, I've cleared you, monitoring you is my job. What's up?"

Sasha understood. "Can you tell me anything? I mean anything?"

"No."

Sasha understood. "I just want to be doing something to help."

"I know." Gus looked away to the vista. "I can only speak from my experience in these matters. I'm hired out to investigate the people operating within massive systems when it goes wrong. Systems are designed to be efficient, not right. If you think you can do something, go to work and see for yourself. Even if you fail, you'll be able to forgive yourself."

Sasha knew this, he'd been tormenting himself with this knowledge and only felt powerless because he followed instructions. He watched Gus watching out the window and began wondering in what part of his life did he learn this lesson. "Thanks, Gus."

Gus looked to the noodle container. "Those were actually good noodles, you want more?"

Sasha nodded and Gus wandered back to the kiosk. He returned with a different flavor but gave Sasha a refill. The sun had set but the sky was still illuminated by the transporting light from the space elevator.

A passing thought. "Gus?"

"Yeah." Gus was not enjoying the new flavor, he eyed it as though he could find the corrupting taste.

"I had a list of players in one of my files."

Sasha rode the elevator with Gus to the hallway where they met. He counted the seventy-two steps to the next elevator. They waited for it to arrive.

"I'll do the talking. You look at whatever you can, might be the only chance you get to see the full extent of the situation." Gus gave instructions while staring straight ahead. "You pull up the file and be one with the wall, if I leave, linger as long as you can."

"Is this okay? I don't want to get you in trouble."

"Don't worry about any of that, my contract is paid in full."

"Okay. Wait. What about me?"

Gus gave a halfhearted shrug as the doors opened and he got on, Sasha hesitated then saw the smirk on Gus' face. Sasha frowned to him as he entered. The ride lasted four seconds as the door opened to a conference room that had been retrofitted into a corporate command center, different cliques of suits and engineers were scattered about different information stations. Gus took the lead and walked to the five Mr. Smiths' in the far corner of the room.

They parted as he arrived revealing the cyborg Sasha had met previously. She eyed Sasha heavily before looking to Gus as he addressed her. "Collette, got something for the good faith claim."

"Okay?" She returned her gaze to Sasha, he realized there was probably some sort of analysis being performed on his personal data.

"Go ahead, Sasha."

Sasha looked about for a system he could use. "I need to access my quality database..."

Mr. Smith with a 12 marked on his forehead stepped forward with a display screen hardwired to his internal system and handed it to Sasha.

"Thanks." Sasha could feel the eyes on him from all corners of the room. He felt like he was trespassing in a prison with the guards all knowing he didn't belong but wanting to see where he was going. Sasha accessed his file and left it on the screen. "...There."

"What is this?" Collette was viewing the display in her eyes.

"List of players..." Gus began and Sasha stepped away from the conversation.

"There's only twenty-seven names."

"Twenty-seven names you didn't have before, we can locate..."

Sasha began to fully turn his head to the monitors, his eyes whirled about too fast to understand anything and he had to calm himself by looking at the floor. He looked up and saw the different forehead numbered Mr. Smiths calculating him. He knew there was no point in feigning innocence, he looked to the monitors wholly.

One monitor was the display of player names, it was repeatedly displaying the same name with location coordinates of vulgar pictures. InCeptors didn't have access to the player's identities or locations. Sasha understood why Gus thought this would work to get him into the room, the only players that could be rescued would need reach out to InCeptors, that's if the

players had people caring enough to reach out. It was easy to for him to perceive that a family member would just turn the power to console off when they found the player unresponsive.

Sasha saw the next monitor displayed the internal data storage had breached capacity, the offsite fail safe was working. He pondered that as he saw the quality monitor was displaying the Halt status, but the game was still playing. He stopped and stared at this monitor.

“What’s his name?”

“Sasha.”

“Sasha?”

“Hey Sasha.” Gus called out finally piercing Sasha’s thoughts.

Sasha gave up all pretense and pointed at the monitor. “How are they still playing?”

“That’s not why we’re here?” Gus tried to cover for Sasha as he waved him to come over. Sasha returned to them.

“Why did you have this list?” Collette asked not as firmly as he expected.

“Oh... They’re players I liked to watch.” Sasha admitted.

“That is against procedure.” Mr. Smith, Twelve, spoke up but Collette put a hand up to cease the pestering.

Collette looked to Sasha with fleeting hope. “Do you have other lists? Like players you don’t like? Or something along those lines?”

“Sorry. I, uh, had a pretty stringent policy for getting on the list, since, yeah, it was against procedure...” Sasha shrunk into his shoulders.

“Well, it’s something...” Collette turned and signaled to a group in the corner, Mr. Smith, Twelve, walked to them. Collette looked to Gus with defeat. “Thanks.”

Sasha pushed his luck. “How are they still playing?” He asked softly.

Gus purposely started walking away as Collette turned to address him but he escaped with enough distance, she walked to Sasha and looked to him with pity. “The game is in Halt, but the console is letting the players play.”

Sasha understood a little more. “That’s okay though, means they’re safe from the in game opponents.”

“...but not the other players.”

“Oh.” Sasha gasped it. Collette began to turn away as he had nothing new to offer. He looked to another monitor and saw the concurrent date stamps with each increase in data collection. He incurred that they were trying to escape the console by trying to reset the game by dying. They needed a way to communicate to the players to stay alive.

Gus was at the elevator watching Sasha. Sasha walked to him and got on the elevator with him. “You didn’t want to linger?”

“No.” Sasha stared at the numbers as they subtracted their descent.

“Maybe they’ll get your favorites out.” Gus tried to give Sasha some hope.

“Maybe.” Sasha was struggling.

They walked in silence to the first elevator. As the doors closed, Gus tried a final time. “I’ll give you the information, good or bad, okay?”

“Okay...” Sasha blinked back. “I mean, thanks, Gus. I do appreciate you looking out for...”

Sasha interrupted himself by pressing the 2nd Floor. Sasha’s leg began to involuntarily shake, Gus eyed him. “Sasha, you’re having elevated...”

The doors opened and Sasha was running. He clipped the doorframe and collided with the floor as he got to the quality department office. The door was locked and Gus caught up with Sasha as he was banging on the lock panel in frustration.

“Won’t let me in!” Sasha was barely coherent but Gus understood something was happening that needed to happen. Gus’ hand pulsed and the door lock reverberated to the floor, Sasha was through it instantly.

Sasha grabbed his Viewer Helmet and activated while slamming to the Zero-G rig. He put it on and could see the graphics were still stationary and poor. He began advancing through the locations, watching for movement. The controls were disjointed and the movement was jerky but he saw the player seated on a stoop.

Gus watched the interaction on the monitor and smiled as he understood what Sasha could do.

Collette stood with her arms crossed watching the monitor beside Gus. “How many has he contacted?”

“Just two.”

“It’s been four hours.” Collette tutted.

“He’s gotta find them first.” Gus tutted back.

Collette looked at the storage monitor. “This doesn’t solve the problem.”

“It buys you time to find them.” Gus looked at the increase of suits and engineers in the newly retrofitted command center that used to be the quality department. “You’re going to need to find some more quality techs to operate in the system, Sasha will kill himself in there if you don’t intervene.”

“Twelve is calling in the second shift.”

“Good.” Gus had heard enough. “Keep Sasha safe, I’m going to go and find your Runners.”

“Would you, please?” Collette snarled.

“Number Three.” Gus pointed at the monitor. Gus and Collette watched as Sasha’s viewer advanced on a Player and slapped a Ban Warning that read “Stay Alive, Help Coming”.

-End