

*“Feliz Navidad,  
Feliz Navidad  
Feliz Navidad, prospero ano y...”*

His transmitter cuts off. The biosuit is temperature controlled, but he still shivers. He dislikes the empty crashes of his own breath. Head to toe, he is encased in plastic and plexiglass. One would think that such a barrier from the murky winds would make him feel safe, but instead, it only makes him far too aware of his own bodily processes. His breath, his pulse, the itch in his right middle toe, the way saliva sloshes inside his mouth when he becomes nervous, the way his eyelashes brush against the visor -- no; this is as bad as solitary confinement. Nowhere to go but his own mind.

He stands on a small metal platform attached to rails fixed to one of the support beams. When he presses the button, the platform rolls down the rails. When he lifts his finger, it stops. The platform won't move back up; not until it reaches the bottom.

His task is to open the paneling at the bottom of the support beam, find the box marked 'internal diagnostics', remove it, and replace it with a new box. It has lived there for nearly 300 years, so although they could tell him it wouldn't be far from his landing point, they couldn't tell him exactly where to find it. They also couldn't tell him for sure that there weren't thousands of mutant spiders making nests in the wiring now.

*“-lo? Hello? Can you hear me yet?”*

“Paul! Yesyes, I hear you now, don't change a thing!” They only just met today, but Paul seems like a solid guy. Nervous and earnest, perhaps a bit melodramatic.

*“Oh thank god. Okay, I've got some bad news for ya.”*

“Yes?” His heart rate picks up.

*“That storm took a sharp turn and is rolling in early. Afraid you'll be right in the middle of it.”*

As if to prove a point, a brown gust and what looks like half a tree slams into the side of his platform. Sparks fly and he falls into the railing. He is very, very glad of the metal clips that hold him fast to the platform.

“WHAT?! I thought the whole point of this rush job was to outrun the storm!”

*“I'm sorry, man, it came out of nowhere. Never seen anything like it.”*

“Pull me up, now!” His head cranes and he tries to see the top of the support beam. It has long since vanished into thick air and debris, and the lines of the rails make him dizzy.

*“Well, that’s the really bad news. It’s a top-loader, and it’s already rolled in. There’s so much junk above your head right now, I’m talking rocks, trash, rubble, whatever the winds ripped off the surface. We can’t risk having you knocked off the platform from miles up. The safest thing is to make it all the way down and ride it out. And...god, I’m sorry man. We’ll keep the transmission open as long as possible. I’ll be with you, every step of the way.”* Even from two miles away, he can hear the concern in Paul’s voice. Storms are always hard to predict, but it’s rare that the weather guys get it this wrong.

He places both gloved hands on the rails and looks into the swirling yellow fog that cloaks the planet. The dizziness he felt when looking up clogs his mind, and his fear swirls the same way as the gasses, sometimes in his throat, sometimes in his stomach or groin. He needs this. He needs this more than he’s ever needed anything. He made a bad mistake when he was younger, and he’s been in prison for most of his adult life. He doesn’t know how to function outside of a cell. This job, it will get his record expunged, and land him an entry-level position in the union. He’ll have to work long hours and live somewhere exceedingly shitty, but he’ll have freedom. All he has to do is show that he can follow orders and not let the fear control him.

And then for an instant, he sees something. It’s like the color is sucked right off the planet. Everything clears and he is staring at brown, rolling hills under a brown sky, and there, near the horizon --

And then the debris is back, and he blinks. It was so fast, it must have been a trick of the light, but now a wave of nausea washes through him and he finds himself sitting on his ass just as the platform grinds to a halt.

*“Hey you good?”*

“Yeah, I just hit ground. Man, what is this stuff? It’s so shifty.”

*“It’s called gravel.”*

“Like that thing judges used to use?”

*“No, dumbass, gravel, with an ‘r’.”*

“Oh.” The small talk is meaningless, but it’s good to hear another human voice over the sound of his own breathing. Paul knows this.

“You sure you couldn’t have given me a laser gun or something?” He hears an exaggerated sigh over the comm.

*“Will you drop it with the spiders? There’s nothing there. Nothing lives on the surface anymore, it’s just you.”*

“Yeah, but what if -- “

*“Look, I know it’s freaky down there, but you need to get control of yourself. Now the best thing for you to do is gonna be to find that hatch and crawl inside as soon as possible, and close it up behind you. That way --”*

An impact tears through his body. He hears the scream of tearing metal and the dizziness hits him harder. The smog turns black and he hears something shatter, and then his feet aren’t touching the ground. It’s like gravity switches off for a few seconds then pulls him from a different direction and he is lifted, spinning, into the air. He can’t tell how high he’s gone or how loud he is screaming, something slams into his chest and is ripped away, he feels a sting in his arm, and then everything stops. The swirling vortex outside his visor vanishes. The sound of his voice is drowned by a low static, and before him, for hundreds of miles stretch empty brown hills. The tan sky seems endless. He is floating, suspended, weightless. And before him, far in the distance, a powder-blue smudge dots the horizon. As he looks, it seems to come into focus, like he is tuning a telescope. It’s a castle. A perfect, fairy-book, powder-blue castle, with three red flags on the turrets. But just as the strange image begins to crystalize, it disappears again and he is on his back on the ground, watching yellow smog curl underneath his broken visor.

“Paul? Paul! You son of a -- oh, shit. Oh, no, oh, somebody?” He continues to curse and plead through the tears that are running down his cheeks. He tries to wipe them away, but his gloves are too bulky and his visor still covers half his face. He stumbles to his feet, shaking with adrenaline, and gulps his first breath of crust-level air. It is hot and sulfuric, and it stings his eyes and nose. He has never fully appreciated the carefully-ratioed Oxygen-Nitrogen atmosphere they pump out on the Levels. He would even take back the damp, stale air that circulated through his suit -- and least that wouldn’t cause cell mutation.

He stumbles to his feet. He is sweating, he is crying, he is coughing, but he isn’t dead. Not yet. He is going to be fine. He is not going to die. All he needs to do is find the hatch. He turns, expecting to see the support beam behind him, but there is nothing. He turns further, but still nothing. Has he turned all the way around? He can’t tell. The beam should be behind him, but which way was that again? The brown winds look the same from all directions, and they are picking up momentum, snapping and swirling like the jaws of an angry animal. He figures he can see about ten feet in front of him. How far had he been thrown? He

doubles over coughing; it's hard to think without good air. The *whump-whump-whumping* of the wind fills his brain, and the way debris skitters over the gravel is making his hair stand up.

He has to move. The storm is getting worse. There! Glass shards! Where those there before? They must be from his visor! He turns away from them, takes ten steps, and stumbles on the shifting ground. The world tips and he is on his knees, staring at his hands. His hands. He stumbles upright and screams, but all he can hear is static. He stares in shock at his body; he is naked. His first thought is that he must have hit his head and blacked out. His second is that he should be stinging and choking from the air. His third is that he should look up.

Dust. Dust, forever. Nothing but dust, rolling in gentle hills until it blends into the sky. The dust is feather-soft, squishing between his bare toes. And there, sitting softly on a distant hill, the castle. He can swear it looks closer this time, like he could walk to it. There is no moat, but there is a drawbridge, closed, cut in an ornate pattern like blue vines crawling up the walls. And it is entirely blue. Not a hint of gray stone or dark metal or glass, in fact he has no idea what the castle is made of. The only other color is on the red flags. Three of them, pennant-shaped and waving gently in a breeze he cannot feel. He squints, trying to make out the symbol on the flags, but he is too far.

He looks at his hands again. Wrinkled and calloused, and he can see every imperfection in them, but they are not shaking. The shock and fear has melted away, like cotton candy on the tongue, and his mind is comfortingly blank. In fact, the only thing he feels is curiosity. Who would build a castle like this with no one else around? And why blue? He begins to step, one foot after the other, the soft dust molding to his feet and leaving perfect footprints behind. The curiosity grows with each step, until he feels as if he is at one end of a rubber band that is pulling him to the castle. The white noise in his ears is soothing, the air clean and warm, he feels like he is an infant again. He doesn't care why the world changed; he is relishing the calm. But then, his mind snags on something, and he turns. Behind him, brown sky, brown hills, rising and falling like soft breath. What did he expect to find? Nothing, he decides, and continues towards the castle.

This time, when the storm returns, it is like stepping on a live wire. Every sense is overloaded at once and for a moment, he is in two places, in two minds. He feels the soft emptiness of the hills and the castle slip away, an image superimposed over the swirling mass of wet and wind and debris. He cries out and tries to reach for the castle, tries to take another step, but something is tugging him away. And then the castle is gone, and his body stings. There are drops of blood on his gloved hands, but he can't tell from where. The wind is pushing him along the ground, ripping the outer layer of his suit. Great beasts seem to surround him and stalk him, clouded by the thick wind. They stomp

stone feet and drag metal claws around in circles, breathing hot and toxic into his face. Everything smells like death.

The tears are the only thing he can fall back upon. His body is wracked with sobs and jolts as he is slammed into the ground again and again. His limbs flail in empty space, unable to find anything to hold onto, so he slips deep into raw emotion. His wails pierce his ears and his blood is hot in his veins. He spasms, once, twice, again, he hits himself in the face, he grinds his teeth until the pain shoots through his jaws into his eye sockets. What else can he do? He has lost control entirely. This may be his death, and he cannot punish the wind, so he punishes himself.

He wakes slowly, as if from a terrible nightmare, to his existence. The dust is the same color as his skin, and this is fitting. He was born out of this dust. He is, perhaps, the consciousness of this planet, given form and mind to discover the state of its being. To discover the castle.

There it is, larger than before, and more beautiful. He can see now that it is a sleek thing, without windows, and perfectly proportioned, with the left side being an exact replica of the right. The gate has flowers woven through its branches, and they peek out at him playfully, begging him to come closer. He can see the flags, too. They are blank. They are waiting for him.

He does not smile, but pleasure swells high in his chest, and he feels light. He is almost floating as his feet brush the soft dust, step after step after step, and the castle rises, growing and blooming like a flower out of the primordial dust. This is the beginning of the universe. The beginning of everything. He is the first, or perhaps the last.

As he nears the castle, he hears calling. He cannot make out the sounds, cannot separate them from the white noise in his ears, but he knows it is his name. He quickens his pace. He wants to know his name. He needs to know. It is the only thing.

“NOOOOOO!” His own scream cuts through the white noise, and he is back in his broken body on the surface of an inhospitable planet, and he is dying. The beasts have gone but the thick wind remains, tugging at flaps of biosuit and skin. His bare face is dripping with sulfuric tears that sting the crevices of his neck. He is not cold but he is shivering uncontrollably, and every part of him is wet. His legs won't move. He doesn't know where his mind has been or for how long, but this, this is hell. He wants his mother. He wants Paul. He wants death.

The castle is gone. He cannot feel panic, he is too blank, but he feels a dullness in his legs, an uneasy fog over his mind. The horizon is gone, too. The sky has become hills like the ground. He cranes his neck, but he cannot see the end. He is in a quiet womb of dust and hills.

He hears his name again. He turns, he blinks, he smiles. The castle is so close behind him, he can almost reach out and touch it. Euphoria sweeps through him. It is more beautiful than he could ever imagine, more blank than he could have hoped for. When he reaches a hand in front of him it, too, is smooth and blank.

The universe does not exist, not yet. He will begin it, here, in this castle. He will write the first words, tell the first stories, create the first life. It is his purpose and his joy.

The gate begins to open before he can touch it. It moves silently, and inside the castle is dark. He takes another step forwards, and now, his name is so close, he can feel it pulsing. He is about to begin.

The first thing he becomes aware of are waves. Is he at the beach? But then the waves become pain, and he wants to drift back to wherever he came from. And then something pinches, and everything screams into focus.

He is in a hospital bed on Level 2. Two nurses in cheery yellow scrubs are talking to each other, comparing clipboards. Everything smells like cheap detergent and alcohol, and there are voices and whirs and beeps from every direction. He moans.

“Hey? He’s awake! Chrissy, he’s finally awake!”

One of the nurses turns, and Paul materializes above him.

“Paul? What...what are you...”

“Oh god man, I’m so sorry. I’m so, so sorry. How much do you remember?”

“Not much...I remember the music cutting off, and we were talking about a storm, and then...I saw something blue...”

“I wouldn’t trust anything you saw, man. A storm rolled in, quick as I’ve ever seen, and you got caught right in the middle. The wind threw you around and your visor cracked, and after that, you probably hallucinated a lot. The doctors said your brain chemistry had a weird reaction to the gasses. Anyway, storm moved off just about as fast as it came, and we were able to convince two paramedics to go down for you. You...you almost died.” Paul’s voice chokes off, tears begin to run down his face. He turns and throws his arms around an exasperated nurse, sobbing loudly into her shoulder.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry! It’s my fault!”

He recovers quickly. He remembers little of his time on the surface, but something tickles the back of his mind. He writes it off, telling himself he must have hallucinated something crazy, and carries on with his life, feeling just a little bit empty. Soon, they let him start his new job. He reconnects with his brother, who has two kids now, and his apartment isn’t as shitty as he thought it would be. But two weeks later, he meets his three-year-old niece for the first time. She is at a friend’s birthday party, and he comes with gifts and smiles, but is stopped in his tracks. The child has a powder-blue birthday cake, iced to smooth perfection, with three bright-red candles in the top. Everything comes back to him in a rush. The hills, the blank sky, the castle...and the first glimpse of it all, the time he stood on the platform, before his visor was shattered. It was all real.

Surrounded by singing children and proud parents, he curls in a ball on the floor like a dog, and cries.