

Sphere #4055

Brent jolted upright in his shape-conforming Reclinesuit, pen clattering to the floor. The massage motor had failed again in his left arm, for the third time this month. He had been relaxing in his Reclinesuit on his Hammock, as all students had in their pods. It made him quite... uncomfortable to get up from a 2.5 in both swing rate and full-body rippling, just as he liked it.

Brent disabled the protesting left-arm motor, which was making an awful clicking sound instead of the normal purr. Reaching for the speed dial on his wrist, Brent swiped for the College Assistance Request Emergencies (C.A.R.E.) number. He gave them 30 seconds to arrive, just as they always had.

He could picture it in his mind--the Student Wellness hub opening one of its dozens of ports, giant holes with automated silver sliding doors out of which a response team would be ejected. At the very bottom of the Sphere, it allowed quick access to any of the facilities via hoverjet. These would snake up, signature pink light trails floating just behind; twisting through the sleek steel scaffolding that cradled thousands of pods safely in the center ring of the Sphere, the hoverjet would drop its nose to glide pleasingly over the pods, scanning the landscape to locate the pod of interest--

The airlock in Brent's pod clicked open to reveal a C.A.R.E. staff, dressed in their pink jumpsuit and warm smile. They were almost always women, and the occasional man who appeared at your airlock less than happy. This one was a man, tall and white, with a noticeably hardened look. Perhaps another student would have ejected him immediately, recoiling from the palpable privilege this man emanated. Brent was unusually relaxed for a student here at the Sphere, however, and paid little attention to the C.A.R.E. staff's appearance.

“We’ll take your Reclinesuit right away, *sir*.” The white male C.A.R.E. staff said the words through closed teeth. Brent had never seen such rudeness before. How had he not been expelled yet?

“Yeah, no problem, man. You doing alright?” Brent was concerned for him. Did he not realize what he was doing? The microphones in every pod? What if they caught it already?

“Yes. Never better.” The man’s eyes studied him briefly. They flicked between Brent’s brown eyes, searching for traces of depth. Then he saw the pen and notebook at his feet. “Your Diary? A physical one?”

Brent cursed silently. He concocted a fitting excuse. “I... prefer the texture of the pages. Holographic never felt... intimate enough.”

“I see.” The C.A.R.E. staff’s blue eyes softened, falling silent for a moment. Brent prayed the staff didn’t ask for a sample. Most students retreated to their Student Diaries in times of discomfort; perhaps, after being violently assaulted by a short string of hate speech, or glanced at by a privileged, straight white male out of the corner of his eye. Not the typical student, Brent’s paperback Diary contained mounting doubts of the Sphere’s hate crime justice system, and held paragraphs upon paragraphs pondering life outside the massive Sphere walls--all his secrets, which, of *course*, the C.A.R.E. staff would choose to serendipitously inspect inside Brent’s book of heresy lying conveniently open at his feet--

“And I thought I was the only one,” the staff said, chuckling.

The world stopped.

Another like me? Brent thought. He peered again at the man’s bright blue eyes and in them he now saw the same swirling doubt he saw in the mirror at dawn. A sadness, too. The man appeared to see the same in him, for to Brent’s stunned silence, the C.A.R.E. staff’s chuckle grew

into a hearty laugh, and eventually Brent found himself joining in, until the two had bent over crying--no words needed to be spoken. Brent's soul filled with warmth, and his heart swelled at the image of two like-minded rebels laughing at the absurdity of what they were in. It felt good.

Later, exhausted, the man and Brent took each other in. The man, his eyes returning with a familiar sadness and a certain determination, glanced at the ceiling microphone in Brent's pod, then deftly tugged the keycard to his hoverjet from the chain around his neck, snapping the comfortable animal-free leather strap. He gave it to Brent, and closed his eyes in resignation as if saying, *my time has come*.

Then, with crystal clear eyes and a loud voice, the man said:

"Black people are an inferior species."

And he was vaporized from the pod.

The alarm was deafening. Red lights strobed in Brent's living space, and the words 'HATE SPEECH' glared angrily from the Reclinesuit's frontal display. Stumbling back against the Hammock, Brent's mind careened in the rapids. Dozens of lined papers with art and poetry fluttered to the ground from the spherical pod walls. Brent yelled, and recalled the Headmaster's needle-like warning: *"a violation of hate speech in any student pod will cause an experience that mimics what it feels like to receive such hate speech."* The noise of the alarm dug itself deep into Brent's brain. Feeling his way to the airlock at the front of the pod, Brent now realized he had about 20 seconds before the second major Assistance branch arrived: the aptly named Punitive Assistance In Need (P.A.I.N.). As a security force against discomfort in the Sphere, their black hoverjets and ominous disciplinary methods were rarely mentioned among students. Clicking open

the silver airlock to drown out the blare of the siren, Brent searched his memories for the last time a P.A.I.N. staff had left the Student Wellness hub. He drew a blank.

The outer airlock clicked open, and little by little Brent's thoughts cleared momentarily as he watched the inner Sphere, his one and only home, reveal itself. The glowing Sphere walls themselves stretched miles apart, a vast universe in which Sphere life existed. Hundreds of floating, spherical buildings, with different areas of study, different professions, all connected by winding tubes between which students were shuttled. And the countless student pods, of course, a flat, endless honeycomb spanning the center slice.

Looking at the keycard in his hand, it clicked. The C.A.R.E. staff wanted him to do what he had never had the courage to do--go outside the Sphere. Brent looked up, and at the very top of the Sphere, past all the schools of study and Wellness areas and safe spaces... a tiny porthole. An exit that had always been there. The entire sector was off limits. Brent didn't care.

The mechanical echo of a port shuttering open from far below in the great silence shattered his thoughts. Without looking down, Brent stepped into the hoverjet and slid the keycard into the main console to start it up, took control of the joystick, and immediately ejected the C.A.R.E. hoverjet from the noisy entrance platform. Still rising, Brent used years of C.A.R.E. service knowledge and angled the nose at a steep angle towards the top of the Sphere, pulling farther and farther away from his pod (and the P.A.I.N. hoverjet he didn't need to look to know was coming). He overrode the speed safety and accelerated, flying at unsafe speeds past spheres of history, spheres of politics, spheres of journalism... all of which had indoctrinated him for the past two decades on tales of oppression and privilege. As Brent passed into the restricted zone in the upper quarter of the Sphere, the Sphere walls became more clarified, and he could see the yellow-white flowered pattern that was projected from the Sphere walls, a comforting tessellation. Consumed in

the moment, Brent drowned out the alarms around him, the awareness campaign messages strung up on admin building fronts, the victimization that dissolved life in the Sphere into an empty white mist, and at that moment nineteen years of Brent's life were left behind with his pod and Diary as the hoverjet passed through the porthole at the top of the Sphere.

Brent went blind as the hoverjet passed through thick, dense clouds, shaking the vehicle with turbulence. Brent feared for his life as his Reclinesuit was stripped away little by little, even the clicking motor of the broken left arm, until he was stark naked. Wind whipped at the fragile pink walls of the hoverjet. Red icons flashed through the smoke from the console, indicating a loss of power, and Brent felt the pink exhaust trail cut out. The structure around him vibrated and was losing velocity fast, continuing up through the dense clouds. Brent held on for life, with an empty mind, completely reduced to instinctive terror. Finally, just as the hoverjet was about to stall, Brent broke through the clouds.

It was peaceful. A landscape of a dark gray cloudy ocean stretched out to the horizon. Above the clouds was a gradient of reds and oranges, the deep tones of sunset, and a white-speckled nighttime rolling in from behind. The air was misty but silent. Brent stared at a glowing sun in the distance, casting rays over the dark ocean. He felt cast adrift in the sky and took a breath of the purest air he had ever tasted. In those few precious seconds, his restless mind was at peace, surrendered to fate. Then he began to fall.

The hoverjet arced and dipped back into the ocean of clouds, plunging Brent into darkness. As the clouds rushed past him again, and the winds grew to a roar, Brent thanked the blue-eyed man, and wryly promised to share his Diary entries with him when he had a chance, before the hoverjet slammed into the ground.