

Colonized

“Is the world ever not new?”

The preacher had no training. Just an interest and time, and no one objected to the idea. Like most things on this ship, I figured I would try services once. After all, her sermon did occupy one morning out of every seven. Then, it became habit just like everything else. Not exactly comforting or challenging, but something I did because I had already been doing it.

When she said, “Is the world ever not new?” I took it as a challenge. Maybe at one point the world was endlessly new or relentlessly renewing but somewhere around year three on this ship, I was certain we were just on repeat.

After midday meal, I returned to my room and scrounged for paper, set out my hypothesis, and mentally created a shorthand to record my observations. I did my shift later that afternoon, ate evening meal, and then retired wanting to rest up for the next day.

Day 1 of my experiment. Day 1,762 on board.

I awoke with the faux sunrise. I used to try to sleep late, like some twentieth century teenager, but it was a lot of work to go against the hum of a whole ship created to keep you on a schedule. Once awake, I freshened up and changed into daily uniform, navy blue breathable synthetic material fitting my form neatly but not tightly, gray striping down the sides indicating my status as a mechanical engineer. I swallowed my supplements that purportedly make up for the lack of nature. I left my room promptly twenty minutes after awakening and joined the others lining the hallways.

I saw Derek first and smiled. He smiled back and said good morning. I returned the pleasantries, and we walked alongside each other toward breakfast. Along the way I spoke with

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Priya, Mason, Alexa, and Jane. Everyone was pleasant. All of those talking together were in the navy uniforms. Mason and Alexa had gray stripes like mine.

When we entered the dining hall, we lined up with everyone else; picking up bowls to fill with porridge, fregetables, and what we referred to as coffee. I don't really remember coffee, but it couldn't have been this lackluster. I followed Derek and Priya to a table that we typically sit at. Derek, Priya, and Jane sat on one side. I sat across from Derek, with Mason and Alexa on my side. We ate efficiently, listened to announcements, and then made our ways to our various work stations.

I decided to not track that work day too closely while I established my shorthand for recording purposes. But I noted that I was already a bit tired trying to keep all of the components of my morning routine in my head. At midday meal, I rejoined the same dining crew. Priya said, I think kindly, and certainly quietly, "Are you okay? You look tired?" I thanked her for her thoughtfulness and told her I was fine. We sat in a slightly different arrangement. I was next to Derek as opposed to across from him this time, with Priya by my side. Jane, Mason, and Alexa were opposite. I don't remember what we ate specifically but we usually ate some combination of protein and algae.

By the time I got back to my room after shift, all my remaining energy went into recording this in my journal. Then, I went to stash it behind the panel where a headboard would've been had this been an old-fashioned bed in my first bedroom.

"Experiment Day 1, Ship Day 1,757."

"Experiment Day 1, Ship Day 1,742."

"Experiment Day 1, Ship Day 1,729."

There was notebook after notebook after notebook after notebook after notebook. So many I was actually impressed with myself; my desire to figure out whatever was going on and my ability to hoard paper.

When I first saw the stack, my mouth went dry and my heart started racing. I had the wherewithal, though; to stop the panic before my uniform could alert the ship to a problem. Is that what had gone wrong before? Had I panicked and then had my memory wiped? Could they do that?

I shook my head and started going through the records, my records, of what had already taken place.

The oldest notebook: Ship Day 1,212. That notebook had twenty-three days of data. I wasn't entirely positive what I was telling myself with the shorthand, but I could tell that Derek, Priya, Jane, and Mason were all part of that time. Alexa wasn't there, though. And I could tell that the inciting event had also been a preacher's sermon though I wasn't sure it was the same one.

The most recent notebook was not very long ago at all. Today was Ship Day 1,762. The nearest notebook was 1,757, a mere five days ago. It only had a scant day and a half of data recorded. I couldn't figure out why that experiment had started. Derek, Priya, Jane, Mason, and Alexa were all there, though.

I struggled with what to do next. I was exhausted and evening meal was approaching. I didn't want to risk anyone checking on me if I didn't show up like usual. I also didn't want to lose my progress. Then someone knocked at my door and I had only one real choice.

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Evening meal. Same or similar food. Same people. Similar table. Priya suggested a game of Spades after. I went along, not wanting to seem off. I managed to set the group; the good-hearted jeering seemed familiar.

“How long’s it been since I last kicked all your asses?” I asked, trying to sound funny.

Mason shook his head at me. “How long’s it been since we played?” Everyone laughed. Derek walked me back toward my room later. “Calling it a night?” he asked. What was I supposed to do?

“Yeah,” I shrugged. “Just feeling a bit worn out today.”

“When was the last time you had your levels checked?”

Levels? “I’m not sure.”

“You know these filters have been working a long time – they only get so much screened out. Tiredness is the first sign of space sickness. You mentioned it last week, too. Take care of yourself, okay?”

“Okay. Dad...” I smiled at Derek and he mussed my hair.

“Funny. Good night.”

“You, too.” I went into my room and tried not to just slam the door behind me. But I sank to the floor by my bed and pulled open the panel again. The pull of the bed was strong – the “sun” had set some time ago. But I wasn’t sure what tomorrow brought so I made a few notes and tried to read as much as possible from the most recent notebooks.

Day 2 of my experiment. Day 1,763 on board.

The thing about every day seeming like the one before was that it’s pretty easy to allow your body and behavior to go on autopilot while you mentally freak out. That’s how Day 2 this

time around started. Really, Day 1 barely ended. I read and read, trying to absorb what I had noted before, mindful of needing to sleep so as to not send up any alerts. My head was spinning as I put everything back into my hiding place. Did I have others? I didn't know but there weren't a lot of obvious potential spots.

I also had a penchant for a shorthand that varied slightly each time. Some notes I could figure out fairly thoroughly, others less so. Of things that seemed certain: my job was always my job; my friends – with the exception of Alexa – were always my friends; even when my experiment started over (again and again), the Day on Board moved forward in a way that seemed to indicate that even if I couldn't capture my days, the ship's days were being recorded.

By the time I was walking to breakfast, I had moved on from this evidence to what was unclear. And really, my motivation. Why was I worried? Humans for centuries had been involved in mundane tasks that felt repetitive and unending. Just because I was on a ship that was supposed to save humanity didn't make the work of saving humanity any less tedious. Maybe I couldn't remember things very clearly because they were all so similar. Maybe I felt like things were on repeat because things repeated. There didn't have to be anything nefarious behind it.

“Did you get some rest?” Derek asked me as we sat down at the table for breakfast. Startled out of my reverie, I shook my head slightly. “Oh. Yeah, I suppose.”

“That sounds more like a no. How about I walk with you to MedCheck? I don't know why you always avoid them. It's really not bad.”

“I always avoid them?”

This time Derek shook his head. Laughing a bit, “Please. I can't remember the last time you willingly went for a check-up. It seems like the green suits are always stopping by to walk you over.”

Definitely nefarious reasons for what I was experiencing. We were supposed to go in every twenty-eight days for our blood levels to be scanned so we could receive individualized supplementation if anything was out of the ordinary. I took a supplement packet every morning. And I certainly had about a month-long supply at hand based on my morning dose.

But when did I last go?

Experiment Day 2, Day 1,758 on board. When I returned to my room after evening meal, Mason was waiting for me. “I’m worried about you,” he said. “Maybe your vitamin levels are off.”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“You just seem off. Maybe a little stressed.”

“We have been here awhile.”

“Well, sure. But still. I just don’t want you to suffer unnecessarily when a shot of B-12 might fix you up.”

“I appreciate it, Mason, I do. I’ll get my blood checked tomorrow alright?”

“Thanks, babe. I think it’ll help.”

I swallowed a grimace and said good night. With the door closed behind me, I opened the panel by my bed to record today’s notes. Just seeing all these other notebooks or journals stressed me out entirely but I didn’t have time to review them. I was having a hard time keeping my shorthand straight as I progressed through the day. I could feel the heat rising under my collar. I kept straightening out my palms, fingers splayed, trying to release the tension. I had to keep my pulse down. I shook my head at myself. *What happened after midday meal?* I concentrated and scribbled. The knock at the door caused me to start but I kept hold of my

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materials, quickly returned them inside the panel, and silently – faster than I would have thought – put the panel back in place.

I opened the door. “Hello?”

Day 3 of my experiment. Day 1,214 on board.

During breakfast this morning, the captain broadcasted an alert about space sickness again. Apparently two people had died, and a number were receiving treatment for it in the infirmary. It hadn't been this bad since those first few months on board. And that was expected. But everyone thought that after acclimation, we would be fine.

Could this explain my feeling? That we were repeating? I thought – and had been told – that space sickness had a lot more to do with incessant vertigo, vitamin deficiencies, and loss of bone mass. I was fine on all those fronts. I check in every four weeks with the green suits. I take my supplement packets. I've never received anything but good news on all of those check-ups.

“I heard Ag was hit really hard with space sickness,” Priya told the table.

“I also heard that Astrophysics lost someone,” Mason added.

“Is everyone here feeling alright?” I asked, silently asking my other question: do you think this is on repeat, too?

“Nothing out of the ordinary,” Derek said, Jane, Priya, and Mason nodding in agreement.

“Same,” I muttered, trying to keep the disappointment out of my voice.

Day 4 of my experiment. Day 1,765 on board.

Most of my experiments don't make it much past this point. I had organized my previous notes by duration. The first attempt was by far the longest. Only four go beyond Day 9. Only seven, beyond Day 4.

Last night, after putting down my notes for the day, I spent some time determining just when Alexa came into my life. Since I didn't take time to list all of my station colleagues each experiment, I can't quite tell if she's also always been a mechanical engineer, just more recently a friend. Or if she rotated into MechE and then became a friend. I tried to bring it up with Mason, but he has no sense of subtlety and couldn't pick up what I was really asking.

This led me to think back to when I became friends with each of these people. We all left family behind. Intentionally, no one could be related closer than three degrees on board. All of us had passed test after exam after psych evaluation after physical extremes after language classes and fluency scores after genotyping.

Derek was first. We met on planet, before the roster had even been finalized. Someone farted during a training session and we both laughed at the same time. Everyone else glared at us, even the girl who had farted. This just made us both laugh harder. We've never been romantically entangled, though we did have a fun romp after too much champagne one New Year's Eve and agreed that, though fun, not worth it to the friendship.

Priya – we also met on planet first, but already knew we'd been rostered. Command was trying out some team building schtick and both of us showed up to goat yoga. After each failing to attract an animal to play with us, we decided to head off for booze instead and had been friends ever since. We've never been romantically entangled, though we did occasionally depend on each other to thwart unwanted romantic interest from others.



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Mason was stationed next to me during our initial rotations. Though we both still reported to MechE, our jobs had evolved but so had our friendship. He was complicated, or really, we were complicated. But we had become something immediately, after we had moved out of lift off and into orbit. Shifts were faster together. Meals more pleasant together. Space life less boring together. We just couldn't be too together, or we didn't work.

Jane worked with Priya. They, too, had become fast friends and Priya brought her into our group right away, much like I had Mason. She and I didn't have much of a relationship outside of the group, but she was integral to the group. Family, really.

But Alexa. I kept coming back to this. We've been out here nearly five years and I don't remember her until sometime in the last year or two. Was she to be trusted?

Day 5 of my experiment. Day 1,746 on board.

I woke today with a splitting headache. The lux was turned all the way up to therapeutic UV rays before I even realized the sun was rising. I was so sluggish that by the time I left my room, nearly everyone was already in the cafeteria. I had taken three ibuprofen with my supplements. My lack of appetite, cause for conversation.

I didn't fall asleep at my station during shift today so much as completely blank out. Thankfully, I wasn't doing in calculations today, just triple-checking engine audits. Thank heavens for Alexa. She came over to chat and brought me back into focus. That's it for today. I need some rest.

Day 6 of my experiment. Day 1,734 on board.

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I overheard something today that I can't quite make sense of. Derek was very angry with Alexa. "It's not helping," he said to her. "I think it's making it worse."

"Making what worse?" I had asked. Alexa flushed. Derek shook his head, tersely. Priya and Mason sat their trays down.

"I'll tell you more later," Derek said softly to me.

But then I asked him about again after midday meal and he claimed to have no idea what I was talking about. "What isn't helping?" I repeated.

"You asking me about things that I don't know anything about!" Derek laughed, annoyed. Then everyone was there again, so I quieted down.

Tomorrow, I'll ask Alexa.

Day 7 of my experiment. Day 1,768 on board.

"Do you mind if I join you all?" CJ had gold stripes. I'd seen him before but I wasn't sure where, but he was looking at Alexa at breakfast and she smiled at him, the kind of smile that made me think that "you all" really meant "all of Alexa." At first I didn't think much of it. We'd all occasionally spend time with other people, who in turn would spend time with the rest of us.

But I kept catching him looking at me. And then Derek glaring at him. Priya even. She shook her head at him at some point. I wanted to ask about it but I also had been feeling lightheaded since waking up and didn't want to risk appearing off.

Later, at midday, CJ showed up again, this time sitting right between Alexa and me. The conversation was pretty typical until he asked me about what I did.

"I'm just in MechE. Like Alexa and Mason. Usual stuff." I responded.

"Always?" CJ asked.

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“Umm, yeah. Like everyone else.” I felt my throat getting tighter.

“I could’ve sworn I met you early on, but it would’ve been in Med.”

“But you’re in Astrophysics, aren’t you?” Motioning at his gold.

“Now. Yes. But just since second cycle.”

Then Priya knocked over her cup, sending us all laughing and avoiding the mess. We didn’t settle back in at all.

And so then, back in MechE, I asked Mason. “Second cycle? I don’t know what that means.”

Mason looked down, sad, but also literally down, eyes on the floor. “I’ll come by later – tell you all about it.”

I’m waiting for him now.

Day 8 of my experiment. Day 1,219 on board.

At services this morning, I sat in my usual row. Sometimes Priya and Jane join me but not today. And Mason and Derek rarely come. I know I come out of habit. I know it reminds me of my family, of home. But somehow, things also seem more real in the little pseudo-chapel. Less scripted.

For instance, the preacher today said something about “all of the years, all of the trials, all of the joys . . .” If it’s only been three years or so, would she say that? And then, during the part where we view a missive from ground control, I could’ve sworn I heard someone refer to “first cycle” but then quickly, the sound cut out. Just adding to my list of things to investigate. I tried using the search engine but nothing came up.



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Day 9 of my experiment. Day 1,770 on board.

Something is very wrong. I was walking behind a few people on the way toward MechE after breakfast. One of them mentioned “fourth cycle” and then someone else shushed them. “You know not everyone can manage and there aren’t enough people.”

I slowed down so they wouldn’t think I had heard them. Mason hadn’t come by the other night, he wasn’t feeling well. I hadn’t thought anything about “second cycle” yesterday. But now. Fourth cycle? I couldn’t catch Priya at midday – CJ had turned his inquisition to her and mostly ignored me. I can’t ask Jane. And Derek is definitely avoiding me. I have to go to evening meal. I don’t know how much longer I have.

Day 10 of my experiment. Day 1,738 on board.

“You know what happens when she’s confronted with the cycling!” Alexa whisper yelled.

“But she senses something is off. She knows! And this is worse, I’m certain.” I’m sure it was Derek talking to her.

The mealtime whispers were now confirmed. I’m sure they weren’t expecting me in this part of the ship right now, but I had gone to the archivists trying to find out more about our progress this entire time aboard. The records were not helpful in the least. Minutia and technical readouts. But this exchange?

Alexa continued, “It’s not her fault – some people cannot handle that earth is gone. When the anomaly occurred, their brains literally could not make sense of it. We have to continue as though nothing has changed. When the green suits give us the go ahead to release the information again, then we will. And we will all be with her when it happens to keep her safe.

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The cycle will continue until everyone is brought forward.” She was calm by the end of her speech. I couldn’t see her or Derek but I could feel their tension wane. I rushed back here, skipping evening meal.

How could earth be gone? And I not know? My chest is very tight, and my pulse is pounding just remembering this. Time to —

Day 1,873 on board.

I’ve had it. Something is going on here. I’m going to try to track what’s happening because I have this strange feeling like I’ve been through all this before. Heard the same sermon. Received the same space sickness alert. Even talked with Derek about the same shit over and over again. And not in the way that you have the same conversation again and again (“how’s it going? fine, how are you?”). But in the way that can’t be explained away with déjà vu or years of friendship. I’ve managed to procure a small notebook, and I think I can hide it in the panel beside the bed. I’ll just have to be careful to not be too descriptive in what I write. Perhaps a shorthand will work. I’ll start tomorrow with this experiment. Day 1,874 on board. Day 1 of my experiment.

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