

[Colony #A4829: LOG]

The first thing you need to know about me is that I was born for this.

It doesn't look like much now, I'll give you that. But it's mine. I've fixed every glitch in every computer on this dusty heap of rock. I've trekked halfway across this asteroid and back every day to sweep the solar panels. I clean the pipes; I patch the airlocks- I nursed the biosphere back to health on my hands and knees when a fungal disease slipped through quarantine.

I was made for this world. So I'm not bailing now. I'm not.

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The power's going to go out. I can't keep it up for long with the emergency batteries- not with no sun to recharge the solar cells.

Eventually I'll have to divert all of it to life support systems. And then, the lights will go out. It'll be pitch black.

This was all planned for, of course. The asteroid's orbit passes behind one of the gas giants in this system- larger than Jupiter, larger than Saturn. And the three months that I'll be in its shadow were always accounted for. With careful rationing, the stored energy from the solar field will last me throughout that time, even though the solar field itself will be nonfunctional.

But light is an excess. I don't need it to survive. So for the next ninety days, I'll live in total darkness.

This was all planned for. I was warned this was going to happen.

Funny thing is, though, there's a difference between intellectual knowledge and actual experience.

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I'm done moping. I'm turning off the power in five minutes. Which means I'll stop using this log. Can't waste energy on luxuries when I'll basically be on the edge of running out of power for the next three months.

I've already turned off life support for the biosphere. It's an efficient system- aside from saving energy, when the plants die, the nitrogen will return to the soil. It's the equivalent of a giant compost pile. After the shadow passes, the heat lamps will turn back on, the hoses will pump water again, and the seeds of the dead plants will begin to sprout. Very practical. A perfect system.

It's not like I could have seen them, anyways.

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Power's out. It's been out for days, I think. Hard to tell with no light. I've been trying to sleep.

I kept myself away from this thing for as long as I could, but I'm going crazy in here alone. I've been tracking the flashes of light from the oxygen monitor. Sometimes I fall asleep while watching it, and all I can see in my dreams is that pulsing red light.

How many times did I wish, back on Earth, that I could do nothing for a day? Just sleep, eat, and breathe.

I was an idiot. I can't stand this.

So, yeah. I'm using the log again. I figured if I don't move much, I can make up for the loss in power. Don't know what I'll do when the batteries on this thing run out.

I could call control. No, ignore that. I can't call control. If I'm going to stay here, I have to be able to wait out these months. If I call them, they'll be sympathetic. They'll bring a counselor to talk to me, reassure me. They'll let me turn on the lights.

Then they'll put me on the next ship to Earth and send someone else to take my place.

So no. I can't call control.

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Sometimes I don't know if I'm asleep or awake.

Every time I close my eyes, I see that red light. I see it flashing, taunting me, a blip interrupting an endless sheet of darkness. I think it's almost worse than having nothing at all.

I try not to blink. I try not to move much. Once I swear I saw my hand, outlined in moonlight on the floor.

I don't dream in color anymore. I dream in black and red, black and red. I remember touching the leaves of a palm tree- I remember the taste of a date in my mouth- but I don't remember their shapes.

Black and red, black and red.

How many more days?

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Yesterday, I walked around the station. I stumbled more than I'd like to admit- and used valuable power in the process- and I could feel eyes on my back, flashing open and shut- rhythmic like a heartbeat. At one point I ended up outside the biosphere. An airlock separated us, but I swear I smelled the rotting leaves, the decay seeping through the floor.

It made me want to vomit. But with the orchard dormant or dead, the only food I have is one hundred and ninety vacuum sealed meals- one for each day I'll be in the darkness, plus some for the time it takes to get new seeds started. If I lose my lunch, I go hungry. I can't afford to waste food.

So I swallowed the bile down and crept back to the oxygen monitor. It blinked at me, over and over and over again.

I hate that thing.

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I dreamed I found an EVA suit. Just outside the biosphere airlock, tucked behind a corner.

When this program was started, control toyed with terraforming the asteroids. Make an atmosphere thick enough to breathe in, implement a self-contained water cycle- one particularly ambitious team suggested micro-versions of all of Earth's biomes, contained on one tiny floating rock.

But it was too expensive, too impractical. So they made the biosphere for farming and oxygen filtering and gave the habitants EVA suits for everything else.

They're sleeker than they used to be- easy to maneuver, able to adhere to the rocky surface of the asteroids, making walking in low gravity a lot less of a pain.

We were supposed to use them for strictly necessary purposes- clean the solar panels, do maintenance on the ship, take samples of the local rocks. The EVAs cost a lot. They lasted a long time- fifteen years if you took care of them right. But we were lifers. Eventually, they'd wear out, especially if we took them out every day. Control didn't want us to use any more than we had to.

But every Tuesday, I'd suit up and head outside to watch the stars. I'd see comets, sometimes. I'd make up new constellations, chart them in the sky. The Sail. The Gate. The Lanternfish.

I can almost see them in my mind. Almost. But every time I get close, they dance away.

I need to see them again.

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I did something stupid a few minutes ago. Something hugely, colossally stupid.

I found my EVA suit.

It was where it was in my dream. Tucked in a corner, just outside the biosphere door. I nearly crashed into it.

I've got to see the stars. If I see the stars, I can make it. I can get through this darkness. I just need to see something that isn't a red dot in the dark.

I need it like I need air.

Problem is, the suit has no power.

Modern EVA suits are less bulky now because they no longer need to carry electricity with them. The benefits are many- the suit is lighter, more maneuverable, less prone to sparking. There's just one problem for me. They have to be charged up before you go.

In order to get this suit functional, I have to activate its charging pad. Charging the suit to full power takes a huge amount of electricity. Electricity that powers the water reclamation, emergency communications, and, of course, the oxygen monitor.

I could charge it for a half-hour's use only. The amount of power would still be more than I can afford, but-

I need to see the stars. If I see them just once, I won't do it again. I'll stay in the station for however long that takes. I won't move. I'll barely breathe.

If I don't see the stars, I'll lose my mind.

The choice is obvious.

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I'll admit it. I cried like a baby when I saw them.

Then, when I finally got a hold on myself, I checked this suit's systems and nearly started bawling again.

It's only been three weeks. Less than a month. I have sixty-nine more days to spend in total darkness, with only the red dots for company.

No more stars. No more light for two months.

Nothing to do but sleep and eat and breathe.

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I held out for as long as I could. Until I could smell the rot coming from the biosphere no matter where I was in the station. Until I saw eyes in the darkness, palm fronds in the corner of my vision.

When the oxygen machine started whispering to me, I climbed into the suit so fast I must have broken some kind of record. And then I was outside again, stars dancing in my vision.

I lay on my back for hours, drawing pictures in the sky. I watched the constellations shift until the suit began to blare. Then, only then, did I check the clock.

I have sixty-two days before I have light again.

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It's beginning to become a habit.

Here is my normal weekly routine:

I lock myself inside until I can't tell the difference between sleeping or waking. I siphon power from the life support systems, trying to ignore the steadily decreasing levels. I suit up. I stare up at the stars until my eyes water, because I'm too afraid to blink now. Every time I close my eyes, I feel hands on my shoulders, hear voices in my ear.

Then I walk to the solar panels, using a flashlight in my suit to light the way. Force of habit.

Here's the strange thing-

Right before I turned off the power, I tilted the solar panels forward, to keep dust from collecting on them while they weren't in use. I'm sure I did.

But now, their faces point straight up. Up at the stars.

Like they're trying to collect that little bit of light.

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Darkness, red light, stars, darkness. Palm fronds. Hands on my shoulders. Eyes in the corners of the room. The taste of dates in my dry, crumbly meals.

I have memorized every step of this station.

Forty-five days until I see light again.

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Can anyone hear me?

I feel the eyes watching me when they think I'm not looking.

They blink in sync in a grid of hexagons.

I can't do this anymore. The power level's low. I'm not going to make it.

I don't remember the sun. I don't remember anything.

I don't know how many days I have left. But it's not enough.

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[Static.]

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[TRANSMISSION RECIEVED FROM COLONY #A4829]

*I see light. I see light. Endless light.*