

THE FIRST OF MANY BEGINS AGAIN

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The space mission to colonize the exoplanet Polaris IX was about to begin.

Shirley flexed her fingers inside the digital space suit and watched them dissolve into strings of light. She had led dozens of dematerializations as mission chief, yet this one troubled her. Polaris IX was not merely habitable; it was the first planet believed to host a planetary-scale consciousness. If the mission succeeded, humanity would no longer be alone among thinking worlds.

As her body unraveled particle by particle, an unwelcome, clear sensation surfaced: *I have done this before*. The thought did not feel like a memory. It felt like a function of her consciousness. Along with it came a precise, perfectly formed, but without context, phrase: *the first of many colonizations begins*.

Shirley frowned. The sentence was not stored in her mnemonic logs.

“Computer,” she said, pretending to be calm, “flag anomalous mnemonic activity.”

“Acknowledged,” replied the Magmatic. “Probability of recurrence: non-zero.”. Non-zero!

Around her, the bodies of the other hyper-humans laid suspended, dissolving into light. Their minds, continuously mapped and stabilized by the Magmatic’s sentient intelligence, fluctuated into a virtual substrate where biological time did not flow. In that state, they could be accelerated to 289,324 km/s without cellular damage. Physical re-embodiment would materialize only after deceleration.

As the Magmatic decreased the cruising speed and entered the reassembly corridor near Polaris IX, pressure resumed behind Shirley’s eyes: that was the familiar prelude to embodiment.

Then the computer spoke: “Warning. Reassembly anomaly detected. External interference identified.”

The interference originated from the planet itself.

For millennia, scientists had theorized that the universe was a living organism and consciousness was not exclusive to neural systems. Stellar magnetic fields and gravitational gradients could give rise to awareness. What remained uncertain was whether such awareness possessed agency.

Polaris IX did.

The planet emitted unknown---till then---patterns of electromagnetic waves that subtly altered the biochemical constants governing life aboard the Magmatic. Gamma emissions, registered as benign radio waves, bypassed the Magmatic's standard shielding systems. As a result, the neural backups that coordinated bodily reconstruction failed to activate the ship's biochemical countermeasures.

Cells reassembled out of sequence. Proteins misfolded. Organs failed to recognize themselves.

Shirley felt her body returning, but not as a whole. Pain fragmented across her awareness as tissues rejected one another, each following a different biological instruction. Beneath the agony, her point of view slipped.

A red horizon intruded, and dust suspended in it.

A voice, her voice..."Shirley. Shirley. Shirley."

The Magmatic attempted emergency corrections. Thrusters fired, then failed. Polaris IX's surface roiled, incandescent, reshaping itself as gravitational forces intensified. Escape velocity climbed toward relativistic limits.

The ship was no longer approaching a planet: it was being contained.

Polaris IX closed around the Magmatic as a living boundary. Within it, internal temperatures spiked. Cells attempted exchange, survival. Then the ship, bodies, and planetary matter collapsed into a single energetic convergence.

The resulting surge expanded Polaris IX's consciousness.

Click!

The Magmatic was traveling at 40,000 km/h. The space mission to colonize Mars was underway. Paul and his team were reaching the Red Planet. Upon arrival, Paul and his crew touched the Martian surface. The activities to terraform Mars and ensure human colonization of the planet began.

Paul was euphoric and laughing, breathless, shouted over the radio to his crew and all NASA personnel on Earth: "This is Commander Paul Reyes. *The first of many colonizations begins!*"

As soon as Paul finished saying those words, a flash forward. The anguish painted on Paul's face, and pain bloomed behind his eyes. His happiness and confidence almost instantly turned into fear and terror. Images forced

themselves into coherence: a woman suspended in light; a planet that burned and thought; a collapse that felt less like death than interruption.

Without knowing how, Paul understood that Mars was not the first world he had been sent to prepare. It was simply the next.

Fragments of the future assembled rapidly in Paul's mind. The Magmatic. Polaris IX. His body was no longer human. His name was not Paul, when he and his crew aboard the Magmatic crossed the black hole.

The black hole generated by Polaris IX had displaced the Magmatic into another universe, another spacetime configuration among many overlapping realities. The crew had been reassembled again: biologically viable, imperfectly synchronized. Residual imprints of other past and future lives persisted in Paul's brain and in the brains of those who preceded and would follow him, of those who followed and would precede him.

Time had no direction across overlapping universes, the same consciousness instantiated wherever expansion was possible, wherever matter could be reorganized into meaning. Bodies varied. Names rotated. Planets resisted.

Colonization was not an act humanity performed. It was a property of this consciousness. And it was still incomplete.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Samuele Murtinu is a Chair Full Professor at Utrecht University, with a passion for reading books and writing short science-fiction stories. He recently published a science-fiction story “The Self, Life in Transition” on *Bohemian Writers’ Club*. Reading books across philosophy, physics, and sci-fi has inspired this story. Authors like Asimov, Ballard, Dick, Heisenberg, Land, Lem, Lovecraft, Rovelli, Schrödinger, and Vonnegut, among others, have profoundly shaped his imagination and ideas.