The First

The last human died on a secluded planet orbiting a small red giant star in a silent corner of the Triangulum Galaxy.

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"Today we launch the first interstellar exploration vessel, the *Spero*," resounded Dr. Eli Abrams from a podium atop a stage before a crowd of several hundred people. They were in an auditorium at the project's headquarters. Behind him was a large holographic projection of the *Spero* in Earth orbit, preparing to make her departure toward the sun to generate a starbridge. She was a sight to be seen, an ivory arrowhead floating above the murky atmos of Earth, the sun sparkling off her pristine hull.

Abrams continued, "Seven years ago, Dr. Billings barged into a meeting where I was about to disband this entire project. To be frank, I was more than a little annoyed at her disrespectful interruption. But, I'm glad she did. Her efforts, and the efforts of every single member of this team have made this moment possible."

Humanity was on the verge of apocalyptic extinction. Environmental collapse had turned Earth into an uninhabitable wasteland, but not before all of its resources had been completely depleted. Human colonies extended from Earth orbit to the far reaches of the Solar System, but there were too many people and not enough to go around. It was a constant struggle to support a large population over such a vast expanse with ever dwindling stockpiles of food, water, and air. Human ingenuity, combined with gluttony and mixed with an evolutionary drive to reproduce for species survival had generated a lethal concoction that destroyed their home. Now humanity needed a new one.

Fortunately, the universe was abundant with planets suitable for human habitation. Unfortunately, even the closest planets would take hundreds of years to travel to.

Nanoprobes could be sent anywhere in the universe within the blink of an eye. Immense graviton fields could be generated that created a tiny gateway into M-space, the higher dimensions of the space-time continuum. These dimensions caused the so-called "spooky" quantum mechanical phenomena that were

impossible to explain using a simplistic 4-D model of the universe. But, the energy to produce even the tiniest gateway of a mere micron in size for a few seconds came at an incredible energy cost.

But, it was enough to send out nanoprobes. These probes were sent out, and gateways were routinely opened to download the data they had collected. Over the past few decades, scores of probes had been sent and data analyzed. Many of them reported planets or moons that could support human life with some minor terraforming.

The problem was how to generate a graviton field large enough to send a ship through. The energy requirements were more than the Sun could generate in its entire lifetime. But, nature provided a way to get around this problem, and it was Dr. Billings who had discovered it.

The gravity wells generated by even the smallest of stars were so great that if a gateway, or starbridge, were opened in the gravity well of a star and connected to that of another star, the energy requirements for opening a portal large enough for a vessel were orders of magnitude less. It would require a ship to be in the photosphere of a star, but once there it could generate a graviton field and form a starbridge to access M-space, permitting nearly instantaneous travel to any star system in the universe. Developing the shielding technology to protect a vessel in a star's photosphere had been nearly as onerous to the project as the starbridge technology.

Today marked the fruits of the project's collective efforts.

Abrams finished his speech, clips of which would surely appear later on newscasts and VR outlets, "The *Spero* will travel to a dozen different star systems over the next year, leaving science teams behind to assess the habitability of over twenty planetoids. She will then go on to explore systems that even our nanoprobes have yet to venture. Her mission is to search for intelligent life and alien civilizations, as well as new planets for potential colonization. We gather here to wish the crew of the *Spero* good luck, and to toast the achievements of every one of you!"

The crowd applauded, not just for the *Spero*, but also for their project leader. This was his final speech, for his

retirement began after that day.

A crowning achievement to a life devoted to science and saving humanity.

Pride filled his chest, its warmth spreading through his entire body. A pride not just for his contributions to the project, but mostly from the dedication and devotion of every member of the project. He had even gotten to like Dr. Billings.

Well, perhaps a little more than *like,* he thought as he glanced over at his beautiful wife, Rebecca. She smiled back. A project completed, a mission accomplished. Their work would ensure the survival of humankind, and they could now relax and enjoy their well-earned retirement together.

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"Holoviewer on. Display news reports," Rebecca ordered the housing unit's control matrix. She slid toward the living room where Eli was already seated on the couch. He hummed a jovial little melody, but his blank expression revealed that he was connected to his neural link and blissfully unaware of his surroundings. Rebecca bent down and lightly tickled him while concurrently scooting him over to make room for herself. He chuckled and his attention focused on his surroundings as the neural link closed.

The lights dimmed and a waist-high pedestal against the far wall disappeared into a holographic 3-D projection of dozens of floating news stories to select. Eli saw the one they were hoping to view and called out, "Play *Spero* Mission Update."

The projection shifted to a life-sized hologram of a news reporter standing next to an image of a green-marbled planet. The scene before them became part of their living room, as if the reporter and floating model were in the room with them.

"Salutations. I'm Cassion Plania with the latest update on the famous *Spero* Mission. What we see here," Cassion gestured to the green orb with an open palm, "is the most Earth-like planet discovered to date, with a habitability index of 98.8%. In fact, the crew has determined that no terraforming measures are even necessary. Gravity, air pressure and composition, magnetic field strength, surface radiation levels, et cetera, match those of a pristine Earth almost exactly. It's quite an astonishing

discovery, and..."

Eli reached over and grasped Rebecca's hand as they both inhaled and unknowingly held their breath. Every time an update from the *Spero* was announced, they awaited the same news that every other human in the system was waiting for. They leaned in toward the reporter, eyes locked on his unrevealing face.

At this point, the image of the planet was replaced with a rectangular shaped colony ship floating in Titan orbit, a sliver of Saturn and its rings peaking from behind the orange globe.

Rebecca released her hand from Eli's. They exhaled their unconsciously held breath and their shoulders slumped in unison, eyes darting away from the image in front of them. They both knew what the reporter was about to say.

"...a colony ship is being prepared for expedited launch for immediate colonization. In the seven years since the *Spero* began her mission, over 50 colony ships have been launched to 17 different worlds. The *Spero* herself has surveyed more than 100 planets randomly throughout our galaxy that support various forms of plant and animal life. To date, the search continues for sentient life or any traces of an alien civilization, and hope remains that one will be found."

"Stop playback. End Holoview," quivered Rebecca before turning her gaze towards Eli. "So, another planet full of life, yet not a single trace of another intelligent species out there."

"Hey, come on now," Eli reached over and put his hand on her knee, looking directly into her brown eyes with a wide smile on his face. "A hundred or so planets out of the billions in this galaxy alone? Do I really have to do the math for you? Even if a tenth of a percent of those have an intelligent civilization, we're talking about a few hundred thousand civilizations out there amongst the billions of stars and planets. And, with the abundance of life we've found so far, I'd bet my bottom credit that there are even more than that. We'll find them, and we'll find a lot of them. It's just going to take time. Space is big; it's bound to take a little time before we bump into someone out there. Be patient, dear." He smiled again, infectiously so, making Rebecca flash a smile in return just before he leaned over and kissed her cheek.

Rebecca giggled, "You're right. Of course, you're right. I

just wish we'd have found something already. It's been seven years. We need to stop investing all of our resources in colony ships and build another exploration vessel or two. The *Spero* doing this job alone is inane, to say the least."

"And we will get there. But, first, we need to stretch our legs. Get out of the solar system before she dies completely. I just wish we were younger. How exciting it would be to colonize a new world in a new star system! Imagine the marvels they must see?"

"It would be the adventure of a lifetime," she agreed, "but we've already had our adventure. We're the ones who made all of this possible. It's our legacy."

"I just directed the project, and almost pulled its plug. *You're* the one who discovered a way to make all of this feasible. But, just the same, you're right. It is our legacy. You could kind of regard us as the saviors of humanity?" Eli jeered with a hearty laugh, lifting his chin and chest in an overtly pompous manner.

Rebecca laughed in return, "Let's not even go there. Anyway, I hear that a company is building a small transport ship for permanent travel between the Sol system and Primus colony. There are now over 50,000 people on Primus, if you can believe that. It should be ready for deployment within a few months. I say we work our connections and get on the maiden voyage. Be the first tourists to the first human colony in another star system."

"I hate pulling strings, but in this case, I think it's an excellent idea! I'll give Gallus a call in the morning and he'll make it happen. He'll turn it into some huge PR gimmick with the company, I'm sure. But, you always look fantastic on holoview, almost as lovely as the real deal." Eli winked at his wife.

He jumped up and pulled her into his arms. They laughed and spun around before settling into a gentle rhythmic rocking. Rebecca put her head to his chest, gasping to catch her breath, "I'm so excited! I've dreamt of seeing a natural world for as long as I can remember!"

"Well, Primus did need an orbital satellite system installed to enhance its weak magnetic field, and atmospheric regulators are required to maintain enough oxygen to breathe, but overall, the terraforming wasn't too invasive," Eli said,

never fully able to fully disengage from the scientist within him.

“I hear the sky is blue, like old Earth, but deeper, almost purple at times. And dense rainforests with red moss and ferns instead of green...” Rebecca’s eyes were no longer seeing their living room, but were instead gazing upon those alien vistas as they came alive in her mind.

“Yes, and I hear the sights are so breathtaking that even holoviews don’t do them justice.”

“We may not have found a sentient species out there yet, but there are certainly countless marvels to keep Human curiosity and awe at bay until the end of time itself,” spouted Rebecca as she stopped and took a step back, her hands in his. She parted her lips further into an even wider smile. “I’m going to go uplink all the data there is about Primus to my neural processor before bed,” she said before she turned and raced toward the hallway.

“Not too much, you don’t want to have an information hangover tomorrow. You’re groggy and cranky for days until you’re able to fully assimilate the uplinked data. No more than three files!” he ordered after her.

“Five at most, I promise!” She yelled back.

“I better make sure we have the good coffee; it’s going to be a long morning tomorrow,” Eli joked to himself as he spun around to go check the kitchen.

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There’s a slight chill to the air this evening, thought Keyth as he looked across the valley from the patio of his isolated home. The bright yellow sun was transitioning into a deep orange-red as it descended below the horizon, casting shadows across the endless alpine forest before him. The needles of the everblue trees darkened to black as day faded, and the rumbling white noise of a distant river was rapidly washed away by the orchestra of awakening forest life as night approached.

“A perfect night on a perfect planet,” boomed a voice from behind. Keyth turned and smiled at Fynnt as he exited the house with two glasses of wine in hand.

“Perfect indeed,” he replied as he took a glass. Tonight

marked their tenth anniversary on Spero, one of dozens of planets humans have colonized since the maiden voyage of their home's namesake nearly 300 years prior. In that time, humankind had been forced to abandon their ancestral home for new lives on numerous planets and moons orbiting distant stars. Shockingly, such planetoids were abundant, each easily amendable to human habitation.

"I'm glad we chose to come to Spero. Nouvterre was becoming too crowded, too metropolitan." Fynnt had always wanted to get away from the crowds, something that Keyth had come to appreciate the older he got. The hustle and bustle of city life that he once thrived on had become cumbersome and stressful.

"I agree," he replied, his gaze locked on the almost completely dark valley. The first starts were now visible and the bands of the Milky Way would soon dominate the sky. It was rare that both moons were new moons, providing unobstructed darkness to fully appreciate the splendors of the universe. Fynnt had programmed their telescope earlier to take advantage of the event.

"I can't wait to see what you have planned for tonight's show," Keyth said. He turned around to take in his husband, his home, and his life. Gratitude warmed and enveloped him. If it hadn't been for the discovery of the starbridge drive and interstellar travel, he would never had been born and their species would now be extinct, victims of their own shortsightedness and greed. Fortunately, the lessons were learned and humanity now prospered. Hundreds of billions of humans were now spread across half the galaxy.

"The first thing I have is this," Fynnt said. He hopped over to the telescope and pressed on the holocontrol panel. "Come have a look."

Keyth walked over, took a sip of his wine, and bent forward to peer into the viewer. Before his eyes was an elegant spiral of stars. A bright spot illuminated the center, with arms extending outward counterclockwise. The interior of the galaxy was a jumble of reds and browns that increased in definition to become crisp blues and purples at the outer rims.

While still looking, he tapped his forearm and accessed his media stream to save the telescope feed to his neural tag. It would make the perfect holocination for the next time he closed

his eyes to mediate. His mind would take a virtual flight through those wispy bands, shooting through nebulae and around countless stars, losing himself to the wonders of the voyage.

"That, my love, is the Andromeda Galaxy," whispered Fynnt in his ear. "That is where we're off to next. Maybe out there we'll find someone to talk to."

The galaxy was full of life. Every planet they colonized was brimming with it. Keyth and Fynnt had a pet korimin, native to their home planet Nouvterre. But, not one intelligent species had been found. The galaxy was a lonely place for being so full of life.

Hope and statistics kept them moving forward. It was a mathematical impossibility that they were the only civilization in the galaxy, and just as improbable that they were the only space-faring one. They merely had to keep looking, and an argument had been made that they should begin to look further out.

Other galaxies are closer to the Milky Way, but Andromeda is the closest major galaxy with roughly three times as many stars as our own galaxy. If they were to find a species capable of interstellar travel, it was sure to be there. And so the decision was made to send an expedition.

Theoretically, creating a starbridge between any two stars in this universe was feasible, and nanoprobes had been sent to Andromeda already. But, this would be the first time a starbridge would be formed between stars in two different galaxies that was large enough for a ship to pass.

Another giant leap for mankind. It's funny, Keyth thought, how giant leaps eventually always became small steps. He wondered if Armstrong thought about that when he uttered those words as he stepped onto the lunar surface all those centuries ago. Or was it Glenn? He was pathetically rusty on the history of ancient space exploration.

"It's beautiful," Keyth uttered. He straightened his tunic front and turned away from the telescope and Fynnt. He ran his hand through his thinning hair, then with a strained smile he turned back to face Fynnt, "What's next?"

"What's wrong?" Fynnt asked, sensing Keyth's apprehension.

Keyth never could hide things well, especially from Fynnt.

"It's nothing... silly really. It's just. I don't know.

What if... What if we find nothing? What if there is nothing out there and we *are* truly alone?" The Minister of Intercolony Relations suddenly felt like a fumbling schoolchild instead of the experienced administrator he was. His usual sense of clarity and logical progression of thought collapsed into a maelstrom of anxiety and uncertainty. An urge to retire early and live in total seclusion began to seep in.

Throughout the years in his job, Keyth had come to learn a fundamental, and potentially fatal, truth about human existence.

Fyntt interjected, "So what if we are alone in the cosmic void? We've escaped the threat of extinction by colonizing other worlds. War, famine, disease, and poverty have all been extinguished. We are living in the golden age of humankind. There's an infinite universe to explore and endless questions to answer. We will simply continue to grow and prosper."

Keyth winced at the naivety in Fynnt's response. But, he couldn't hold it against him. It's how everyone felt. More than that, it's what everyone believed. But, feelings and belief can only go so far. Eventually reality and its consequences catches up, and humanity will have to face it and perhaps other perils one day. But, what Keyth feared most about this uncertain future was our own human biology.

"Things are good now. They're great. Yes, how can I argue with that," Keyth conceded. He took a moment to decide if he wanted to begin an intellectual debate or simply enjoy their evening together. Of course, the two are not mutually exclusive, so he decided to voice his concerns.

"I'm just afraid that our own nature will be our undoing," he began.

"How so? Like we're all selfish and will stab each other in the back if need be to survive?" Fynnt asked, pouring another glass of wine and sitting next to the fire pit he had just activated. Keyth remained standing, but set his nearly full glass down on a nearby table. When thinking, Keyth preferred to stand or pace, with his hands free to articulate as necessary.

"There's that, but I'm talking about an aspect of human survival that is often trivialized, if not completely ignored altogether. I see it almost every day at work. There's a subconscious despair that I'm afraid one day may surface, a distress caused by evolution. We are already seeing evidence of

evolution changing human anatomy between natives of different colonies. And we are a social species. We live in societies. We couple and have familial units, social circles, and so on and so forth. Our basic biology continues to evolve; what if our need to socialize likewise continues to evolve?"

He paused for a moment, and then, "What if we are evolving toward a need to socialize, to share the awes of existence with intelligent species other than our own? What will happen if we evolve that necessity, but are unable to fulfill it because there is no one out there?"

Fynnt just stared at Keyth for a second, eyes wide and mouth agape. "Wow. I never thought about that. I'm no biologist, but I think I do see one fundamental flaw to that line of reasoning though..."

Keyth already anticipated this, for he struggled with this obvious shortcoming in logic. What he observed happening and his fears for the future made no rational sense.

He interrupted Fynnt, "It's that the overall goal of evolution is to adapt for survival. And, if the socialization I describe is impossible, then the need for that kind of socialization will not evolve to begin with, and human socialization is all that we will ever require."

"Something like that," Fynnt muttered. He hated it when Keyth cut him off, but Keyth gave up trying to stop doing it umpteen years ago. Fynnt in a way had evolved to merely accept it.

Keyth acknowledged Fynnt's annoyance and patience with a guilty smile. "Sorry," he offered before continuing. "What if it's not that simple though? What if this social evolution has reached a point where it's inevitable? What if our collective hope and desire to meet other intelligent life, our endless wonder and curiosity, combined with interstellar travel somehow catalyzed some kind of unstoppable evolutionary drive?"

He grabbed his wine and took a sip. His discourse continued, "I mean, humans are a social species, right? What if the need to socialize with advanced civilizations other than our own becomes some kind of biological necessity, as essential as air, water, or food? What will happen to us? Without the ability to satiate this primal necessity, will our evolution come to a halt? Or worse, since evolution is the means by which a species

adapts and survives, what if this eventually means the end of humankind, our very demise?"

Neither said anything for a moment, then Fynnt spoke up. "A lot of "what ifs". If this does happen to be the case by some improbable scenario, then there's nothing we can do about it. Or perhaps you underestimate evolution? If we do evolve such a need and can't satisfy it, then we may simply de-evolve back to the state where human socialization suffices."

Fynnt rose and walked back over to the telescope, "Now, if that's all that's bothering you, then don't fret. There's not a damn thing you or I can do about it, and it's not anything that's going to happen in our lifetime, or even the lifetime of our great-great-great-great-grandchildren I'd venture to bet. Now, let me show you the Large Magellanic Cloud. She'll be a sight for those worrisome eyes."

"I know you're right, but worrying is in my nature. We barely escaped extinction once, and I can't help but wonder if we only delayed the inevitable." Keyth sighed and moved over to the telescope.

"Tonight, your only worry is not letting me finish this bottle of wine by myself." Fynnt declared the end of that conversation while simultaneously dictating that the rest of the evening would be reserved for non-intellectual stimulation only.

"Let's see this big space cloud then," Keyth relented as he grabbed his glass and joined his husband at the telescope.

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Trendor and his sister were sitting in the humble living room of their childhood home, visiting their parents for Colonization Day. Fifty years ago, their young parents and a few hundred other people first sat down on this desolate rock to colonize it. Approximately 1,000 years ago, Keyth and Fynnt were gazing upon their galaxy from their home on Spero in the Milky Way. Humanity had now spent 1,300 years spreading throughout the local cosmos.

Trendor often wondered what drove his parents and the other colonists to choose Ikaria of all places to colonize. The planet was essentially a barren rock, though he had to admit the geological features of the Anillis region were breathtaking. It

didn't need any major terraforming, which made it cheap and convenient. Why spend the money, effort, and time to terraform a paradise when there's a rock that is perfectly suitable for human settlement with minimal exertion? Human comforts seemed almost frivolous anymore.

"How's work going?" he asked his sister. He didn't actually care to know the response. They weren't particularly close and only spoke once or twice a year.

"You know how it is. Nothing ever seems to change." She shrugged his question off, not in the mood for silly small talk apparently. But, what else were they supposed to do while waiting on their parents to return from town?

"Got a big class this year?" he asked. His sister was a primary school teacher in the colony's school.

"Less than last year, which was smaller than the year before, and smaller than the year before that. Each year, it's the same. At this rate I won't have a job in ten years time." She rose from the dusty couch and moved over to peer out the window. Was she looking off in the distance to see if she could see their parent's transport, or did her back to him indicate a desire for silence?

"I guess that's normal. If I had the means, I'd probably get off this rock myself. Problem is, I don't think anyplace would be any better. It seems like it's the same everywhere." When he was bored, he talked. His sister knew this, so her overt apprehension to conversation was probably more a means by which to bother him than an actual desire for silence.

"You know damn well that's not the problem. The colony has actually seen a slight surge in immigration. It's just that no one is having kids anymore. Who'd want to? What's the point?" Zenna sneered in her flat tone, refusing to avert her gaze from the window. Somehow the grey and decrepit room perfectly reflected the disheartening ambiance of not just Ikaria, but one that was spreading throughout all of the colonies.

"I suppose there's no place new to go anymore," he responded. "The founding of Ikaria may be the last one ever. No one wants to colonize new worlds anymore. I remember mom and dad saying that it took more than a decade to recruit enough people willing to colonize Ikaria. I've read that back in the day there were actually wait lists for people wanting to colonize new

worlds."

Trendor was covertly interviewing his own sister for an article he was working on for the colony's news network. During Colonization Day season people tended to become more introspective, questioning the meaning of life and all of that nonsense. He thought it'd make a good op-ed piece for some quick cash. So far the article was just damned depressing!

His sister surely wasn't helping. He was hoping that the perspective of someone who works with children, who after all are supposed to be the tangible manifestation of humanity's hope for a better future, would detract from the grim disposition of his piece. He should have known better than to try and get that from his sister.

Except, this attitude seemed to go beyond just his sister's foul temperament. More and more, the average person on the street would likely react in a similarly bleak manner. Perhaps that's the real story he should be focusing on. He wasn't sure yet. But, he felt a story had to be close.

Since his sister was clearly not going to offer any free conversation, Trendor had to continue prying. "Did you see that report about birth rates falling across most of the colonies? There are even rumors of ghost colonies back in the Milky Way, whole planets that quietly died away because they just stopped having kids and people stopped immigrating. Some colonies have even begun programs to encourage people to have children, offering tax benefits and even money in some cases. Can you believe that?"

Zenna turned and gave him a look of disgust. But, then unexpectedly she dropped her crossed arms and sighed in defeat. She scuttled back over and plopped herself next to him on the old couch. She clasped her hands and peered down at the floor, "I've actually thought of asking the colony council to begin one of those campaigns, but I thought maybe I was just being an alarmist."

Her head rose and she turned to look directly into her brother's eyes, "Do you really think this is an issue, something to worry about?"

His sister was like this, going from being a bitch to your best friend in the time it takes to blink an eye. If he didn't know her better, he would be prone to believe she was being

genuinely sincere. Besides, proposing such a campaign at the end of his op-ed piece may be just the debate he needed to add the jolt the story needed.

"I don't know, sis. These programs have been quite contentious on other colonies. Those against them argue that there are billions of humans spread across a thousand worlds in a half-dozen galaxies within the local cluster, and that there is no population crisis at all. They are upset that their tax money is being used for what they consider to be useless programs. A riot even broke out in the capitol of the Kolb Union. For a poorer colony like Ikaria, such a proposal would certainly upset a lot of people. You wouldn't be very popular."

"I wouldn't like that," she snapped. "I don't have much, but at least I have respect in the community as a teacher."

She bit her lower lip, then peered down at her folded hands, "But, mom and dad did raise us to stand up for what we believe in, and I do think this is a problem." She turned her gaze back toward her brother, "Tren, I've been studying this for a while now. I'm convinced that this is something that can only be fixed if we start now. If we wait until the problem is more evident, it will be too late."

He'd never seen such fear and concern in his sister's eyes before, and she rarely spoke with such passion about anything. She was usually insensitive and downright grumpy most of the time, except when teaching. Her only true joy seemed to come from that, and he could see her desire to teach her fellow citizens about what she has come to know as truth.

"Well, Zen, then I think we should do something about it. I could write up a piece quickly, and plan the publication to coincide with your official petition to the council." He failed to mention that the article was already basically finished. He just needed a story for it, which he now had.

Then a blanket was thrown over her fire. She slouched her shoulders and her vacant eyes returned, reverting their attention back to the floor. "Nah. Nevermind. It was a stupid idea. It'd be too much work, too much hassle. What would be the point of putting all that effort into something that really doesn't impact me at all?"

And up she went, back to the wretched window.

Some would argue you should do it for selfless reasons, for

the betterment of humankind and all that, he wanted to say, but instead said nothing. There was nothing more to say. Despite her decision, he had his story. He'd end his article with a proposition to initiate a birth incentive program on Ikaria. He'd even suggest that this was his sister's idea in order to divert any heat away from him.

He couldn't care less about the issue personally, but it would certainly boost his faltering career. In these times, it was every person for themselves, even if he had to hang his sister out to dry to save his own hide. He was certain she would do the same to him if given the opportunity to better her pitiful excuse of a life.

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Svilo sat hunched in his chair, sinking into its worn cushions. It was less comfortable than standing, but certainly not worth the effort to get up. The cushions were faded with age, grime long taking over as the predominant color and pattern, much like the rest of his modest home. Dust covered nearly everything and trails amongst the filth directed him from the chair, to the food dispenser, and to the excreta recycler. A less worn path led to the sleeping area, but Svilo rarely bothered to sleep in his bed anymore. He spent most of his days sliding in and out of consciousness without bothering to move from the chair.

A foul stench crept its way into his nostrils. "Time to slip into the hygiene unit," he grumbled to himself. The only time he bothered to undergo the routine was when he couldn't bare his own reek anymore. Standing for nearly 90 seconds as the unit processed him seemed like an eternal torture.

"Might as well be clean for the trip. Dunno why, but might as well be." Yet, he continued to sit there. His mind was blank. He simply stared vacantly at the far wall. Gray with streaks of dirt around the edges, textured with tiny clumps of amalgamated dust, hair, and dead skin that clung to the walls like mountaineers on the side of a steep cliff. He focused his attention to where the wall met the ceiling, his neck tilted back and nostrils vertically aligned to reduce the onslaught of odorous attacks by his own filth.

He stared for what seemed like hours, but was probably only

minutes. Finally he slowly rose from the chair, only because his neck began to kink and he daren't relax it or face the brutal assault of his own despoilment. He didn't move though. He just stood there, again staring at that blank wall, unconsciously stroking his forearm.

He turned and looked toward the food dispenser in the wall to his right. Behind him was the entrance to his home. *Does the door mechanism still even work*, Svilo thought? He hadn't opened the door in years. To his left was the sole window to the outside world, but only a pale stream of light was able to breach through years of neglect. Even self-cleaning windows needed to be manually cleaned every so often.

He toddled along the worn path straight ahead of him that led to two open doors side by side, personal facilities to the left and sleeping unit to the right. He shook his head, took in a deep breath, and exhaled slowly. He just had to get this over with, and onward he marched into the doorway on his left.

Ninety seconds later, now clean, he fumbled his way out of the facilities room toward the food dispenser. If the automation worked, he would eat. If not, then he wouldn't bother.

Svilo pressed a random selection on the panel; he had no appetite, but the pangs in his stomach were forcing him to at least consider eating. The unit screeched and whistled, and Svilo knew even before the red "maintenance required" flashed on the screen that he would not be eating without the effort of flicking a few switches or re-aligning a phase coupler. But either task required a couple of minutes of moderate focus, and the hunger was not yet strong enough to force him from his indolence.

Maybe later..., he thought,*...oh yeah, that's right...*

There would be no later. The medical sensors indicated that he was in the process of cardiovascular failure. Immediate medical attention required. Without it, he had four to six weeks left. There was nothing more that the automed, the nanovax, or chemical therapeutics could do.

It had been more than fifteen years since he'd seen another human, and more than ten since he'd seen a broadcast or even heard a voice on the comm channels. Even if there were some way to get medical attention, Svilo knew he wouldn't. What was the point? His life consisted of endless periods of boredom broken

only by the reprieve of slumber.

For years, he tried in vain to contact another person. Anyone. The loneliness and despair eventually became so suffocating that he retreated to the shelter that only monotony could provide. He stopped living and began merely existing.

He stood halfway between the food dispenser and his chair. Standing. Looking around his meek home, taking in a deep breath and exhaling it in a futile attempt to force the weariness from his soul. Still standing, completely unable to make even the tiniest decision.

"Now what?" he asked aloud. *I'm fucking bored*, he thought. He shrugged and made a half jeer across his face. *Might as well sit back down and think of something*.

He returned to his dingy, uncomfortable chair. He sat. He stared. But, he never once actually thought. His chest rose and fell with his breathing, his heart still able to pump blood throughout his body for the time being, providing fuel to innumerable biochemical reactions within his failing body.

Mechanically, Svilo leaned forward and grabbed a small metal cylinder tapered slightly at one end from an otherwise bare table, the only item aside from his chair and pathways that were in relative terms "clean". He slid a single toggle upward as far as it would go, and he pressed the tapered end to his forearm.

A rush of euphoria flooded through his entire body and Svilo closed his eyes. In these instances, life was tolerable, almost good in fact, even if nothing more than phony escapes.

Seconds later, the overdose of crysoma took effect and stole his last breath.

And so the last human died, alone on a secluded planet orbiting a small red giant star in a silent corner of the Triangulum Galaxy. The existence of an entire species vanished, countless civilizations and legacies lost to the imperceivable magnitude of the universal expanse.

It would be 277,928 solar years later before another advanced civilization arose on a planet in the Milky Way Galaxy. Many others appeared quickly thereafter, primarily in the Milky Way, but such awakenings were occurring throughout all of the galaxies touched by humankind. These civilizations eventually ventured out into space over the course of countless millennia,

bringing forth thousands of species and trillions of lives throughout the Local Group alone.

Humankind had simply awakened too early and advanced too quickly, fueled by a voracious greed that forced them into the cosmic void before it was ready. Humanity had been the first - the first to rise, the first to fall.

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The End

Thank you for reading The First. It was, ironically, the first story I ever finished a draft of. I hope that you enjoyed the story, and I encourage you to sign up for my newsletter at http://www.danieldelill.com and follow me on Twitter @danieldelill. My first novel Lunar One is a dystopian, young/new adult story that will be released in 2018, and I hope you'll check it out.

About the Author

A native of Potter County, PA, Daniel de Lill grew up under the darkest skies on the eastern seaboard. This inspired countless nights of dreaming of new worlds and a desire to understand the nature of our universe. After obtaining degrees in French and Chemistry from Lock Haven University of Pennsylvania, he went on to earn a master's degree and doctorate in Inorganic Chemistry from The George Washington University in DC. Following a NSF-funded postdoctoral stint at the University of Nevada, Reno, he became a professor at Florida Atlantic University. After seven years of teaching and research, Daniel left the world of academia to pursue dreams of writing and publishing his science fiction and cooking lots of amazing vegan food in his hot laboratory, the kitchen. He is the author of nearly 30 scientific publications, scores of presentations, and two laboratory manuals. His first fiction novel, Lunar One, will be published in 2018.