

# *Interstellar Caveman*

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## **INTERSTELLAR CAVEMAN**

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## PROLOGUE

ERD: A HISTORY

NOBODY COULD REMEMBER WHERE EARTH WAS, OR WHAT HAD happened to it.

It was all most embarrassing.

In fact, nobody was sure whether ‘Earth’ was even the correct name. Some people argued the original name must have been corrupted. They had a point. ‘Earth’ was a strange name, like calling a planet ‘dirt’ or ‘soil.’ Giving the mythical origin of humanity a label reminiscent of compost really wouldn’t do.

The whole matter grew so bothersome that the various planets of humanity momentarily put aside their differences and came together to determine, once and for all, which planet humans had really originated on. They did it in the time-honored fashion: by forming a committee to adjudicate on the matter.

Being a committee, it didn’t attempt to reach conclusions that were actually true—that would have caused *far* too much trouble. Rather, it tried to find a world that satisfied all parties.

All the serious candidate planets were quickly dismissed in the interplanetary squabbling.

“Too far from our territory!” cried the ambassador of Sirius.

“Too close to *their* territory!” declared the delegate from Epsilon Eridani.

“Why should *we* have to give up *our* space and *they* give up none of *theirs*?” bellowed the envoy of Pollux.

Eventually, a compromise-planet was found. To anyone who bothered to look closely, it clearly couldn’t have been the origin of the human species, but that didn’t seem to matter. It was pleasant, easily accessible by most nations, and came at no disproportionate cost to anyone. At a distinctly un-glitzy ceremony, the planet was duly christened Erd<sup>1</sup>.

And so, the matter was resolved.

But then, in a rare, fleeting moment of forward-thinking camaraderie, someone suggested that Erd become home to a new interstellar organization charged with fostering peace between the different nations of humanity. Several years later, at a distinctly glitzy ceremony, the headquarters of the Interstellar League of Nations was opened.

“League of Nations,” one young, doe-eyed diplomat was quoted as saying. “How could it possibly fail with a name like that?”

Unfortunately, the League turned out to be as useful as an umbrella in a supernova, but the planet itself prospered as a renowned tourist spot. Thanks to its uniquely-historical importance (not to mention some very canny marketing) people visited annually by the millions, and the Erd Tourist Board became one of humanity’s greatest success stories as a result. Slogans of the Erd Tourist Board spread to worlds far and wide:

“Come visit the first home of our species!”

“Immerse yourself in the history of humanity!”

“See the original pool of slime where life first began!”

“Ride the *Evolutionator*—a thrilling roller coaster ride through the ages of mankind!”

“Reasonable prices! Great food! Plentiful orbital parking!”

In time, the Erd Tourist Board became the most powerful

force on Erd, possessing its own cities, its own police force, even its own star navy. The officers of the Board were some of the wealthiest and most powerful humans in existence. For as long as the spell held firm that Erd was humanity's origin, their power was assured.





# 1

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## EARTH, PRESENT DAY

COLIN STARED AT HIS KNEES.

His knees stared back at him. They poked out from under his surgical gown, knobby and pasty white. Colin had always considered them very British-looking knees.

One couldn't fail to notice, however, the right knee was hairy while the left was bald. The difference had troubled Colin throughout his life. He recalled worrying, back in his teenage years, that it would cause girls to recoil in horror, presuming he ever got the opportunity to be bare-legged with a girl.

Later, fresh into adulthood and with a couple of awkward knee-baring encounters under his belt, he'd suffered through a spate of hypochondria, and the knee hair became one of his obsessions. He went so far as to consult a doctor after convincing himself asymmetrical hair growth was a symptom of diabetes.

Now, having settled into his early thirties, Colin had come to accept his knees. He still wasn't happy about the whole knee-hair situation, but he'd reached an age where he could make peace with himself over his appearance—or form an uneasy truce, at least.

A loud beep echoed around the room, interrupting Colin's

thoughts. He didn't want to look up. He was hesitant to set eyes on anything around him, least of all that chrome monstrosity he knew was in the room with him. But he couldn't fool himself. Ignoring everything wasn't going to make it all vanish, and fussing about the hairiness of his legs was just desperate self-distracted.

The beeping resumed, grew persistent, and this time he couldn't resist raising his head. His gaze fell upon the machine, causing a chill to go down his spine. Until today, he'd only seen it in pictures. Finally coming face-to-face with it was downright frightening. It looked like a chrome-plated sarcophagus, its surface smooth and featureless except for a couple of small control panels and a tiny readout screen. Four identical machines sat in a line beside it, but those others were occupied and sealed shut. The one absorbing Colin's attention was open, its lid propped up like a car's bonnet. Inside, various cables and tubes lay atop a smooth, grey foam mattress. Colin knew those cables and tubes would be inserted about his person very shortly.

The man attending the machine tapped the control panel, and the loud beeping ceased. He turned to Colin.

"Sorry about that, Mister Douglass," he said.

Colin gave a pathetic smile. "Perfectly all right, Doctor," he whispered.

"Nervous?" the doctor asked.

"No, not really." Colin was a poor liar. Of course he was nervous. He was *visibly* nervous. Why else would his body shudder and his teeth chatter in a room that was thirty degrees Celsius? "I must be cold."

The Doctor glowed with perspiration. "Really?"

Doctor Bond was a handsome man who wouldn't have looked out of place in an aftershave commercial despite—or, weirdly, because of—his designer stubble. That men in aftershave commercials didn't appear to shave had always irritated Colin.

There he went again, trying to distract himself.

“Well,” continued Colin, “I suppose I expected it to be cold, so my body’s reacting accordingly. You know, it being cryonics and all, it still conjures up images of refrigerators to me. I’m surprised just how warm it is.”

“Yeah,” said the Doctor. “The subterranean heat keeps everything warm down here. But it’ll be nice and cool inside your pod. Not that you’ll feel it once you’re under, of course.”

Colin already knew all about the process he was about to undergo. At least he ought to have.

For the last fortnight, he’d been given so many pamphlets and lectures he should have known neo-cryonics inside out. But it was all so complex and technical he could never say he really understood it. The staff at CryCorp, the company into whose care he was about to commit himself, always asked if the material was clear to him and whether he had questions.

Perfectly clear, he would say. No questions.

Colin never wanted to admit when it all made little sense to him. He really should have. These weren’t sales assistants at an electrical retailer; he wasn’t buying a stereo and would figure out the details later, this stuff really mattered.

Nevertheless, he had made it to this point. He’d gone through a whirlwind couple of weeks: meetings, medical tests, endless forms, and questionnaires. He’d met with doctors, lawyers, civil servants. He’d emptied his bank account and mortgaged the house to afford CryCorp’s fees. The only time he hadn’t been busy was when he slept. In fact, the whole process had allowed him no time to just sit down and concentrate on being terrified. The rare, quiet moments he had managed were so short he’d barely been able to work himself up into moderate anxiety before the work began again. It had left him wondering when the real nerves would actually kick in.

The answer, it turned out, was today: the day that he would go into suspended animation.

While he had been above ground, the whole endeavor seemed oddly distant and abstract. But today, upon descending underground in a rickety elevator that a grizzled coal miner would have hesitated before using, the reality of the situation had finally hit him. The nerves had promptly kicked in with a vengeance and become worse with every passing hour. Everything he did—dressing into a surgical gown, undergoing one final medical check, getting various catheters fitted—felt like taking one step further towards the execution chamber.

A real execution chamber probably wouldn't have felt so different. The room was sterile, like a hospital ward, and about the same size. The walls were cold and white, and covered with charts, whiteboards, and banks of switches. It didn't smell like a hospital, though. The air had an earthy odor to it, mixed up with a metallic, dusty smell that reminded Colin of the London Underground. One of the few details he *had* understood was that all the equipment down here was powered by the natural subterranean heat. Apparently, it was cheaper and more reliable than using power from the grid. Colin and his insurance analyst's brain approved.

Just then, the pod made a gentle whirring sound, and its readout screen turned green.

"Well," said the doctor, closing up a panel in the pod. "Everything's set."

Doctor Bond turned and gave Colin a kindly look.

The time had come.

But Colin couldn't move. He just sat staring at the pod. He'd already given all he owned to get here, but now he would have given anything to be somewhere else. He tried to swallow, but his throat was too dry.

He had quite forgotten about his knees.

In theory, it was so simple. All he had to do was lie in the machine, and the staff would put him to sleep. Later, in only a few years hopefully, they would revive him, give him the newly-

discovered cure for his illness, and then he could get on with his life. But all those unknowns and unanswerable questions now conspired to hold him back.

What exactly was going to happen to him? To his body and his mind?

Was suspended animation going to hurt?

How long was he going to spend in there?

Would he come out the same man?

For that matter, would he come out *alive*? The technology was complicated, immature, only a couple of years old, in fact; Colin didn't even trust his own DVD player. None of the other occupants had been revived yet. He might enter the machine now, be put to sleep and, as far as he knew, might never wake up again.

Maybe CryCorp was a fraud? Maybe they had invented an elaborate way to cheat the terminally ill out of their money? Maybe the machine wasn't a stasis pod, but an expensive suicide pod?

Dear God, these might be the last few minutes of his life. Was he really supposed to just lay down and let it happen?

Sweat poured from Colin's brow, his heart pounded, and his clammy hands gripped the table beside him.

A voice snapped him back to reality.

"Mister Douglass?" Doctor Bond stepped forward, awaiting an answer.