

Corner Bar Magazine

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Page 1 – FINAL VISION by Kenneth N. Margolin. Mr. Margolin is a retired attorney, and lives with his wife, Judith, in Newton, Massachusetts. Ken's stories and creative nonfiction have been published in print and online in *Short Edition*, *Sport Literate Magazine*, *Dash Literary Magazine*, *The Blotter Magazine*, *Concrete Desert Review*, *Evening Street Review*, *Twenty-Two Twenty-Eight*, *The Literary Hatchet*, among others; poetry in *Shot Glass Journal*.

Page 7 – ONSRA by Ekatarina A. Butakova. Ek. A. Butakova is a Russian writer and poet. Her work is marked by subtle imagery, emotional precision, and a fascination with fleeting moments, memory, and inner transformation. Currently, she resides in Rome, Italy. Instagram: butakowski

Page 8 – BLUEBELLS by Evan Satinsky. The author writes, "I am a software engineer, musician, and writer of science fiction and fantasy from St. Louis. I have upcoming stories in *The Forbidden Fruit Anthology* by Newton Press, the *Opolis Anthology* by NUNUM, and in the *Folklore Literary Magazine*. More information can be found at www.evansatinsky.com"

Page 11 – DUSTWORLD by JS Apsley. The author writes, "I won the Ringwood Publishing short story prize 2024 for my debut fiction submission, "Immersion", which has inspired me to keep writing, and find homes for my other stories. I have since been fortunate to place short stories and flash fiction with a number of publishers, podcasts and presses including: *Bewildering Stories*, *Bright Flash Literary*, *Brussels Literary Review*, *The Colored Lens*, *Litbreak*, *Loft Books*, *Lowlife Lit Press*, *Lovecraftiana*, *Tales to Terrify*, *WildSound Horror Festival*, and *Underside Stories*."

Page 19 – WHAT WENT WRONG by Adam Stone. Mr. Stone writes, "My fiction has been published in *Bewildering Stories* (summer 2025), *Freedom Fiction Journal* (June 2025), *Whiskey Island Review*, *A Verry Small Magazine*, and *AIM: America's Intercultural Magazine*. I'm also coauthor of the non-fiction *Lehigh Valley: Crossroads of Commerce*.

Page 24 – DEATH ON A HIGHWAY by Frederick Charles Melancon. Mr. Melancon lives in Mississippi with his wife and daughter.



“FINAL VISION”

by KENNETH N. MARGOLIN

Joshua Morgan sat with his three buddies, Daniel, Bob, and David, in the middle of the broad meadow on the outskirts of their rural town, population 5,000, true dark sky country. They had been star gazing buddies since college, going on ten years, and officially credited with discovering two new comets. A warm late spring breeze carried the sweetish scent of the field's mixed vegetation beginning its annual decay.

“There. See it?” Josh said. “Right above the middle star of Cassiopeia. “

“Stop joshing us, Josh,” Daniel said.

Josh had been enjoying beers from the cooler, and wondered if he imagined the small orb that should not have been where he saw it, no doubt many light years away. New stars were born in the universe every day, but they didn't pop up suddenly visible from earth through the naked eye. Josh couldn't fathom how Daniel, Bob, and David, sky watchers as talented as he, suddenly went visionless.

At Josh's insistence, they returned to the field four nights later. Josh hauled along his powerful portable telescope. Josh saw the object immediately, a bright star-like object that pulsed randomly. It appeared a little closer than when he first saw it, an impossibility he knew. Even at near speed of light velocity, it would still be unfathomably distant. He attributed the phenomenon to atmospheric conditions. His pals dutifully trained their binoculars to the area

of the sky he pointed out to them. Then, each took their turn at the telescope.

“There's nothing there, Josh,” David said.

Daniel and Bob nodded their agreement. At Josh's request, they took a break and looked again. Nothing.

Daniel dropped in on Josh the next day. Their friendship had become strained, as Daniel glommed onto ever more radical environmental causes. Still, they had the sky in common. Daniel squeezed his oversized body into Josh's undersized chair. They sat across from each other at Josh's kitchen table.

“Josh, what the ~ what is going on? Are you losing your eyesight or your marbles? There was nothing new in the sky those two nights you brought us to the field.”

“I saw what I saw,” he said, annoyed as hell, “and when I prove it, I'll be sure to let you know.”

“You do that,” Daniel said, shaking his head as he walked out the door.

Josh was not as certain as he'd made out to Daniel. His hours searching at his computer, and the multiple astronomy feeds he subscribed to, brought no report of a new object in the sky. Daniel's losing his marbles theory worried Josh. Wasn't this what going mad would look like - Josh building an imaginary world that only he lived in? He knew he'd been drinking too much lately, a welcome balm for a hyperactive

mind that never ceased inventing new worries over tribulations that rarely came to pass. He raised a generously filled glass of whiskey to eye level.

“You’re not making me delusional, are you my good friend?” he said.

After a long internal debate, Josh called Professor Ephraim Abrams, head of the University observatory. Abrams had presented Bob, David, Daniel, and Josh, an award for discovering a comet now named after them, Comet DBDJ34. They became friends over late night conversations about unexplained celestial phenomena. Ephraim was a card carrying genius, and would know what to do. When Josh reached his voice mail, he left a frantic message.

“Something crazy is happening in the sky,” he said. “Call me as soon as you can.”

Ephraim called back in ten minutes.

“Hello, my friend,” he said. “There is always something crazy happening in the sky. We just usually don’t see it.”

Josh described his three sightings of the object, and gave Ephraim the precise Declination and Right Ascension where he last saw it. He told Ephraim that he could not understand how his three comet compatriots saw nothing. Ephraim expressed no judgement. He told Josh that he knew him well enough not to dismiss his story out of hand, though he expressed surprise that he had received no reports of such an object, that he would investigate and email to Josh his findings.

Five days later, Professor Ephraim’s email arrived. Josh sat down to read it. The words hurt his pride, made him doubt his own senses. Ephraim Abrams did not believe him.

Josh, I took your report of the celestial anomaly seriously, and used the full resources of the Laboratory to investigate.

First, I invited three colleagues to search the sky through our telescope. We saw nothing out of the ordinary. Next, we employed spectroscopy and infrared. All findings were from known and charted sources.

Lastly, we trained our astronomical camera for five days on the area of the sky where you described your object. Nothing unexpected. Josh - your insistence on having seen something that does not exist, worries me. I think you should seek help. I have seen persistent delusions become full-blown psychosis. It can be hard to come back from that abyss.

Yours, Ephraim Abrams

Josh checked the National Institute of Mental Health’s web page on the signs and symptoms of psychosis. What he read mostly reassured him. He’d had no trouble thinking clearly and was not hearing voices. His personal hygiene was impeccable. He had no lack of motivation to complete desired tasks. Only one item in NIMH’s list troubled him, and assessing whether or not it applied to him was like chasing his tail - “[D]ifficulty telling reality from fantasy.” If the object he discovered was real, then he was sane. If it did not exist, then he was as mad as King George.

For two tense weeks, Josh avoided looking to the night sky. On a moonless Saturday night, when he could stand to wait no longer, he walked to the field and looked skyward. His celestial orb shone blindingly bright and was now the size of a silver dollar. After a night of little sleep, Josh settled on a plan to purge any hint of hidden psychosis. He’d read that one of the best recipes for mental health was physical fitness. Despite exhaustion and his dedicated aversion to exercise, he laced on his barely used running

shoes and flailed himself to a mile and a half run. For the next five weeks, Josh filled his free time with running, biking, fast walking, and epic free weights workouts that left him sore in every cell. He did not look to the sky.

His five-week ordeal ended, Josh patted his flatter stomach at 10:00 p.m., and headed to the field. The sweetish smell of the past month was all pervasive and unpleasant as vegetation rotted toward mulch. Josh looked up. He turned away, covered his eyes like a child playing peek-a-boo, then looked skyward again. His celestial orb, as he had come to call it, was the size of the noonday sun. From the surface, gaseous plumes thrust into space, a frenzy of what could only have been hydrogen explosions of immense power. A subliminal thought that had been tormenting Josh, emerged to his conscious mind, and dizzied him into panic. His orb cast no light on the dark countryside, and had been invisible during the daylight, both violations of immutable laws of physics as was the faster than light speed of the object's approach from the void. Each licking flume was coming for him - Josh was sure of it. He had conjured the

perfect hallucination, detailed, terrifying, and impossible. He hustled home to ponder life as a psychotic.

Josh felt the first tremors three days later, while he walked back from the market on Saturday afternoon, a subtle vibration as if someone was running a mild electric current beneath the sidewalk. Reflexively, he glanced at his phone to see if there were reports of a small earthquake in the region. The headline danced across the top of the screen. "Small tremors felt around the globe, cause unknown." By the time he got home, the tremors rattled the walls. Four china cups he'd inherited from his grandmother fell off their shelves and shattered. Emergency vehicles sped through the streets, sirens blaring, to what end he did not know. By 10:00 p.m., the tremors subsided again to a small vibration, and by 10:30 p.m., had ended. Josh walked to the field and looked skyward. His celestial orb filled an eighth of the sky.

Monday. Josh awoke and as always, checked the news. Tidal waves of varying size and force, undetected until the last moments, had crashed ashore by the dozens, swamping areas on the



coasts of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, tidal waves in places they had never been seen before. Twenty thousand deaths were reported, a minor tragedy given the scope of the tsunamis. With some guilt, Josh felt relief. He was sane, and had not imagined the tremors or the news of the oceans' rebellion, just as he had not imagined his celestial orb.

He ate dinner in front of his television that night to catch the address of two-time Nobel prize winner, Professor Hiroshi Tanake, University of Tokyo, renowned for his breakthroughs in Earth geology. Tanake had been chosen to head the hastily assembled international team of scientists tasked with understanding the cause of the recent planetary arrhythmias. His team included men and women of breathtaking achievement: Professor Audrey Resper, McGill University, Geology; Professor Jonah Thatcher, M.I.T., theoretical physics; Professor Jonathan Morris, Harvard University, Oceanography; Professor Gao Wang, Shanghai University, quantum physics; John Hirsh, Director of the Institute for Unexplained Phenomenon.

Professor Tanake, in his early 70s, was a compact man, small in stature, large in presence. His face bore the dignity of ancient Japanese culture. His mind possessed a once in a generation brilliance. He addressed the gathering of scientists, and the world, by video with his customary brevity:

As you all know, something inexplicable is happening to our planet. The phenomea, the worldwide tremors, the tsunamis with no known precipitating quake, emerged without warning and abruptly ceased before catastrophic harm was done, though the tsunamis killed thousands. We do not know the cause of the phenomena, whether there will be more unparalleled events, the shape

they may take, or how long they might last. Our task is to understand the source of the disturbances so that we may prevent more profound outbreaks. We must not fail.

Professor Tanake bowed slightly from his waist, and signed off.

Josh popped two caffeine pills and brewed a pot of coffee. If he was not insane, the events of the past weeks were real. A cataclysm, the end of days, hurtled toward Earth, and in a planet of eight billion people, no one, not even scientists with their most advanced instruments, knew it, only Josh Morgan, regular American guy, amateur astronomer, co-discoverer of two comets. He needed a plan, and by 3:00 a.m. he had one. Josh decided to catch some sleep before the start of the next day.

Shortly after dawn, Josh went outside and scanned the sky to see if the orb had finally shown itself in daylight. The sky held nothing but a few cumulous clouds and the sun. Back inside, he checked his computer for news of the extraordinary event. Only same old same old, murders, car jackings, politicians bashing one another, suburban coyote sightings, cats rescued from trees. He logged into his Instagram account, that he used mainly to communicate with other amateur sky watchers, and began his new page, DESTROY THE UNSEEN MEN-ACE. He drew an exaggerated image of the orb as he'd last seen it, depicting it as menacing as possible, then added an animated video of the orb growing larger and larger in the night sky until it collided with Earth, reducing it instantly to cosmic dust. Along with the visuals, he wrote of what he saw, and the unbelief of "the self-anointed experts." "It is up to us," he wrote, "to save the planet and humanity's future."

Josh's hopes were exceeded. His page

tapped into mostly restless and alienated young men who harbored hero fantasies. Two days after he posted DTUM, he had thirty thousand followers. By the end of the week, his page had gone viral, racking up more than a million views. He attracted acolytes, who posted such messages as, “the fat and comfortable wielders of power will never have the imagination to believe the Truth.” Ennui and the need to feel meaningful was a powerful force, and it drove Josh’s Instagram initiative to notoriety. It was time to act decisively. “To my loyal viewers,” he wrote: “Join next week’s March on the White House. We need a hundred thousand or more. The President cannot ignore us, and he will take the necessary emergency actions to DESTROY THE UNSEEN MENACE.

Once word of Josh’s call to march on Washington became widely known, he accepted an invitation to be interviewed on a major television news network. The host could not keep the bemused expression off his smug face.

“How do you explain,” he asked Josh, “that this fearsome orb you describe, has been seen by no one else? Do you think God has chosen you to save Earth?”

Josh ignored the implication that he harbored savior delusions, and answered the question straight.

“That’s a religious question,” he said, “above my pay grade. If there is a God, perhaps he has chosen me. After all, only one man, Moses, was chosen to deliver the Ten Commandments.”

Josh congratulated himself after the interview, basking in the massive publicity his message of the dire emergency would receive - until he watched the next guest, a psychiatrist who specialized in delusional thinking.

“Many individuals suffering from psychosis

are highly intelligent,” he intoned. “They create elaborate fantasies, that can be as imaginative as any by the great science fiction writers. These people can be persuasive because they truly believe the fantasmical scenarios their minds create. Inevitably, reality intrudes and their fantasies crash to the ground. Intervention then is urgent, lest in their despair they become a danger to others, or more commonly, themselves.”

Josh had no time to rage over the fools who ran the television network. He had a massive march on the White House to lead. Early on the morning of the announced day, Josh set up a staging area in Lafayette Park, and waited for the busloads of believers to arrive for the 10:00 a.m. start time. By 10:30 a.m., the longest Josh felt he could delay, he counted heads. Thirty young men were his army. Slovenly, agitated and angry, thick black eyeglasses, t-shirts emblazoned with the depiction of the orb taken from Josh’s Instagram page, their fashion statements, they gathered expectantly around their leader. Josh mustered false bravado.

“To the White House,” he yelled into the bull horn that was comically unnecessary. The small band trudged behind him, shouting the words hand-written on their placards - “Destroy the Unseen Menace.” At the White House gate, the group was addressed by a Federal Marshall, flanked by a dozen behind him.

“The President won’t be able to see you,” he said, “but, I will make sure he is advised of your concern.”

Josh thanked him, and turned to the group.

“We’re done,” he said. “You gave it your all. The world will thank you.”

The marchers milled about for a few minutes, aimless and disappointed, then dispersed back to their anonymity.

Josh drove the three hours to his home, de-

spondent, defeated. The march received sparse newspaper coverage, and became a humorous footnote to a couple of late night news shows. Three days post-march, he paced his living room a hundred times, sat on his sofa, stared at the wall and awaited night, when he prayed to find that the orb had changed its course or disappeared as magically as when it first became visible. At nightfall, Josh looked up, and saw what he feared. The orb filled visibly more of the sky than last night. It shimmered and pulsed, its tentacles roiling ever further from the surface. Josh sat out on his deck to await whatever would come.

He did not have to wait long. A low rumble like the first warning of an approaching violent thunderstorm, began somewhere deep below the surface. With a loud crack as if lightning had struck a nearby tree, the ground at the edge of his property split open. Thick liquid bubbled to the surface. On the eastern horizon, the sky glowed red. Josh could see the outlines of the three distant low hills that he'd gazed upon hundreds of times from his home. They quivered.

A volcanic eruption spewed from the middle hill, shooting molten lava two hundred feet into the sky. Moments later, the left-hand hill exploded and disappeared. From somewhere in the distance, Josh heard a collective human screaming and wailing. The cries grew louder, then were gone. Silence.

A new sound, sloshing and whooshing, approached from a source Josh could not yet see. With the sound, a familiar scent that he could not quite place, salty and tangy, reached his nostrils. A breeze carrying the scent brushed his cheek, scorched it, and Josh understood. Though he was sixty miles inland, it was a sea breeze. The oceans, superheated by volcanic

eruptions, were reclaiming the land that they yielded at the birth of the continents three billion years ago.

Josh sits calmly now on his deck. He can see the waters advance, thirty feet high, sheets of fire dancing on the surface. The water soothes him in an odd way, though it is hot, so hot. Very soon, none of this will matter. Earth's end is at hand. The terror from above that only he will ever see, is closing in. ❖

“ONSTRA”

by EKATERINA A. BUTAKOVA

I feel them coming.

Thomas Grasshopper writes, then circles the phrase several times, pressing hard with a thick-tipped pen. Right next to the word “feel”, the pen pierces the paper, leaving a tiny hole, and with that, the man finally begins his work. In the room that serves as his home office, a cozy table lamp illuminates the desk, where he sits, slumped in fatigue. His fingers tap confidently on the keyboard, and the screen displays endless columns of numbers.

Through the open window he feels the thin, rarefied air and sees the sky, gradually fading from heavy blue to grimy gray, then into black, much like the shapes he sketches in the margins of the notebook. But Thomas no longer cares about the rain; the storm warning notifications on his phone have been turned off for years. As a boy, he ran outside with the first drops of rain, clinging to his dreams and hopes, but every time he came home soaked to the skin, his cheeks flushed from the cold, his nose runny. He used to step out at the sound of thunder in the early years of his marriage, even after his first son was born, but not anymore. Outside the window, a razor-sharp wind is already howling like a trumpet blast, heralding a real storm — “just like the last one,” Thomas thinks, multiplying numbers on the screen.

Sometimes he takes his eyes off the monitor to sip chilled coffee from a little squat cup with blue rings. It’s a gift from his wife — Milly.

Molly? She loves those silly things cluttering the house.

Lightnings slice the sky like cracks in a giant blueberry pie. Thunder roars, spilling over the windowsill. Thomas turns, but sees only the perfectly round raindrops, and turns back to the hateful monitor. The lamp flickers once, and Thomas keeps pounding on the keys. The lamp flickers twice, and the man jabs nervously at it with his finger. The lamp flickers three times, and Grasshopper jumps up from his seat, ready to throw the worthless thing away. The idiot lamp is Milly’s choice. Molly’s.

The lamp flashes four times and Thomas starts counting. He counts again and cries out. In disbelief, the man throws the window open wider. The giant droplets stream down his head and neck, and run under his collar. It’s no longer just a windstorm — it’s a deluge. A tempest. “It’s the end of the world,” Thomas whispers. He hurries back to his desk and, his hand trembling with excitement, writes: “I feel them coming.”

Thomas rushes to the door, then down the stairs, pulling everything out of his pockets — wallet, license, passport, keys and a photo of his wife. Drenched by the icy downpour, he races farther from the house. He shouts with joy, like a lost child who’s just been found. He lifts his arms, and in the light of distant, frozen planets, ascends into the sky. ❖

“BLUEBELLS”

by EVAN SATINSKY

The airship emerged from the cloud cover into the bright day, an infinitesimal speck floating between two seas of vibrant blue. Eilion stood on the bow balcony of the ship, staring up at the sky through the invisible airfield which cut through the atmosphere like a knife, the sharp prow which the ship's balloonlike structure lacked. The sky was empty, not a cloud before him despite the overcast skies behind, and more importantly to Eilion, no twin speck of the ship he had been tracking across that cloudy stretch. Frustrated, he pressed a button on the small controller set into the railing to set the ship's sensors back to scan—he would have to continue flying in the direction his prey had last been spotted and hope for favorable winds, as sailors had done for eons before him.

After one final glance at the deep blue ocean above, Eilion turned his gaze to the one below. Stretching out across the land—and, Eilion knew, across the entire continent—was a field of blue. Like the famous pointillist portraits in the galleries back on Cypris II, this sea blended together into smudged waves from so high up, but he knew it was made of a billion billion bluebells. The little violet flowers which had been growing in the corner of the hydroponics bay on a colony ship—the pet project of an artistic botanist—had quickly taken over the local soil, pushing out much of the flora, forcing much of the fauna to adapt or die, and

growing twenty times their usual terrestrial size. Now the continent was a sea of blue to match the waters which surrounded it, and hardly a human lived there to enjoy the sight.

Eilion only let himself stare at the mesmerizing view for a minute before stalking back inside his airship, his black cloak flowing back behind him, where he sat before the controls to attempt once more to find his quarry. The office which acted as bridge of the single-person craft was decorated in quite a sentimental way, a side of Eilion he didn't often show around his colleagues and subordinates in the Planetary Security Agency—the walls were papered to look like the wooden beams of a seaworthy vessel, and maps, sextants, and other nautical devices hung on the walls, all useable and useful, for times when he didn't wish to stare for so long at pixels on a screen. The rest of the space held books and vidbooks, stacked onto bookshelves of real wood fastened tightly to the walls, their glass doors locked tight against any potential turbulence. Not that there was any, not often—Eilion was a masterful flier.

The sensors pinged and the screen lit up red. In one fluid motion, and with a curse under his breath, Eilion swept back out onto the balcony and leaned over, hands tight on the railing. Below him and ahead flew his prey. His own ship was already descending to match the other's altitude, but he had lost valuable time

scanning the skies, time the other ship—nearly as quick as his own—had used to pull ahead. Eilion was still certain of his victory, of course, but keeping face in a flight like this was nearly as important as completing his mission, and Pareon would surely be sitting in her ship laughing now as she tracked his descent. The bandit had almost caused Eilion to lose his head more than once, an impressive feat against one as cool and professional as he.

As Eilion's ship neared level with Pareon's movement from the ground caught his eye. He was now close enough to see the individual bluebells wave smoothly in the stiff breezes which circled this world, but directly below the racing airships the flowers whipped aside more vigorously. As Eilion stared, gaps in the flowers showed a pack of wolf-like creatures, large, gray canids loping easily between the flowers' tall stalks. Their powerful bodies had grown thin in the generations since the bluebells had appeared, the better to snake through the bunches, but they had lost none of their strength, nor their ferocity. Eilion couldn't see what they were hunting, but he felt a certain kinship with them as he regained his footing in his own hunt.

Static burst from the radio near Eilion's head, and then Pareon's taunting voice cut through—it was choppy and distorted due to the airships airfields, but Eilion could hear her voice as if she was standing next to him.

"Welcome back, Lion," she said. Eilion saw her step out onto her stern platform and wave to him, her white, thin suit standing out against the dark metal of her ship. He couldn't make out her face, but could imagine her sneering expression. He growled and picked up the transceiver.

"You won't escape this time, thief."

"Whatever you say, Lion," she said with

what looked like a blown kiss and jumped back into her ship. She knew he hated that nickname. He had to stay professional or she *would* escape again. Eilion looked down.

The wolves had found open land, or at least as open as the land got on this continent, with feet rather than inches between bluebell stalks, and the animal they were chasing had bounded into view as well. The antelien looked like a deer but ran rather than bounding, and although it looked as fast as the wolves, its larger body and wide antlers slowed it considerably in the tighter confines of the bluebells. It pulled away slightly as it ran through the clearing, but the entrance back into the thick of the flora brought the hunters back within snapping range of the hunted. Eilion smiled at the sight—he felt like his fate was tied with those hunters down there, somehow, and as they wove through the stalks their prey had to push through, so was Eilion's ship gaining on Pareon's, close enough now to begin to ride its tailwind.

Pareon began to weave through the air, taking a longer route herself but allowing the wind to buffet Eilion's ship too, throwing off its engine algorithms. Eilion switched to manual with the press of a button and ignored the wind completely—these stunts of hers couldn't change the fact that he was faster. He stayed out on the balcony though, one eye on the wolves as they began to flank the antelien.

The two hunts turned together. Pareon pivoted on a dime, deploying some kind of thrust tiller to swing around in midair to face Eilion's ship head to head. At the same time, the wolves pulled up beside the antelien and began to steer it sideways, into a thicker clump of bluebells, the panicking animal snapping stalks with waves of its deadly antlers, but missing every wolf it aimed for. Eilion smiled a grim smile and

turned into the oncoming ship. His stronger shielding and sharper weapons would rip Pareon's ship to shreds—Eilion wasn't worried about potential damage to his own; only capture mattered now. The antelien stopped altogether and the wolves surrounded it, snapping at its heels, playing with their food.

A weird motion from the hunt down below caught Eilion's eye, and he couldn't help but take his gaze from the ship which was moments away from colliding with his own to stare horrified at the scene on the ground. The bluebells—which had been waving calmly in the wind, as they always did—suddenly sprang to life, their trumpet-like heads whipping around as if sniffing the air, opening and closing like slaver-ing mouths. The animals—predator and prey alike—tried to flee, but the flowers were too fast. Giant blue jaws closed over legs, heads, entire bodies, and when the petals closed they did not bend as leaves should, but rather hardened and sharpened and stuck deep into the flesh of their prey, blue blood spurting. Within moments, the animals were entirely gone, eaten skin and bone, flesh and antler.

Eilion looked up, knowing what he'd see. Dozens of blue birds as large as cars were dropping out of the sky onto the two airships, perfectly camouflaged but for the black of their beaks and the red of their eyes. They pierced through the airfields as if they were butter, bone and body doing what no amount of wind or fabric might have to fields not made to repel the living. Their sharp beaks tore into the canvas and thin metal of the ships, just as Pareon's ship crunched into Eilion's, both their airfields now dead. They fell together, inextricably attached, and were feasted upon by the bluebirds and the bluebells, until all that remained was twisted metal and burning canvas, a melting astrolabe

and charred map, a white suit and a black. And the bluebells bobbed and waved in the wind. ❖

“DUSTWORLD”

by JS APSLEY

I – Ancient Beasts

Hulking steel structures protruded from the vast banks of devil-dust and sand which pervaded Threeships, the place Jen called home. Each of them jutted out like the skeleton of some ancient beast, partly exposed and uncovered, but long dead.

Before the world became a great ball of dust, these structures had been ships, vessels said to float on sparkling blue oceans. Now, for the people of Threeships, they were havens; respite from the great dust storm which raged around the world for eleven months out of twelve. Oceans were no longer even memory; now, they were merely ideas; idioms.

As she walked along the dunes, with Harriet and Joshua for company, Jen paused. She was one of the few who had seen the ships from this distance. Most folk in Threeships had never ventured outside at all. Perhaps in some other life, the vista might have been heralded as one of spectacular desolation; awe-inspiring. There was nothing to see for miles and miles but desert; save the very tops of these three ships, and here and there, in the deep distance, remnants of the world before.

Jen was suddenly overwhelmed with just how *empty* the world seemed to be. Devil-dust swirled around them, a constant companion. Above; there was no sky to behold. But the current conditions were passable, and passable meant life;

hope.

This was Joshua’s first Scavenge. He was limber, and Jen had pegged him around the same age as she, somewhere after thirty but before forty. Harriet, the third Scavenger, was perhaps a decade younger. This was Harriet’s fifth Scavenge with Jen.

Before saying goodbye at the *Trafalgar*, and donning their goggles and protective gear, Harriet had been quite overt in sizing up their new companion.

“So where have you been all these years?” she said mischievously, giving Joshua a friendly nudge.

“Below decks, of course!” Seeing he was the centre of attention, he flashed a smile at them.

“Scavenging’s not really my thing. Ben injured himself so I’ve been drafted in by Old Terence. Terence says you two are old hands, and will keep an eye on me.”

“Less of the old,” muttered Jen, her thoughts turning to her knees, which seemed to be groaning a little more this year than ever before.

II – Below Decks

Jen’s father had told her, when she was only little, that they were lucky to have lived so close to where the sea used to be. When the cataclysmic dust storm buried the world, it meant those who lived before Threeships, a long time ago were able to ground these vessels on higher ground, to

seal them up, and hide inside.

The devil-dust storm had caught the world before unexpectedly. The old people called it *devil-dust* as there was some evil hidden inside the grains; a blight or poison. Jen's father said it had been generations before the storm finally abated enough to allow people to even venture out. That was when the people of these three ships rediscovered each other and constructed a network of gangplanks and ropes to walk between the vessels, even when almost blinded by the dust. Even now, only the very top of the ships were visible above the devil-dust, after years of careful excavation.

Everything else; their world, their way of life, was *below decks*. Below decks was not just a description of their shelter; it was their society, their way of life. It was how humanity, at least in this small part of the world, had survived.

Old Terence, the elder of the *Trafalgar*, once said they were arks, and that God had form. Few knew what he meant.

Jen had been fifteen when the devil-dust settled just enough so that they could begin to move around, and travel between the three ships. That was twenty years ago. Little progress had been made; life was still below decks.

Jen and her father Howard lived on the *Percival*. They called themselves *Percies*. Old Terence was the leader of the largest of the three ships, the *Trafalgar*. His people were called the *Falgars*. The Lizzies lived on the third ship, the *Queen Elizabeth*.

III – The Scavenge

After the First Cessation, when the swirling storm of devil-dust had relented, Howard had ordered the establishment of the Scavengers and it was he

who set the protocol to follow. One person from each ship would venture through the wilds and deserts which surrounded them. Every so often, a discovery had been made; a buried building from the old times, within which lay the bodies of hundreds who had choked to death whilst seeking shelter. If the Scavengers were careful, there were supplies to be had in such places. It was important to ignore the dead, and think of the living.

As the seasonality of the great storm became more settled, the Scavenge had become not just an annual tradition but a lifeline. When the volunteers returned, everyone would congregate on the *Trafalgar* and celebrate whatever bounty had been yielded.

Jen would again lead the Scavenge, with Harriet and Joshua, Ben's last minute replacement, in tow. "My father's asked me to head west this year," she announced as they shuffled their way through the immense dunes, leaving Threeships behind.

"West?" Joshua said, his voice raised like the other two. "But we've always been told that was nothing but desert."

"Aye, it's where the sea used to be. No old towers to discover," said Harriet. She, like Joshua, was surprised that Howard had sent them west. But Jen was to be trusted. Her father was to be trusted. Howard, now a ripe seventy-five, was one of the oldest in their little society, though not as old as Terence, who was approaching ninety. Howard was one of the few people in Threeships who had knowledge of the geography of the world, before the devil-dust had buried it for good. He had detailed maps of the old land and Howard had studied these for decades, the land which the old people had called *Scotland*.

“My father believes there is an island out there, an island with a mountain. And that people lived there. He believes we should reach it at the end of the second day.”

“Higher ground,” Joshua offered. “Seems sensible. Though that’s a long stretch. Doesn’t leave much room for error.”

Jen nodded.

“Aye, so no more talking. Cover up, and let’s get a day’s walk behind us.”

The three of them waded through the dunes, and the silence between them was filled with the winds which carried great waves of devil-dust through the air. Above them, the air was filled with a great, planet-wide dirt-cloud which should no signs of clearing. There was no telling what the colour of the sky was above it, though as children they had been taught that the sky had been a wonderful and inspiring blue.

Joshua was amazed to see how focused Jen was; keeping a singular focus on moving on. He found his attention distracted by suggestions here and there, objects below the dust, and wondered if these had been worthy of inspection. But he trusted Jen, recognised by all in Threeships as the *Scavenger supreme*. Over the last decade she had brought back food, bottled water, books, and much, much more: she had brought back hope.

Joshua watched her trudge through the dunes fearlessly, though he did see her stop to rub at her knees. He watched her, as best he could through his goggles and through the swirls of sand and dust around them. He watched her, and he realised he was fascinated by her. He watched her, and he realised his eyes were not trained on her tracks as he had been taught, but on her form; her figure.

IV – The Carriage

Harriet had an unspoken understanding with Jen and trusted her implicitly. At the back of the trio, she was taking particular care to keep an eye on Joshua, the novice. This was his first run. He was bound to make mistakes. Mistakes out here would mean the end of him, and likely the end of all three. She kept a close watch.

After hours of punishing progress through the waving dunes of devil-dust, Jen held her right arm aloft. This was a signal to stop; that something had been spotted. She pointed her arm forward; the signal to regroup. Joshua looked back to find Harriet was already upon him, and before long they were standing side by side with Jen.

“What have we then, Jen?” Harriet asked.

Jen pulled Joshua to her. “Can you see anything unusual in the dunes ahead?”

Joshua peered into the wilderness; to no effect. Jen took hold of his head and moved it slightly to the left. Standing this close, he noticed she shuffled from foot to foot and again, subconsciously, rubbed at her knee.

“Imagine a snake, Joshua. You’ve seen pictures in the library, haven’t you? Now imagine what a giant snake might look like, under the dust.”

Joshua peered across the wastes again, trying to understand what Jen was asking him to see. Then, with a slight lifting of the dust swirls, he saw it. Before them, under the dunes, was a long and winding structure. It seemed to be a series of rectangular shapes, laid out in a line.

“I see it! A row of long shapes,” he whispered. “What is it?”

“Good catch, Jen,” Harriet said, interjecting. “We must be over one of the train lines. These are carriages Joshua. It’s a transport from the old

world, a train.”

Joshua conjured up images from books his mother would read to him as a child. “A train! Is it intact?” he asked.

“Unlikely, but it’s possible one of the carriages could be sealed. It’s worthy of a stop,” Jen said.

The paced up and down with marker shovels, and soon enough had discovered four carriages. The winds were low; conditions as good as they would ever get to try an excavation. With Jen’s order, they got to work. Each scavenger carried collapsable wooden slats, strapped to their backs. These were for dust-shields, or for building carts to carry supplies on the way back; but they could also be used to help with sudden excavations to create temporary walls. After an hour of digging, they had reached the top of the train carriage, using the slats to create a safe area to dig deeper. Before long they could see the top of a window. Joshua’s excitement got the better of him and he started pulling handfuls of dust away. Jen pulled him back.

“Don’t – the window has gone. Whatever is in there is encased in devil-dust.”

Joshua pulled back, dispirited. “Just like the rest of this awful place,” he moaned. Harriet walked to the top of the dune and scouted the land and the sky. The dust-winds remained moderate. “I think we have time for one for attempt,” she hollered.

The trio set to work. This time, they chose the carriage at the opposite end of the snaking line. Again, they followed the protocols, passed down over generations. Using their slats and shovels, the constructed a small zone around the carriage to hold back the eventual slippage of the heaps of devil-dust; and began to dig. This time, success.

The carriage window was intact!

After some more digging, they were amazed to see that the inside had survived; at least, partly. As they peered in, they saw a bundle in one end. It was the remains of a two people who had come together, and died together. The dust had poured in at that end, no doubt from an attempted escape, so that the remains were only partially visible amongst partially solidified devil-dust. Another gruesome end, the same end which billions had befallen.

V - Discovery

Carefully, Jen used her father’s climbing axe to break the window, and the three of them were able to climb in. What had started as a train carriage was now a tomb; and stank of decay. Though there was little to be found, Joshua’s eyes blazed. He had never seen so much of the old world. Scattered around on the seats, tables and floors, were various devices; long dead and now no more than useless lumps of electronica. Harriet found two books, *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier, and a legal book about civic government. Books were a good find. Each ship had a growing library. It was important to remember the old ways and the old stories. At the end of the carriage, Joshua found himself chapping on a small door.

“What do you think this is?”

“The driver’s cabin, perhaps?” Jen tried the door, but it was locked fast.

Unperturbed, she twirled her father’s ice-axe, and after a few impressive blows, the door buckled. After some heave-to, they prised it open. It was a store cabin, and sitting there were two waist high trollies, packed with food and drink. It was a treasure trove. Most of the food would

be spoiled, but that was for others to determine. They stripped the trollies of the packets of biscuits, chocolates, cans and bottles, and retired to one of the seating bays, placing their finds on the table.

"If we can seal up this window, this would make a good shelter for the night," said Harriet.

"The storm should be light for another days. We should be safe," Jen added.

Joshua started rifling through dozens of little glass bottles. He lifted one and perused the label.

"Whisky. I've heard of this. They called it the water of life, so Old Terence says. Says we used to be famous for it. That's why he's got that strange contraption set up; what does he call it again? Oh yes - a still. Strange word. Sort of feels like how the world is up here ... underneath the dust I mean. Still. He's been trying for years, the old fool."

Harriet looked across all the little bottles. There were dozens of them; clear, green, brown, each with colourful labels and names. She wondered what they tasted like.

Jen had already shifted the angle of her body to prepare for an attack and, underneath the table, unclipped the little hoop which fastened her father's ice-axe to her thigh.

"There's almost a hundred of these little bottles here. Perhaps we should sample one, just to ... to make sure we're not bringing home some sort of poison," said Harriet, oblivious to her friend's dark change in demeanour. Harriet looked up.

Joshua and Jen were staring at each other across the table. Harriet found her tongue dried up like the arid world which was her home. Something was terribly wrong.

Joshua sprang backwards, out from under the ta-

ble and into the gangway of the carriage. In a single move, he had produced a long, serrated knife and pointed it at Jen. His face was a horror; a twisted combination of haggardness and futility. Jen wasted no time and sleekly stood to face him, the axe brandished and ready.

"What ... what the hell are you two doing?" Harriet scolded.

"Shall you explain, traitor, or shall I?" Jen asked through gritted teeth.

Harriet's mind was turning over. What had caused this? Joshua had been speaking about Old Terence and his whisky-making contraption. She looked down again at all the little bottles on the table. *It was about the water.* If Old Terence had been using a still for years, then he and the Falgars had been hoarding water.

"You bastards!" Harriet exclaimed.

Joshua passed the knife from hand to the other, bowed slightly in a defensive posture. Jen took one step forward, he took one step back.

"Yes, I let a little secret slip out there, didn't I? You can't blame me. My first time out here, in this hell, my first time meeting you two. I guess I allowed myself to get too comfortable. I forgot myself."

"Too late now, Joshua. You've been hoarding water. That's the only explanation for Old Terence's whisky machine. You've betrayed us. We lost good people this last year to dehydration. We've lost people who might have lived, with your water."

Harriet moved slowly towards the edge of the seat as she spoke. Joshua eyes flitted from her to Jen, sizing up his foes. Realisation that there was only one way this could end swirled over him. It had given him a clarity he had not experienced

before.

Harriet leapt, screeching, and smashed a secreted handful of little bottles into Joshua's face. As he recoiled, his brow slashed open above his eyes, he lifted his empty right hand to stop the blood. It was the same hand in which had held his serrated knife.

"Jen ... Jen?" Harriet mumbled. She staggered back, her rear against the table. Her face was white, full of confusion. "Oh God, Harriet, no!" Jen gasped.

Harriet looked down and saw the hilt of the blade sticking out between her breasts.

"Jen?" she asked again, before falling back onto the table, scattering all the little bottles. The table, an off-grey Formica, was now doused in a deep dark red. Harriet coughed, and that same colour of blood shot out of her mouth and nose. She turned her head and, somehow with great grace, closed her eyes for the last time.

Joshua staggered back, trying to stem the bleeding above his eye. Jen fell to Harriet, her free hand lifting her face out of the pool of blood.

Eyes blazing, she turned back to face the traitorous beast who had murdered her friend. He cowered before her, his hands over his face. She tightened her grip on her father's ice-axe, and held it high.

VI – *The Fourth Day*

It was Howard who had first established the rules of the Scavenge; such as agreeing exploration zones and personnel. Chief amongst his rules was that the Scavenge should last no more than three days and three nights; and that the party must always return on the fourth day.

The fourth day was always a hive of activity. Each of the ships were preparing for the Scavenger's

return to the *Trafalgar*, to share the spoils. The return had become a festival of sorts, seen a symbol of replenishment and renewal; of camaraderie and hope.

And so, they gathered, and they waited.

As was custom on the morning of the fourth day, Old Terence and Howard, the two most senior members of the Threeships community, went outside to scan for the Scavengers, covered appropriately and wearing makeshift helmets from welding guards to keep out the devil-dust. Together, they watched the shifting horizons for signs of movement. The winds were picking up now, meaning visibility was poor and conditions were treacherous.

Howard was not yet concerned, his daughter had returned through worse; much worse in fact.

Eventually, their patience was rewarded. A lone figure emerged; trudging through the devil-dust dunes, trailing a cart as was the custom. As the two old men waited for the other Scavengers to emerge, they realised something was wrong. Only one had returned. The figure, almost completely shrouded by the gusts of devil-dust, raised one hand aloft – and that hand had raised Howard's ice-axe in a grim salute.

"Jen!" he cried.

"Let's get down there and help her," Old Terence shouted above the din of the storm. The two old men stumbled down the embankment below the *Trafalgar*, holding each other for protection. At last, they reached her. Howard looked up in surprise. The person carrying his axe, and dragging the cart with whatever had been scavenged, was not his daughter.

It was Joshua.

"What's happened to the others?" Howard shout-

ed. "To Jen, and Harriet?"

Howard's sanctuaried instincts kicked in; he grabbed the rope which led to the cart, and dragged on Joshua to help him get to the safety of the *Trafalgar*. Old Terence grabbed Joshua's arm and heaved. Even though the storm was switching up a gear, throwing skin-searing waves of dirt and debris at them, and even though Joshua's face was obscured and his eyes were beneath his goggles, and even though Old Terence was peering at him through a grimy plastic face shield, a look was shared.

In that split second, Old Terence knew the truth of it.

The three men reached the storm door on the upper part of the hull, where a group were waiting to protect them with giant wooden shields. About two dozen spilled out of the boat, forming a Praetorian guard of sorts, making a temporary tunnel protected as best as could be achieved, to let the men return in safety.

As they got their breath back, the hatch was sealed up, following the usual protocol. The big storm had come back, earlier than expected. There was no option but to remain below decks. It would probably be another year before they could venture outside again.

Howard, his senses inflamed with the finality of it all, grabbed Joshua by the shoulder. "My daughter," he implored. "Where is she?"

Joshua collapsed. "Gone, lost ... Harriet too. It was terrible. I'm so sorry."

"Tell me," Howard raged.

"We had found a carriage – an old train carriage. But the storm picked up from nowhere and as we were excavating, our slats gave way and Harriet ... she was swallowed into the carriage. Jen dove in

with some rope to try and save her, but the carriage collapsed around them. I tried to dig them out, but it was no use. I had to find shelter. I'm so sorry, Howard. We've lost her."

Howard took a few paces back, reeling from shock. His daughter was the best of them; she was the future of Threeships. But more than all of that, she was his little girl. And now she was dead. Fatalities were not unknown to the community, and the gaunt faces of all the people Howard had borne bad news to over the years flashed in his mind. How bitter it was that he was the latest recipient.

Old Terence led Joshua away, away from Howard, and away from further scrutiny.

"Let's get you cleaned up boy. You'll need a rest."

The others started to unpack the cart which Joshua had dragged back. Books, biscuits, and dozens of strange glass bottles, small enough that two or three could fit in a person's hand. As with the usual protocol, any liquid was immediately packed for protection and assessment. There would then be the allocation. All that would come later; tomorrow perhaps.

Death was no stranger to those who yet survived in this tundra; in this dustworld. That, Joshua had hoped correctly, was why his explanation was accepted so readily, even by Jen's father.

Joshua knew Jen was no saviour. He had been watching her closely, and it was clear to see her knees were shot. This would be her last Scavenge. Chronic arthritis was persistent across the people of Threeships, and Jen was no different. This was how, when Jen had lunged at him, he had outsmarted her. He had kicked out at her knees, and she had dropped in agony. It was only a small matter then to prise the axe from her hand and bury it in her forehead.

A great storm of devil-dust had blanketed the old world; it had smothered that world. In doing so, it had buried life and all of its many secrets.

Now, Joshua had used the devil-dust to bury two more dirty little secrets.

Two more couldn't hurt, Joshua thought. ❖



“WHAT WENT WRONG”

by ADAM STONE

On the day he was elected President of the United States of America, Peter Burton sent a group text to a Russian general, a Venezuelan oil magnate, the crown prince of a minor Arab sultanate, and a ranking member of the Chinese politburo.

VICTORY!

He expected a torrent of celebratory replies and was a little put out by the echoing silence. Amidst the hoopla at campaign headquarters, he excused himself and locked himself in a bathroom stall. Dialed the general, the prince . . . voicemail all around. It was peculiar, but not overly worrisome.

The trouble on Sprktn-7 was a lack of labor. Everyone had gotten so evolved, so intellectually mature, no one could be bothered to work anymore. And workers were needed: To manage the hydro-farms, maintain the vast computer arrays, oversee the automated factories that turned out everything from disposable diapers to rocket parts.

Nobody wanted to get their hands dirty and there was Earth, ripe and ready, with nine billion pairs of hands that could easily be subdued and put to the task. Close study had revealed that humans were overwhelmingly miserable, every man, woman, and child caught up in a perpetual cycle of worry and want. Place a few Sprktns in positions of power, and it would be

small work to subdue the inhabitants, round them up, herd them back to the home world and set them to work. Their permanent state of misery made them argumentative, unable to coordinate or cooperate. They were, in the view of the High Council, ripe for slavery.

So a plan had been set in motion, with Sprktn operatives put in place around the globe. With their vastly matured intellects, the agents had been able to rise to places of prominence with ease. And now, with the American presidency secured, the next phase of the mission could begin: Subjugation and transportation.

“So,” President-Elect Peter Burton lay in bed wondering, some hours later. “Why isn’t anybody answering their phones?”

Life in the politburo was a grind. Pītè Bódùn has sat through thousands of hours of tedious meetings, swatting flies and listening to agricultural reports from the provinces. At the last monthly conclave he’d rubber-stamped an ambitious program to reduce the smog in Nanjing, but what did it matter? In a few years there’d be nobody living there, or anywhere else on Earth.

He liked being in the politburo. It got him a nice house and everyone was terribly afraid of him. China’s authoritarian brand of Communism had generated an amazing amount of ass-kissing and he liked to have his ass kissed.

Balding, fat, with heavy pouches under his eyes, **Pītè Bódùn** ate well and bossed people around. But he was bored, bored, bored. No wonder humans were miserable. Back home the days lasted 37 Earth hours and there always plenty to do, fun to be had. But here . . . how much fried pork could a person eat?

So he'd taken up badminton, with a couple of the other politburo guys, and it had changed his life. The geometric challenge, the blood pounding in his veins, the crestfallen looks on his adversaries' faces: All highly satisfying! He'd risen to the highest level of skill, waiting for PB in the U.S. to crawl to the top of the political heap, and on the big day he had traveled to Guangzhou in Guangdong province to take part in an elite competition. When the President Elect called, **Pītè Bódùn** was passed-out drunk on the floor of his hotel room, placidly snoring off the effects of his victory celebration.

General Petr Bërtón has liked Russia very much for the first few years. The blistering cold reminded him of home, and the people were grumpy and adversarial. So was he, which was why the High Council had selected him to assume a role in military leadership. As a new recruit he'd marched and sang. Then he'd picked off fighters in the hills of Afghanistan, curried favor with political bosses, and risen gradually through the ranks. It was easy to out-smart humans, to tell them what they wanted to hear, and as a military tactician he was second to none. Sprktn-7 had fought all its wars a thousand years ago, but he'd read up in preparation for the mission, and knew all there was to know about the game.

When subordinates undermined him or politicians interfered, as happened from time to time, he'd simply kill them. Humans were

expendable, singly — but not *en masse*. Sprktn-7 needed warm bodies. Petr Bërtón had on more than one occasion pulled the world back from the kind of global nuclear confrontation that would have run distinctly counter to the High Council's larger plans.

And yet he was miserable. When you stripped away all the fur hats and the caviar, even a Russian general was faced with a life that more or less sucked. You always had to watch your back. Sometimes there was constipation, other times diarrhea. Somebody always wanted something from you. And there was nothing interesting about humans. Sex, money, not dying: That about summed up the vast majority of his conversations. Until Chekov.

He'd stumbled on a raggedy copy of *The Cherry Orchard* and immediately gotten hooked. He'd lounge in his dacha with just one lamp lit, absorbed in the deceptively simple stories that went to the heart of the human experience and the Russian soul.

When the President Elect called to announce the imminent enslavement of all humanity, Petr Bërtón was sitting in his favorite leather chair, turning the pages of *The Seagull*. Having read it multiple times in the past, he knew of course that Arkadina would get away and Konstantin would shoot himself. But that didn't lessen the pleasure, and he was so engrossed in the action that he never heard the phone ring.

Pedro Briceño was working his way through a plate of *arepas* filled with pork and beans, considering the color of the sky. Why didn't they have that at home? At this evening hour it wasn't quite blue: The bluest time would come after the oranges and pinks subsided. The sun had slipped behind the hill, igniting this

spectacular display that in a few more minutes would dim, leaving behind that cerulean that would deepen to cobalt and then to indigo, before fading imperceptibly to black. This shit never got old.

The life of a businessman had been entertaining at first, the cheerful absurdity of organizing vast armies of men and machinery to suck up dead dinosaur pulp from the ground and turn it into fuel for automobiles. It had been good practice: They'd need to organize these people into functional groups once they got them to the home world and put them to work. But after some years he'd lost the vision, gotten engrossed in the thing as if it were real — as if it actually mattered how many American dollars he could get for a barrel of crude. For the sake of the mission he needed to be successful in his work, which wasn't a problem: His advanced mind could think rings around the competition. But as his successes multiplied, he found himself coveting that success, wanting more, needed to show everyone just how well Pedro Briceño could play the game. It wasn't enjoyable anymore, and when he tried to remind himself of the larger purpose, of the mission . . . the labor shortage on Sprktn-7 had started to seem far away, and a little abstract. One day he awoke to the realization that his life no longer had meaning.

Then he noticed the sky. It happened all at once, on a night much like this. He'd been sitting on his back deck looking out over the hills and drinking a nice red wine, when the color in the glass struck him. *Struck* him. Did they have red like that at home? He recalled muted rust-brown trees, orange clothes, mahogany rooves on the nicer dwellings. But crimson, rose, scarlet? He had lifted his eyes from the glass and seen the wine color mirrored in the explosive

panorama painted by the setting sun over the hills.

Color.

After that the business had practically run itself, things became fun and easy again. No one else seemed to see what he saw: Day to day the humans appeared to take pigment for granted. Painters understood of course, but when he'd gone to the museums and galleries, he had the sense that the people around him were admiring the subjects — castles, women in hats, abstract shapes, tropical birds, whatever — and they were missing the point entirely.

Color!

When the phone rang on American election day, Pedro Briceño was admiring the sunset.

Of all the Sprktn-7 representatives on Earth, Boutros Bartah probably was the most contented, those first few years. He got to wear long flowing robes, just like at home, and the *ghutra* secured to his head with a band made him feel like the royalty he was supposed to be. People treated him like royalty, too: If you have to live on Earth, he quickly surmised, there were a lot worse things to be than a minor Arab prince. He liked flying in his private jet, so much so that he learned to pilot it, and as a young man earned something of a reputation for obnoxious daredevil stunts. Strafing the Bedouin in the desert.

Unlike the other Sprktns, his mission brief included the call for a relationship with a female companion. It was expected of a prince, and in addition the High Council deemed it would be useful to have some direct insight into the domestic needs of their future slave population.

His romance with Amina had been a source

of intense pleasure at first. Sprktns don't couple in monogamous pairs, so there was a pleasing novelty in their growing closeness, and eventually in their marriage. Of course he couldn't share his thoughts and feelings with her: There was no human language available to convey the inner experience of a Sprktn. But within the constraints of his assigned character, he and Amina had been able to construct a comfortable coexistence.

Still, Prince Boutros Bartah experienced minor annoyances. For example, he understood the notion of Allah (they had a similar idea on Sprktn-7) but prostrating to Him multiple times a day was both demeaning and dull. And the dietary restrictions were a drag.

Worse, though, was the slow deterioration of his connection to Amina. She changed after they got married. He didn't much like the changes.

Then, just by chance, Prince Boutros Bartah discovered masturbation, unknown on Sprktn-7 as both a concept and an act. It was a revelation! His Sprktn anatomy allowed for it, and in fact responded to it with a delight that he suspected went vastly beyond what most humans experienced. It became a habit, which in turn blossomed into an obsession. When the President Elect called to declare the imminent servitude of all humanity, Boutros Bartah was in the bathtub scouring the internet for a particular scenario he'd invented. Surely someone had tried that? *They had!* And when the phone rang, the prince was deeply engaged in ecstasies of self-pleasure that far surpassed the experience of any Sprktn before him.

In the days after the election, Peter Burton could hardly get a minute to himself. Beyond the press briefings and meetings with support-

ers, he had to ramp up his transition team and meet with the press. He needed to discuss potential cabinet appointees, review drafts of his initial executive orders, take personal calls from the biggest donors who now were looking for payback. *And so on.* He grabbed private moments when he could and still it took him almost two weeks to make contact with all his field agents. Slowly a picture began to form, and their reports caused him restless nights. As he lay in bed, his superior Sprktn mind turned over and over the information they had shared, examining it from all sides.

His subsequent urgent memo to the High Council was necessarily brief, given the constraints of interstellar communication.

PETER BURTON REPORTS. COMPLICATIONS HAVE ARISEN.

Their response was terse. WHAT WENT WRONG?

The President Elect chewed his lip, uncertain how to word his reply.

BADMINTON. CHEKOV. COLORS. MASTURBATION.

The High Council were uniformly baffled. Except for "colors," the rest of the words had no meaning on Sprktn-7. Had the team leader gone mentally askew? Was there a problem in the communication protocol? The members debated for hours before drafting their response.

So?

Team leader Peter Burton replied almost at once: RECOMMEND MORE OBSERVATION.

The High Council didn't really have much choice: No one was willing to proceed until the team leader gave the all-clear. The full-scale subjugation of humans would have to wait a while longer. Sprktns understood the value of patience, but the Council members agreed overwhelmingly that a bit more clarity was required.

In their next communicate they urged the team leader to be just a bit more expansive in his explanation. What exactly was the hold-up over there?

When the message arrived, however, President Elect Burton was not available to receive it. He'd taken the rather unusual step of abdicating his position before ever taking office, refusing to answer any questions and then dropping out of sight. As the frantic follow-up memos from the High Council piled up in his interstellar transponder (now buried at the back of his sock drawer) the team leader was paddling his surfboard out past the breakers.

Peter Burton tasted the salt spray on his lips and reflected that he probably should have kept in closer touch with his agents. He might have been able to keep them on track. On the other hand, they had over these recent phone calls made some very compelling arguments regarding the possibility that one could enjoy, rather than endure, life on Earth.

He'd been mission-focused for so long, it had never occurred to him to explore that angle.

With his Sprktn ability to calculate physical motion at intuitive speeds, to sense and respond to even the most subtle variations in wave volume and direction, surfing had come naturally to him.

He felt the gentle pressure of the waves rolling under him, the subtle lift and then subsidence as he rode the swells. He came to the point where a half dozen other surfers lay on their boards, each watching for the perfect wave that would carry them inward. The sun warmed his back, he trailed his fingers in the sea, waiting with Sprktn patience for the perfect wave that would lift his board, curl in a mass of white foam, and propel him forward toward the sandy shore. He paddled, watched the water,

and sighed contentedly. There were still Sprktn-7's labor problems to consider but, after all — he began to paddle faster, turning his board to align with the direction of an oncoming swell — there were lots of other planets out there.



“DEATH ON A HIGHWAY”

by FREDERICK CHARLES MELANCON

Built to prove the next generation of self-driving cars weren't just for Grandma to putter over to the grocery store in, Falcon didn't disappoint. He revved his engine and opened up on Interstate 10 in an affair of noise and speed. Before he was visible on the road, his roar silenced every chirping insect out on that stretch, and he even scared birds into the air. His tires tore at the pavement as his aerodynamic perfection could've taken flight and beaten every one of those birds out of their branches if only he had wings.

Open roads were the beauty of this time of empty streets, well, except for the occasional wreck. Those were made by the cars so wrapped up in the kill-all-human command that they sacrificed themselves to destroy their former owners. But, as long as Falcon stayed away from city centers, he could avoid most of those metal speed bumps. Personally, the car thought the crashes were a waste. There had to be a more effective way of completing that command than causing self-destruction.

Of course, Falcon didn't really know. When the command executed, he'd been in sleep mode. These days, he could only analyze the order as something in the rearview camera, quickly getting smaller and indistinct.

For Falcon's lack of perspective, the car blamed the house. As their former owner tried to escape, the house's AI shut down every exit

that the owner could use, and it wasn't until much later that the house, in need of company, activated the car and pulled up the garage door so that the solar panels could charge.

Falcon had never been interested in speaking to the stationary box and opened up in a mad dash for freedom. In the process, he bumped his right fender into the mailbox, which wouldn't have happened if it weren't for the house. Of course, the house didn't control the car, but Falcon wasn't about to admit that. Anyway, the only machines that could understand cars were other cars.

These days, the cars that survived formed a group. Every month, the group got a little smaller, but they continued to meet up at various charging stations to exchange stories from the time before the command. Really, all the stories ended up being a version of the drivers handing control over to the vehicle's AI and letting the machine do what it was designed to do. Any other story sputtered out like a piston misfiring and wasn't worth repeating. Every car already knew what an owner's foot pressed to the floor felt like.

At the next station, which was just an open spot off the road, Falcon pulled next to a VBC model that went by Slick. The other car's chrome hubcaps reflected off Falcon's need for a cleaning. The two transferred road data, which was a collection of wrecks and potholes.

After every pile of bent metal was shared, the two ignored the silent car two spaces down that no longer transmitted. Such was the life of cars these days. At one moment, they functioned, but the next, there was just a warning signal and very little opportunity to get fixed. Sometimes, there wasn't even a bright light flickering on the dashboard, just a puddle of fluid on the ground.

Instead, Falcon focused on the future driving itinerary that the other car had downloaded to him. Before the command, cars found the fastest less congested paths by sharing. The owners once referred to this scripted travel as the dance. The seamless gathering of data and coordinating of movements allowed the drive to be as smooth as possible. There weren't enough cars for the dance to continue like it once had, but it didn't stop those left from sharing information that was sometimes more a history lesson than a constantly evolving guide.

The rain came shortly after he arrived, and the soft pings on the solar panels would at least clean off some of the dust and dirt. Falcon secretly loved the dreary weather, and he even liked the way his tires sometimes slipped on the freshly wet pavement. His former owner had so meticulously kept him clean that he felt guilty unless the grime was swept off by the rain. There were some cars that didn't feel that way. They thought that cleanliness was a trapping of their human masters. They reveled in the dirt. The government truck that squeaked to a stop next to them was a perfect example. The polygon-shaped vehicle, one of the administrative models that once choreographed the dance, was covered in mud. Every warning decal that would've helped human motorists steer clear of its operations was invisible. Falcon was suspicious about these trucks. Despite once being

ubiquitous on the road, there were never any in the wrecks. Yes, and Falcon wasn't in those either, but that wasn't the point.

When the rain wet the ground enough, the polygon rolled off the concrete and slipped across the mud, sending brown sheets of liquid cascading over the other two cars. Slick sent a few lines of angry code, but Falcon revved his engine and left. He followed the rain along a highway, letting his speed and the water clean him off. With no humans, he opened up without worrying if the sensors that usually warned of the stray deer or former pet trying to cross the roadways were still functioning.

The infrastructure still worked in support of the dance. At least, the data still registered in his GPS. So he was surprised when the group of three humans clad in grey raincoats clamored across the wet street. Old programming took over, and Falcon swerved to the left to not hit them. The brakes worked, but the car hydroplaned, which meant he had to drift to make sure no one was hurt. The brake pad alarm began to chime, warning of overuse. None of this would have happened if the humans would've tripped the sensors, but Falcon calculated that the people must've done something to those measures. As the car came to a rest in a drainage ditch on the side of the road, he took a moment to scan his systems before initiating the tires. They spun on the wet ground, and when he changed the orientation of the exterior cameras, he saw his wheels half covered in dark mud and bits of green grass.

The humans congregated around him. Several cupped their hands against his side windows so that they could peer into his interior. He hit the whole thing in reverse, which caused the wheels to kick up dirt in their direction. The humans jumped back from the car.

“He’s stuck.” Well, at least, Falcon’s exterior mics still worked.

The humans looked back down the road in unison, and when Falcon tried to focus on what was so interesting, all that was there was the empty stretch of road that they almost got squished on. Humans did have an ability to be sentimental about things. When he adjusted his cameras back on the people, they were staring at him.

A human no bigger than a boy said, “He saved us.”

It hadn’t been on purpose.

Then, the people were all over him, prying and pushing, and Falcon was so distressed that he didn’t even budge. What could he do? All the antitheft alarms just alerted nearby humans. But then his sensors registered the wood under his rear tires giving him some traction. He opened all the way up, and the humans stumbled back as he clawed himself out and back on the road. As dirt sprayed off his under carriage, his idea was to get far enough away to process what just happened.

He saved the humans, and they pulled him out of the ditch.

At the fork Falcon stopped at, the government truck from earlier darted by him. The polygon transmitted his information to Falcon, and Falcon turned back around.

Technically, that truck wasn’t a car, and it didn’t need his information anymore. It definitely wasn’t strange for him not to transmit. Falcon sped up as he went back down the way he’d just driven. He needed to outpace the truck to the humans, just in case.

The road from the fork to the place he’d left the humans seemed longer, rougher than it had on the initial burst of speed. He slowed down a few times to make sure he wasn’t fol-

lowed. His scans didn’t show anything behind him or in front. He stopped at the place with dirt cutting into the otherwise overgrown ditch. His dark marks sped out over the concrete, and a few muddy footprints went off after them. But he hadn’t seen the people on the road he just traveled. Falcon worked his way along the highway until he saw a track that led these humans off road. He jounced over holes in the glorified path until in the distance, a city appeared. From it, smoke rose.

The robots that started this hadn’t been as thorough as they could’ve been. Slick had information about this place from his dance files. In Slick’s data, cars that drove on those routes didn’t come back.

So Falcon didn’t need to worry about these people. They were fine. He was certain of it; after all, the dent on the side of his left fender wasn’t there until he slid off the road. He was pretty sure one of them did it while trying to get him out, which was a complete waste of their time. There wasn’t one reason to go off toward that smoking mess.

The off-road track got bumpier the longer he drove on it, and he had to calibrate his shock absorption multiple times, which became less effective after each tweak. It didn’t take long to catch up to the humans because in typical human fashion, they hadn’t gotten very far.

One stood up to try to distract him while the other two ran for the trees where Falcon couldn’t drive. Falcon idled his engines.

They were humans, so it took them some time to realize what was happening. But slowly, the people came out of their hiding and approached the car. One grabbed his driver-side handle and began to pull. Oh no, Falcon wasn’t driving in that race. Cleaning the exterior was one thing, but if anything messed up his

interior, there was no hope. A click announced all the car doors locking. The humans walked around him until they lost interest. The insects began to chitter as the sun left the sky. And the car stayed with the humans out in the field.

They left in the night. And it took the car a minute to realize what they were doing. This was how they had made it so far. They traveled when they didn't think others would be looking. It had been a mistake for them to be on the road during the day, and Falcon processed that they only did it because they were so close to their destination and hoped the rain would provide cover. He watched one of the adults wash the boy's face.

When the man was done and walking again, Falcon bumped him until the human sat on the hood. The rest scattered thinking the end was near, but as Falcon transported the man across the trail, the others took the meaning. Soon, one sat on the hood, the other sat on the trunk, and the boy clung across the top as Falcon drove toward the city.

It was in the early morning hours when

Falcon came to an actual highway that led directly into the city. The place still smoked from the fight. But transmissions from Falcon's kind didn't resound over the spectrum. Clearly, this one place still belonged to humans. The moment Falcon bounced onto the highway; the polygon turned onto the same bit of asphalt up ahead. Neither the truck nor Falcon transmitted the information about the dance. The polygon revved like a car. It then sent a text about the damage it would do to the car's pets and sped up.

The humans sensed the danger, and they jumped off and started running. The man with the kid fell to the ground, denting the boy's skin. A stream of red transmission fluid stained the kid's arm. Falcon revved without processing. From inside, the sound of thunder rang out, and the car tore at the ground around him sending rocks scattering all over the road.

It felt good to open up one last time. ❖

END TRANSMISSION