

## The House with Two Sands

by Adam Casalino

The craft touched down on pale soil. It sunk a little in the uncertain ground. They powered down and two men stepped out. Through their oxygen masks they looked out at their new surroundings. Slowly they took their first steps toward the alien settlement.

Jefferson, the captain, approached the first structure. In many ways it was like a house on earth. As they explored the town the men were amazed to discover how much it resembled their home. Except they were 15 light-years from the Solar System—and the planet was completely empty.

“Where is everybody?” Noah asked the captain. “The signal came from here.”

Jefferson stood silently, stretching his back with his hands on his hips.

“I mean it’s *dark*,” Noah continued, “maybe they’re all asleep.”

“It’s not night,” the captain said. “Check your chronograph.”

Noah checked the device that gave him the time of his current location. It was nine in the morning.

“That’s impossible,” Noah said. “Where’s their sun?”

“Something catastrophic’s happened here, Noah,” Jefferson said. “We need to find out what.”

They continued to investigate the city. From all appearances it was once a densely domesticated community, with large houses and wide, well-traveled roads. There was no foliage to speak of, save dark gnarled trees, bare of leaves. A fine dust covered every surface and mingled with the air.

They came to a courtyard. Seated at its edge was a great house, hedge around with more dead trees.

“Someone wealthy must have once lived there,” the captain said. “Check it out. I’ll keep searching the ‘neighborhood.’”

Noah uneasily crossed the open yard and stood at the mansion’s door. He knocked before he realized what he was doing. Slowly the door swung inward. He entered the dusky foyer. Retrieving a light from his belt, he began to scan the room.

It was in utter disarray. What should have been carefully placed items were smashed debris. The same dust covered everything and glowed like motes

in Noah's beam of light. His soft footsteps crunched on the rubble, filling the room with awkward echoes.

Two staircases rose from the sides of the foyer, leading to a second floor balcony. Noah avoided these, unwilling to stray far from the front door. Toward the back of the room was a large counter, covered with more broken pottery and torn pages. He picked through this, trying to discover something of note. Much of the paper was covered in what he assumed was an alien language. Amidst the rubble he found a faded picture. Anxiously he held the image close to the light.

A loud crash came from above him. Noah dropped his flashlight. Frantically he scooped the light and ran for the shelter of the balcony. He pressed his hand against the wall, only to feel it fall away. He toppled backward, crashing painfully down a set of stairs. He landed at the bottom, too bruised and disoriented to realize his light had broken.

Slowly he climbed to his feet. He was surrounded by utter darkness.

"Jefferson! Jefferson, come in." Noah released the mic at his collar and waited for a response.

"Jefferson?" Only static answered.

Noah tried to figure out where he was. He stretched out his arms and searched for a wall. There was none near him. He stepped back but could not even find the stairs down which he fell. He listened intently for anything, but he was wrapped in silence. A strange, soft wind crossed his face, carrying with it the scent of perfume. It was then that he realized he was not wearing his oxygen mask.

Noah dropped to the ground. He could not find the mask. The air grew thick in his lungs and he gasped in terror. Numbness rose in his extremities and he felt himself slip into unconsciousness.

In the distance there appeared a light. It switched on like a lamp beside a desk. Instinctively Noah moved towards it. As he drew closer to the light his fear subsided and he began to breath normally.

He arrived at a small table. Beside it stood a single, three-legged stool. The source of the light came from an orb that floated several feet in the air. On the table was a tome. Noah carefully examined the book. The opening pages were written in the same language. As he flipped through it, however, he discovered the writing changed. Towards the back the words grew familiar, languages of earth that he did not speak. The very last he recognized immediately. It was English.

*I write this in every tongue that has been studied by the Emurean people. It is the 24<sup>th</sup> of Studan—July in the calendar of this language. I leave this record for any poor soul that stumbles upon this planet. We have been the victims of*

*an unspeakable evil. The very sands that gave us life, that bore up our homes and carried our children, have betrayed us.*

*We don't know why the soil has become a poison. We are dying faster than we can find a cure. I believe the cause lies within ourselves. Long ago we turned our backs to each other, to the greater good. Now the planet itself is paying us back for our crimes.*

*To any who read this: flee Emurea. The sands have stricken us for a reason. Those who still live will not suffer you to survive!*

Noah stepped back from the table. He needed to get out of that house. He reached for the orb of light. As he touched it, the light flared and flooded the room with a blinding white. Noah felt cold hands grip both his arms. As his sight returned he see saw a swarm of bodies surround him. They were shorter than him, with dark, round eyes and gaping, jagged maws. Their lithe arms pulled him away from the table, towards the shadows of the room. His screams were drowned out by their horrific, shrieking voices.

A flash of cool, blue light came from behind him. The creatures began to scatter. The flashes continued as some of them fell to the ground. They let go of Noah. He scrambled to his feet to discover Jefferson, rushing down the stairs. The captain grabbed Noah by the arm as he continued to fire at the aliens.

“Time to go, Noah.”

They fled from the house. The ground seemed to shift beneath them as they moved towards the edge of the city, towards their ship. Entire houses began to shudder. To Noah's horror he witnessed one crumble and disappear into the sand.

“Move, you idiot!” Noah barely heard the captain shout. The ground was rumbling violently as their eyes fell on their craft. As they climbed inside they heard a roar. Noah gazed through the porthole. Much of the city was already gone, as gaping holes grew, surrounding the now lone mansion.

Their ship jetted into the sky. The atmosphere was clouted with smoke and sand. They shook as their engines fought to push through. As they broke into the awaiting space, Noah could hear one last cry. It was a bitter groan, of an animal that missed a new prey.

“How do we report this one, captain?” Noah asked, finally breathing relief.

“We *don't* report it, Noah,” Jefferson answered. “That planet is dead. We're not going back.”