

Fossil Fuel

by Kyle Walker

Erle saw the falling star during his morning smoke break but didn't think much of it until the stranger showed up that night, just before closing time. He took in the sight of her as he drained the last of his cigarette, flicking the butt onto the ground. The irony of the *NO SMOKING WITHIN 25 FEET OF GAS PUMPS* sign had run its course long ago.

The stranger was definitely an out-of-towner. Besides her unfamiliar face, her tourist-trapped attire gave her away. She had evidently clothed herself entirely at The Prospector Outfitters in town. She wore a light brown Carhartt hat, black leggings, Xtratuf brand rubber boots, and to top it off, a "Welcome to Valdez" t-shirt was draped over her small frame.

Like most things at The Prospector these days, everything looked faded and dusty, their stock having sat untouched and unreplenished for years.

She walked up to the gas pumps, eyeing them suspiciously.

"Sorry, lady. We're all out," said Erle, pointing to the NO GAS sign hanging from the pumps.

The stranger looked up; pained confusion painted across her forehead.

"We have used the last of our fuel."

"I know what that's like. Believe you me, most people living in Valdez these days are only here because they ran out of gas coming into town."

"You have fuel here?"

"No, I told you. Ran out earlier this week. Hoping for a delivery soon. But who knows. Took them almost a month last time. And that ran out in just a few days."

"The source was empty. I followed the metal tubing. But there was no fossil fuel."

"Metal tubing?"

Erle's bafflement forced him to take a closer look at the stranger. She was short with a round, tanned face. Black shiny hair flowed over her shoulders. He thought that she was maybe an Alaska Native, but he could never tell those kinds of things.

English was obviously not her first language, but beyond that, he couldn't quite place her accent.

"I detected traces of the source, but there was no fossil fuel in the metal tubing."

"Oh, you mean the pipeline! Yeah, that's all dried up. The hub and refinery's been abandoned for years."

"And what of the fossil fuel?"

"Where have you been? There ain't no more! At least, not in Alaska. The lower 48's got some stock piles, but they pumped the crude out of us until there was nothing left."

"Did you not refine it with Xxynth spice?"

"You mean that bio-fuel stuff? If you ask me, it was too little too late. Some countries did well switching over to electric, but the good old US of A was slow on the uptake."

"What happened to the fossil fuel?"

"Haven't you been paying attention to the world? We burned it all up."

Her dark almond eyes, which until now had been stuck in perpetual, wandering confusion, finally came to meet his. The confusion melted away into a sudden fiery anger.

"You burned it?!"

"Well, yeah. With cars and machines and..."

His words skipped away as he continued to look at her eyes. Except they weren't eyes anymore. He blinked, thinking his

eyesight had finally gone, but the blurriness remained. And spread.

It was like staring at a negative image, but without an image to stare at. A gaping, empty space writhed where the stranger's face once was. As though reality decided to stop right there and the world folded in on itself. Her dimensions shifted, like staring at an optical illusion that is either a cone or a tunnel. The black emptiness, devoid of texture or form, somehow glimmered. It glimmered like oil.

"We seeded this world. We found this world. We destroyed the giant lizards. And now that we have come to harvest their fossil fuels, you say you burned it all?! Why? WHY!"

Erle stumbled over the rock that held the door open, falling backward into the gas station. Free of impediment, the door swung closed behind him, the overhanging bells jangling. The negative chasm followed, moving through the closed door without disturbing the bells. His panicked feet skidded across the dirty linoleum floor, hands swimming behind him. He grasped at his sparsely stocked shelves, throwing the few conveniences he had left at the black hole, the conveniences disappearing into the void.

He smashed his head into the empty freezer at the end of the aisle, having run out of room to retreat. He finally remembered to scream as the nothingness reached to touch him. It

grasped him with squeezing, wrenching madness, lifting him into the air. He felt every part of his insides begin to buckle under the pressure but then, as quickly as it came, it left.

Erle fell to the floor, inhaling hungrily, the weight of the air returning to normal. He gagged and coughed as he sat up against the broken freezer. The stranger, looking again like a short, dark haired girl, sat at the other end of the aisle, weeping.

"This was our last hope. Our farthest seeded world. Our stardrives are empty now."

Her tear drenched face rose from her chest, washed out in the fluorescent lights.

"We both destroyed in order to create, taking what was not ours. And now we are all trapped on this world."

The stranger slowly got to her feet, her boots squeaking on the floor, and regarded Erle through bleary eyes.

"I apologize for my anger. Killing you would have solved nothing. Perhaps it is time we both begin to create by building, not destroying."

With that, she walked outside, the bells playing their waning song.

Erle stood up shakily, catching the door on its slow backward swing. The wind picked up outside as the stranger

walked slowly toward town. Dust swirled in the air. Erle felt something slap against his leg.

Reaching down, he picked up the sign that had blown from its perch.

NO GAS.

THE END