

BRENT PERDUE



STOLEN MOON

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To Kevin

And to all those times
while listening to records
we crafted meticulous moon bases
on the living room floor then
in a final furious assault
blew
them
to
smithereens.

PART I

It's no secret that the stars are falling from the sky
It's no secret that our world is in darkness tonight
They say the sun is sometimes eclipsed by the moon
Y'know I don't see you when she walks in the room

- U2 "The Fly"

– 1 –

A monarch butterfly settled onto the barrel of Iver Spark's sniper rifle. Its black and burnt-orange wings formed a majestic V as the insect perched on the far end of the tube of dark blue steel.

Iver raised his head to gaze upon this lucky bug: it had survived the rigors of metamorphosis, had no clue about the horrors soon to be unleashed around the world and, like him, was a foreigner in a land some still called Norway.

“You lost?” he whispered.

Another monarch fluttered into view and hovered nearby. The first leapt up to join it in a synchronized, tumultuous, hypnotizing dance across the green sea of swaying grass and islands of fragrant bluebells.

Make butterfly babies while you can, Iver thought, settling back into position amid the thick sward.

Iver squinted through the scope as the courting insects flit away in his periphery. The crosshairs drifted along the compound's wrought iron fence. Over the rectangular pool's glimmering, untouched waters. Across half a dozen white pool-side chairs onto the lone occupant sitting there. Settled between the closed eyes of the bald, pink, aging king.

– 2 –

Aboard the E3 in low-Earth orbit, Tarker Vailey felt anxious and bored in equal measure. There was not much to do, but if and when the order to fire

finally came through, he would have a front-row seat. It promised to be quite a show.

The E3's smooth and steady flightpath overlapped four other E-series gunships in a quintuple helix pattern circling the globe. Each ship picked up new marks cresting the horizon while releasing those passing out of range behind.

With a lazy index finger, Tarker tapped a curved screen to review the targets his multi-laser system had its unflinching eyeballs locked onto.

Primary objectives were enemy crafts in similar orbits. No doubt the deadly E-series laser-ships were his enemies' primary concerns as well. Each side possessed an assortment of pieces across an ever-shifting chessboard, evenly matched and ready to obliterate each other. Tarker hoped that when the time came, whoever moved his piece on the board would make good use of him and his beloved E3. A meaningful sacrifice.

Digital boxes categorized the targets by colour. Vessels and vehicles in dark pink. Buildings in green: Amsterdam. London. Edinburgh. Human beings in pallid white. These interested Tarker the most.

They look like ants down there!

A lone pale box tracked a convertible navigating hairpins on a hillside road in south-central Norway. *Not tracking the car; it's the person inside.* Whoever was in there had been ear-marked for obliteration by the E3's awesome auto-trackers.

A familiar numbness swept over Tarker. Was it better to know or not know that death was nearby?

Enemy eyes were at that moment fixed on his six. Eyes that itched to light him up. Burn him up.

Here ... and I'm sitting in a tin can. Far above the world. Planet Earth is blue and there's nothing I can do.

Another pale box popped onto the screen. Tarker zoomed the camera in for a good look: a lone sniper in patches of green and brown camouflage crouched in thick bushes outside the king's secret compound.

“Well howdy, Target Practice!” Tarker laughed, feeling light and lively again. “You got eyes on the prize, but I'm the eye in the sky!”

– 3 –

Viv Ullman peeled back the resealable wrapper of a fresh Nutso chocolate bar. The snack promised more than a sugar hit. She was famished. The last few days had been a whirlwind, and Viv had eaten nothing since yesterday morning.

Nothing but Nutso bars, that is.

How can anyone eat? she thought as her front teeth sank into the treat. Chocolate and peanuts and caramel filled her mouth. She closed her eyes and basked in the familiar Nutso bliss.

Okay yes: humans need to eat. We ain't dead yet.

“Colonel Ullman?” James, dressed in the white collar shirt and thin black tie of the Military Analyst Corps, beckoned her over to his desk. “The remedy failed,” he said. “Nothing is working. All links are compromised.”

“Unacceptable,” Viv grumbled through a logjam of peanuts and chocolate. She trudged over to scan his mysterious layout of four colourful screens.

Each panel showed something different about the same things: a rendering of the real-time global orbits of weapon-ships E1 through E5; connectivity charts showing full outbound data issuances but no returning confirmation; onboard overhead camera angles of the trigger-pilots in low orbit; and efficacy predictions, currently showing big fat zeroes.

Heavy hardware tricked by sneaky software.

The five high-energy orbital weapons with their overlapping targeting matrices had been rendered impotent by a sudden and effective data hack that neither Viv nor the best brains in mission control were clever enough to counter.

“They’ll get smoked,” the analyst said, flicking his fingers at the monitor showing the pilots manning the laser ships. “When the time comes, they won’t be able to fire a shot. Should we tell them?”

“Would you want to know?” Viv asked, tapping James on the shoulder. Her finger left a chocolate smudge on his crisp white dress shirt.

“Honestly, ma’am?” James said. “I wish I didn’t know what I do now. If we’re gonna kill our planet, I’d rather be outside, driving through the country with the top down on a warm summer day, feeling the breeze on my face when the world lights up.”

A cherished memory slid to the front of Viv’s mind: her college football squad on the five yard line, the hand-off, the grainy football shoved into

the basket of her waiting arms, slamming into the defensive line, limbs and grim faces giving way as Viv plowed through, plunging into the endzone.

James slid a loose strand of dark hair across his forehead to put it back in place. Viv eyed the stain on his clean shirt shoulder. A hardened criminal's chocolate fingerprint. "I could snap your neck for you right now if you like," she offered.

James sank in his chair. "No thank you, ma'am. The moment has passed."

"I promise to do better next time."

"Thank you, ma'am."

– 4 –

The red convertible crunched gray gravel.

Bo Bennett, dressed in a navy blue jump-suit and snug black boots, her shoulder-length blonde hair whipping in the refreshing cold breeze, steered the slick red rental onto the lot. Parked beside a lonely white van. Jerked the handbrake into place with a satisfying *crank*. Got out. Left the top down.

Through a side entrance, Bo entered the boxy white building. The air in the main floor common area was warm even though nobody was there.

She scooted past a lone, empty table with three mismatched chairs. Past the humming soda machine flickering dully in the corner. Down the narrow hall. Up the rounded stairs, taking them by twos with her hand gripping the outer railing. Her boots echoed throughout the tight stairwell.

Reaching the only door at the top of the stairs, Bo leaned on the metal handle. Slowly pushed open the heavy door while peeking inside.

The round observatory room was quiet and night-like in near darkness. The domed ceiling was closed. The giant Breheimen telescope slept in the middle of the room. The temperature was lower than the rest of the building: cool like the air outside.

As Bo crossed the sterile floor, the soles of her black boots emitted little squeaks. She knelt beside a single cot pressed up against the base of a dormant yellow scissors-lift. Dr. Alan Egglefjord lay bundled up under a warm blanket, slowly and softly snoring.

A sliver of warm light outlined the door to the observation room. Bo tiptoed over to it. Opened it. Slipped inside. Closed the door with a light click.

The well-lit rectangular room – more deep than wide – housed two opposing desks. Computers and screens and comfy black office chairs crowded each station. A cinnamon scent in the air masked a faint odour. One sniff confirmed that Andy was nearby.

Bo glanced at the screens as she walked deeper into the room. The humming computers were busy running calculations while their nocturnal master day-slept. At the far end of the long narrow desks, Bo watched Andy nudge head-first into a pile of old woodchips on the floor of her cage.

“Hello, Andromeda,” Bo said. At the sound of her voice, the star-nosed mole abandoned its efforts. Stuck its pink, alien-like muzzle through the mesh. Bo reached past the super-sensitive snout to caress

Andy's smooth, brownish-gray head. The curious mole twitched, then pressed into Bo's fingers.

"Miss me?" Bo said, rubbing the mole's neck and back to the creature's delight. "I missed you, too. We girls can't resist the intellectuals for long."

Bo extracted Andy from her cage. Set her on her shoulder. Strolled over to the desks and sat down. Andy sniffed at Bo's ear and neck, then grew a little heavier with contentedness.

A stack of crinkled papers beside the colourful, customized keyboard was capped by a simple black-ink map of England and Scandinavia. The path of the upcoming total solar eclipse was shaded in by hand: a pencil shadow. The swoop started thin over southern England, crossed the North Sea like a bridge connecting landmasses, then grew plump in central Norway. This telescope in the Breheimen mountains sat smack-dab in the middle of the shade.

"You're early," Dr. Egglefjord said, slipping into the office as if concerned about waking the gigantic black telescope sleeping in the other room. "We weren't expecting you until tomorrow."

"It *is* tomorrow," Bo replied, her heart sinking. This brilliant man with clear eyes on the heavens had a massive blind-spot: his own time passing down here on Earth. "You almost slept through it."

Dr. Egglefjord set his hands on his hips. Seemed to be analyzing what Bo had told him. Clearly not believing her, he bent to glance at the date and time on one of the many screens. She heard a grunt build in his throat, but he swallowed it.

He straightened, arms limp at his sides. “This is what I’m talking about: I need you. We need you.”

“Nah, you’re doing fine up here alone.”

“To be alone is to be doomed,” he said, scooping Andy from Bo’s shoulder. The adorable, eccentric animal nestled into the bowl of his weathered hands.

“To be alone is to be free,” she said, flashing her patented half-smile-half-pucker grin. Looked like he could use it. Bo knew the effect her smile, capped by her trademark dimples, could have on people.

“Don’t look at me like that,” he said, dropping heavily into the chair behind her. “It hurts.”

Poor Dr. Egglefjord. No good with his time, yet forever in a hurry. No time for a family, yet forever urging Bo to start one of her own. But for him, stars and galaxies were his first and truest loves.

And of course Andy the star-nosed mole: she was family. The near-blind ground-bound creature was the poetic complement to a man who spent his life gazing up into the endless void of space.

“I’d kiss you all over, Dr. Eggy, if you weren’t so crotchety and wrinkly and tilting into the grave.” Bo leaned back so the doctor could see her in his periphery. She aimed her fingers at the floor, her straight arm at a steep decline.

The man chuckled. Bo stood up, leaned over him, and wrapped her arms around him from behind. She hugged him tight, her hair in his face. Andy chirped in the man’s hands.

“Okay, enough teasing,” the good man growled. “Your hair’s gonna make me sneeze.”

She sank into her chair. Nudged his seat with the toe of her boot to get him to turn around. He did.

“We ready for this?” she said pointedly, eyebrows up. “Humanity sharing one final cool event before we roast ourselves in nuclear hellfire?”

“Don’t say things like that,” he said, tapping the keyboard. “I wish you wouldn’t. Makes me sad to think of you being robbed of the joys and horrors of growing old.”

The screens in the control room brightened. Bo heard a familiar purr emitting from the observation room: the domed ceiling was beginning its slow retraction march. Daylight would soon pour in.

The telescope lens remained capped with a tight, dark canvas cloak wrapped around its terminus like a nativity shepherd’s forehead. In a few short hours, Bo would board the scissors-lift, raise it to the height of the angled telescope, untie and remove the cover: the reverse of what she had done yesterday evening when she’d slipped it into place. Daylight was far too bright for such a sensitive instrument, but soon the stalwart Breheimen mountains, along with most of central Norway, would sink into an eerie, mid-day darkness. The telescope was waking up to watch that happen.

Bo shuddered with dread and hoped the good doctor hadn’t noticed. After this marvellous celestial event was over, the eyes of the world would once again drop from the hope of infinity to glare at each other across imaginary borders.

Then the war to end humanity would begin.

– 5 –

The dark moon slid in front of the shining sun like a manhole cover fitting in place over a heavenly opening. The disc pinched off warmth and light. In south-central Norway, it was quickly nighttime in the early afternoon.

Bo Bennett watched charts fill up, graphs stretch with fresh primary colours, and white numbers tick into existence in columns on the screen. Next door, the massive black telescope auto-tracked the total solar eclipse's steady progression across the once-blue sky, feeding the computers everything it saw on and around and beyond the moon. Glimpses of the mid-day firmament. Unbent starlight. The sun's eye, for a brief moment, had shut. Time to see what its far-flung cousins were up to.

In her lap, Andy the star-nosed mole stiffened. Quivered. Sensing something strange, no doubt. Bo patted the creature's trembling back. Seated behind her, Dr. Alan Egglefjord was a young man again. His gnarled fingers danced across the oversized, colourful keys of the custom board. He said things on the inhale like, "good" and "okay" and "tusen takk teleskop" which Bo, in her limited Norwegian, understood as: "a thousand thanks, telescope."

– 6 –

In low orbit, the E3 cabin grew chilly. Onboard heaters kicked into overdrive. As his ship's speeding

orbit entered the path of the total solar eclipse – its many screens tracking buildings and automobiles and people – Tarker marvelled at the wide shadow etching across the land and sea beneath him. Like God was using a huge pencil to shade in a thick line across a topographical map.

Tarker glanced at his screens. Colourful, digital squares popped into place. Familiar targets. Yellow boxes over government buildings. The pale box for that person driving the red convertible in Norway had shifted away from the car, now parked on a gravel driveway beside a white van, and hovered overtop a corner of a rectangular building in the mountains. The lone sniper still lay sprawled in the bushes precisely where he had been the last time Tarker had flown past high overhead.

– 7 –

A sharp wind spread through the green shrubs and bent the grass in which Iver Spark stretched flat. The crosshairs of his faithful sniper rifle's scope remained fixed on the left temple of the king now standing there gazing up at the darkened sky.

Security guards in black suits, red shirts and black ties paced nearby, ignoring the celestial event. That was their job: keep their eyes on the ground, roaming the black fence surrounding the pristine compound, past the looping gray barbed wire curled on top, out to the neighbouring horizons where Iver, unnoticed, waited to do his job.

One of the guards – a woman with hair shaved down to stubble, the arm of her sunglasses between her teeth as if smoking a pipe – stared across the field to exactly where Iver lay concealed in the grass. Her free hand absently brushed her prickly scalp. That haircut, Iver mused, was new to her.

A flock of sparrows swirled in the cooling air. The birds rose in stunning unison. Bent toward the west. Surged. Folded. Retreated. Reformed. Then scattered like a football squad breaking a huddle. Iver made note of them. Birds usually moved in such surging flocks when under threat. This kept predators – a hawk, perhaps? – from fixating on any one victim. But to break ranks suddenly? Every bird for itself? Must be the effects of the eclipse. Birds and animals and even insects go wonky when experiencing something out of the ordinary. It was a temporary deviation in behaviour, Iver concluded. The moon would soon move along. The sun would soon return. Those birds would soon calm down.

– 8 –

Colonel Viv Ullman bit into a new Nutso bar, retracting the resealable plastic like the brown peel of a banana. Her analyst team was acting strange. Well, stranger than usual. Instead of solving this infuriating hack by unknown saboteurs, they stood in a pack fixating on a single monitor and chattering like chipmunks burgling a birdfeeder. She barked at them to scatter, but they were cuckoo for the eclipse.

James raised an index finger without turning: *one moment*. Viv surveyed the chocolate stripe on the man's white dress shirt. Her guilty fingerprint. He hadn't noticed it yet.

This was delay not disobedience, Viv knew. The gals and guys in the analyst corps were not like that. This team worked through issues in a language that was kilometers over Viv's head. How do you lead people who are smarter than you?

I'm an ordinance guru, not a computer whiz like these kids. How do I tell smart people what to do?

The gang was in awe of the total solar eclipse, Viv understood. The whole world was watching it. Nobody had any appetite to say out loud what this event was: humanity's final shared experience.

Viv took another generous bite of Nutso. Closed her eyes. Sighed deeply. Let herself be wrapped in fresh flavours and calming darkness.

"Colonel? You better see this," James called, his voice nearly an octave higher than usual. The hairs along Viv's arms leapt to attention.

She joined the tense crowd gathered before the oversized screen recording the stellar event through protective filters. Seemed an ordinary eclipse at first: the dark moon blocking the sun, drifting away to create a glittering diamond ring, the sun's corona like a thin band. The image expanded as the camera zoomed in closer.

Something's off.

It was the moon's well-lit rim. It was pulsating like audio bars on a stereo. Around the perimeter,

millions of large, light gray blocks rushed forward from the dark side like floodwater spilling over a berm. Around the circumference, cubes tumbled over each other. The front ones were overrun and pressed into the lunar dust where they froze in place. More arrived to smother the moon, billions of plastic construction blocks spilled from a galactic toy chest.

The analysts gasped and pointed and pressed their hands to the sides of the heads as if to keep their brains from exploding.

Viv went numb. She watched without blinking. “We recording this, James?” she whispered.

“Yes’ m,” he said, sounding a hundred kilometers away. His untended hair drooped over his forehead.

The energetic blocks raced to meet in the middle of the moon as if completing the bulls-eye of an extraterrestrial dart board. Within minutes, the lunar surface was completely transformed into a smooth, uniform plain.

More flip-smothering blocks poured over from the dark side. They kept coming. Began to stack up, in some places very high. They created a metropolis of windowless skyrisers – *moonrises*, Viv thought, a cool logic kicking into gear in her brain even as her body began to overheat – with some sections on the moon more pronounced than others.

The familiar face of the moon was masked by a tranquil gray veil, smothered by perfect blocks no natural or random force could create in a zillion years. An intelligent hand was clearly at work here.

“My God!” one of the young analysts gasped as she pushed her reddening face into the trembling mesh of her own pink fingers.

“We *hope* it’s God,” James said, arching a combed eyebrow at Viv, his clear, brown eyes watering with fear and fascination.

– 9 –

Stretched on his back in the tall grass, Iver Spark carefully dismantled his unused sniper rifle. Each component fit into a customized hard-foam spot in the open black carrying case. Last in was the scope. Iver set it gently in place inside its long, narrow coffin then clicked the case shut. Then he tapped at his chest to make sure his trusty Walther PPK pistol remained secure in its hidden inner pocket.

The job was over. Orders had come in after the solar eclipse had finished bathing the countryside in a strange, frigid midnight: *Stand down*.

Iver had been lying flat on his belly for over 24 hours. Standing down meant he could now stand up. Stretch his aching limbs. Think about other things.

But he would not risk rising. Not yet. Dutiful guards continued to patrol the king’s compound. German shepherds on leashes sniffed out danger. Bored lookouts watched from strategic places. Iver had to mentally navigate his way back out before he dared move a muscle.

Retreat was the least-rehearsed aspect of this mission. Getting here – which began two nights ago

when an amphibious submarine carried him up the Innvikfjorden, then a slick, stealthy outrigger carried him silently under the bridge, past the dozing town of Stryn, up the serpentine Stryneelva where men he would never meet again deposited him on the east side of the river, after which the black boat retreated and Iver stole over farmland and across single-lane country roads in the moonlight to reach the treeline within sniping distance of the furtive compound – had been quickly and expertly planned. Options for escape were less-well-thought out. Iver knew, as did his bosses, that if he was successful in his duty, that was all that really mattered. He himself would then shift from asset to liability.

Stand down.

The signal had not reached him through an earpiece or any other comms device. He had none. One of the king's guards – the woman with the fresh, severe haircut – had made a discrete hand-motion in his direction: her fingertips, grazing the stubble, shifted from right to left across her forehead, paused, then quickly left to right, then right to left again.

Stand down.

Iver rolled onto his stomach. Backed away crab-style, elbows and knees doing the crawling. His eyes remained fixed on the compound, his ears at high alert for sudden cries of alarm that never came.

Though the sun shone unimpeded again onto the Norwegian hinterland, the mid-April air retained its mid-day chill from the solar eclipse as Iver stomped across a field of waist-high grass.

Beside a stone hedge parallel to a quiet country road, he paused to shake off his jacket. He pulled the sleeves through to flip the thick, breathable fabric inside-out. The patchwork pattern of dirty browns and shrub-like greens gave way to a well-worn, tan, corduroy texture. It looked stylish over his plain black t-shirt. He slipped his Walther PPK nozzle-first into the new inner pocket.

Iver pulled off his skin-tight camouflage cap and crammed it into a pocket. He ran his fingers through his thick blond hair to tease out the compression.

No sound of approaching cars, so Iver kicked off his trusty boots. Pulled off his pants. Inverted the fabric. Pulled them back on, now stylish black jeans. By all outward appearances, he was a typical Norwegian man in his late-20's.

He made his way over to Strynevegen where he strolled along its shoulder. Traffic was light. Only one truck and two cars whooshed by. Iver reached the town of Stryn an hour later. As he ambled along the quilt-like stone sidewalk toward the Visnesvegen bridge and the tiny marina beyond, Iver kept the black rifle case dangling at his side: a simple, old violin case. Not worthy of a second glance.

He passed several young people huddled before a shop window, their heads bowed, their wide eyes fixed on their bright smartphones. At a corner café, a waiter dressed in clean black and white saluted the sky, his gaze fixed upward, his serving tray at an awkward tilt ready to capsize and spill its fragile glass passengers.

Nearby, an idling transit bus farted. The driver in a pale blue shirt and dark blue pants stomped out, plopped onto the bench, then sat hunched over his smartphone. The man beside him looked scruffy and homeless. When he leaned over to look at the glowing screen, the bus driver tilted it so that the homeless man could see it better. They muttered to each other.

A small yellow electric car at the intersection didn't move, even though no traffic opposed it. The middle-aged, white-haired driver sat motionless, fixated on her silver cellphone pressed against the steering wheel. A white and blue police car behind the yellow car didn't budge either; the cop inside was also staring at his personal device.

The solar eclipse was fascinating, Iver thought, but it's over. What's wrong with everyone?

The world seemed to have come to a standstill. As was the case on this mission and ones before it, Iver had no phone. No comms. No electronics on his person that enemy forces could use to track his movements. But he needed information. More than that: he needed extrication. He was on his own. Iver realized his best option was to get to the marina. Maybe steal a boat. Or, if the chance arose, a car.

As he eyed the pair of strange, idling vehicles, Iver trudged into the street, crossing at an angle. A long-nosed, red sports convertible racing through the otherwise sleepy town whined with displeasure. The front end bowed with hard braking as the car twisted to miss him.

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To that aspirational writer out there – do not let this frigid world snuff out the flame of creativity in your heart: the world is cold, that is true, but that goes to show how crucial it is, now more than ever, that we gather together around our story fires.

To the music of my youth – it's amazing how meaningful songs early in our lives work their roots into the deepest recesses of memory and *live* there.

To U2 – I wouldn't even know what to say if our paths crossed in this life: I'd probably smile and nod, stare and sweat and shiver, turn and run.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

An alumnus of Norman Jewison's prestigious Canadian Film Centre's Screenwriters' Lab in Toronto, Brent Perdue has written feature-length screenplays, scripts for television and short film, and science fiction novels. He is the author of *The Timeworks* trilogy, *Stolen Moon*, and the upcoming action-adventure sci-fi series *Amistar*. Brent Perdue lives in Alberta, Canada with his wonderful wife and three awe-inspiring, awesome daughters.