

Zarreich, a novel by Michael D. Smith

Chapter One

Jim Donne's Arrival

Monday

Most of the land was gray dirt. Except for the prickly pear cactus and mesquite trees, the low hills by the bus terminal were like the surface of the moon. The slanting afternoon sun came down like a blowtorch.

Jim sat on a bench outside the bus terminal. Yellow grass clung to the cracked sidewalks. A terminal attendant sprayed a hose at a few bushes. Stone fountains churned. Silver-gray mountains shimmered far to the west.

Jim looked through his suitcase. Sketchpads, technical pens and pencils, some clothing and a paperback novel about some kid from Georgia joining a mercenary band in Africa. He flipped through the book; he didn't remember packing it. He couldn't imagine having bought it.

In fact he didn't recognize a single item in the suitcase. These were not his sketchpads and technical pens; he'd never seen these button-down shirts. He'd gotten the wrong suitcase. He went back into the bus terminal.

The bus driver sat with a cup of coffee listening to the woman behind the ticket counter.

"Marjorie got that towel set. But I don't know if I'd want to be spending two hundred dollars on that towel set. Now my towels may be a couple years old, but I like 'em, I figure they'll last awhile, and who has two hundred dollars anyway? On the other hand, Marjorie's towels were nice, you could tell that."

"Yeah, I would think so," said the bus driver, then turned and said: "How you doing, young man? What can I do for you now?"

"Well," Jim said, looking from the bus driver to the woman behind the counter, "I think I got the wrong suitcase or something." The woman, nametag Sandra, and the bus driver, nametag Earl, were the only people in the terminal.

"No, that can't be," Earl said. "You were the only passenger into Eicsine from Cuxlacjs. There was only one piece of luggage on board her. And that was the one."

"What makes you think you got the wrong suitcase, hon?" the woman said. "That's the one I checked in for you. You were the only one off the bus."

Jim pointed to the suitcase. "Well, I don't remember that scratch in the side there." But now he

recalled joking earlier with Sandra about the scratch, how it had been there for years, and Sandra's little return joke about how Jim didn't need to worry about getting his suitcase mixed up with anyone else's because it was the only one in from Cuxlacjs today.

Jim was horrified. How could he have forgotten his conversation with this woman?

"Maybe the scratch came from being bumped around in the bus," Earl offered.

"No, the scratch has been there for years," Jim said. "I was just thinking that maybe it got mixed up in Cuxlacjs."

"Hell no, boy, that bus was *empty* in Cuxlacjs. I've gone five hundred miles today and stopped at four cities, and didn't have a single passenger until I picked you up in Cuxlacjs."

Jim remembered the last half hour on the bus journey when he'd finally gotten the nerve up to come up from the rear to sit behind Earl and chat about the heat. "Well, maybe this *is* my suitcase?"

Sandra stepped from around the counter. Jim had liked her from the first. She might be fifty years old but was still pretty. Her orange blouse wrapped tightly around her large breasts and her thick bra was clearly outlined. Earl, a handsome man in his sixties with bulging muscles, looked on from behind his styrofoam cup. "Now hold on," Sandra said. "If you've got some reason to believe that isn't your suitcase, we'll just have to look into it, won't we, Earl?"

"Sure," Earl said. "What I can't figure out is why he thinks it isn't his suitcase. I mean, it's the same one he gave me to load. Or isn't it?"

"Well, of course it's the same one, then," Jim said.

"Hold on, Earl," Sandra said. "Maybe it's possible you had another suitcase in there. Maybe it just got stuck way back in the luggage compartment, and it happened to look like your suitcase here. Then maybe on the drive the wrong suitcase got knocked forward, and you picked that one out."

"Well, that would explain the scratch it got," Earl said, standing. "Guess I'll check the luggage compartment again. I could've *sworn* it was empty, though."

"No, I guess I'll just take this suitcase," Jim said. "Please don't go to any trouble." He remembered how dark and stifling that luggage compartment had been when Earl had opened it. It shouldn't be revisited for a stupid suitcase. "This one has the scratch, after all."

"I suppose it's possible both suitcases had scratches on them," Sandra said. "Though it'd be a long shot, you can bet."

"Maybe that kind of suitcase was especially prone to being scratched right there," Earl offered. "Beats me, though." He walked to the bus and opened the luggage compartment.

Jim drew back. "No, this is mine. I guess I'll just be leaving."

“You’re sure it’s yours?” Sandra said.

“It’s empty, all right,” Earl announced, then slammed the compartment shut.

“Did you check way far back?” Sandra said. “Maybe it got lost way in the back.”

“Naw, there’s no kinda place to lose a whole suitcase back there, Sandra. This here’s the right suitcase, all right.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Jim said, staring blearily at the insect-blasted bus windshield.

“Are you sure?” Sandra said. “Because we don’t want you to be unhappy. We’ll be glad to look around a little more for your suitcase.”

“But it’s right here.”

“Oh--I suppose so.”

Jim edged backward. “Guess I’d better be going?”

Earl drained his coffee and threw the cup into a black can. “That’s right. Your grandmother’s gonna wonder why you’re late.”

“My ... grandmother?”

“Grandmother?” Sandra said. “How nice. Who is she?”

“Well ...”

“Why, Sandra, didn’t Jim introduce himself?” Earl said. “He’s Emily Donne’s grandson. He’s coming to live with her.”

Jim stared at Earl. “How do you know that?”

“Why, you told me on the bus. Fine woman. She and I were in high school together. You seem a little old to be her grandkid, though.”

“Oh, no, *that* could easily work,” Sandra grinned. “Emily and her daughter both married real young, you know. But I didn’t know she had a grandson. Please to meet you then, Jim.”

“You are?” Jim said. Earl had talked about this town. Eicsine, what a silly name. Why was he here? Who was this grandmother? What was this Cuxlacjs they’d driven from? All Jim could remember was endless desert highway and bumping his head against the window. Earl and Sandra and the bus terminal seemed real, but they were messing with his mind. Maybe he had no suitcase at all. Maybe he had come here without possessions. Maybe he needed to come here *because* he had no possessions.

“Well, Jim says he’s gonna get some of his cartoon work done here in Eicsine,” Earl said.

“What?” Jim said.

Earl and Sandra exchanged a puzzled glance. “Well, maybe he doesn’t want me to discuss it.”

“Discuss what?” Sandra said.

“His cartooning. Jim was working for this graphic art company.”

“I told you *that*?” Jim gasped. He considered the instruments and paper in the suitcase. Earl and Sandra could be dangerous.

“Sure did,” Earl said, his voice slightly clipped. Sandra was leaning toward Jim with a concerned look. Jim stared at those tight orange polyester tits. Earl frowned.

“Uh, that’s right.” Jim tried to smile the whole thing off but only succeeded in making an awkward grimace.

“You’re a cartoonist, isn’t that what you said?” Earl said.

“Yeah, it’s all in this suitcase here. This is my suitcase, really. Uh, do you know where my grandmother’s house is?”

Earl strode to Jim, grabbed his arm, and walked him out of the bus terminal garage. “About four miles beyond the field here. You can’t see her house until you get across that first series of hills. Then you’ll see it. It’s a split-level and white, kinda off by itself, and there’s a stream behind it.”

“Four miles? In this heat?”

Earl shrugged. “Well, it *is* hot.”

Sandra moved up. “Is that it, hon? You having trouble with the heat?”

Jim looked back at her, only now realizing his back was soaked. “I’ll ... be all right.” He hefted his suitcase. “How the hell did I *get* this?”

“I don’t know,” Sandra said. “But just take it easy, Jim.”

“Say hi to your grandmother for me,” Earl said, turning away.

The next time Jim wiped the sweat from his eyes, Sandra and Earl had disappeared into the building. There were hills on all sides, plus the mountains to the south. Surely his grandmother lived on this side of those mountains, which looked to be a good thirty miles away. Maybe he could make four miles without collapsing. He couldn’t understand why he was sweating; this area looked so arid. The sun was pitiless.

Jim sat on the bench again, opened his suitcase, and pulled out a sketchbook. JIM DONNE. IDEAS FOR SCIENCE FICTION GRAPHIC NOVEL. There were colored-pencil sketches of dark urban streets and vivid monsters, with scribbled notes on perspective and color, along with an array of expensive art pens and color markers. And an open envelope. Jim took out a folded

letter.

JOINT DECLARATION OF INABILITY TO CARE FOR SELF

Cuxlacjs Regional Council of Public Services

Zarreich Provincial Assistance Authority

1. It is hereby declared that James Postyn Donne, age 23, graduate of the University of Cuxlacjs, is assigned Status Unable to Care for Self after death of mother Lois Carter Donne two months ago, and after being discharged as employee of Demomars Graphic Arts, LLC, of Cuxlacjs, two weeks ago.

2. It is therefore determined that, in the interests of his own safety and well-being, James Postyn Donne shall be sent to live with his only surviving next of kin, grandmother Emily Markham Donne of Eicsine, Zarreich Province, effective immediately.

3. The Cuxlacjs Regional Council of Public Services hereby grants the sum of \$250 to James Postyn Donne for bus fare and initial living expenses in Zarreich Province, in the expectation that the Zarreich Provincial Assistance Authority will provide additional assistance contingent on James Postyn Donne's satisfactory performance as a citizen of Zarreich Province.

Jim shut the suitcase in shock. He checked his pockets. There was no wallet. But he pulled out \$35 in folded bills.

A bus ride was that expensive?

So he had a mother who died? Lois? Who was that?

Somebody fired him?

Assholes were saying he was too incompetent to live?

The sun seared his neck. He felt violently drunk. He looked at himself in the chrome curve of the suitcase handle. There was a hard square face, jutting chin, and knotted light brown hair, all curved through the handle, distorted but oddly recognizable. He remembered "Jim," but not "Donne." Or this letter, or this graphic art business. He couldn't remember anything before the ride from Cuxlacjs. He couldn't even remember Cuxlacjs. He could only recall feeling awkward in the back of the bus and going up to talk with Earl, the only other person onboard. Even the conversation with Earl was becoming vague and mythological; yet he must have told Earl about the letter and this grandmother. Stepping off the bus, getting the suitcase, and seeing Sandra were

a bit clearer, but not much more so.

Jim met his own eyes in the mirrored handle; twin black pools strained to pierce the veil.
Massive blinding clouds built high above his hair, sharp and puffy, dominating this hilly lunar surface and its cruel artificial life.