

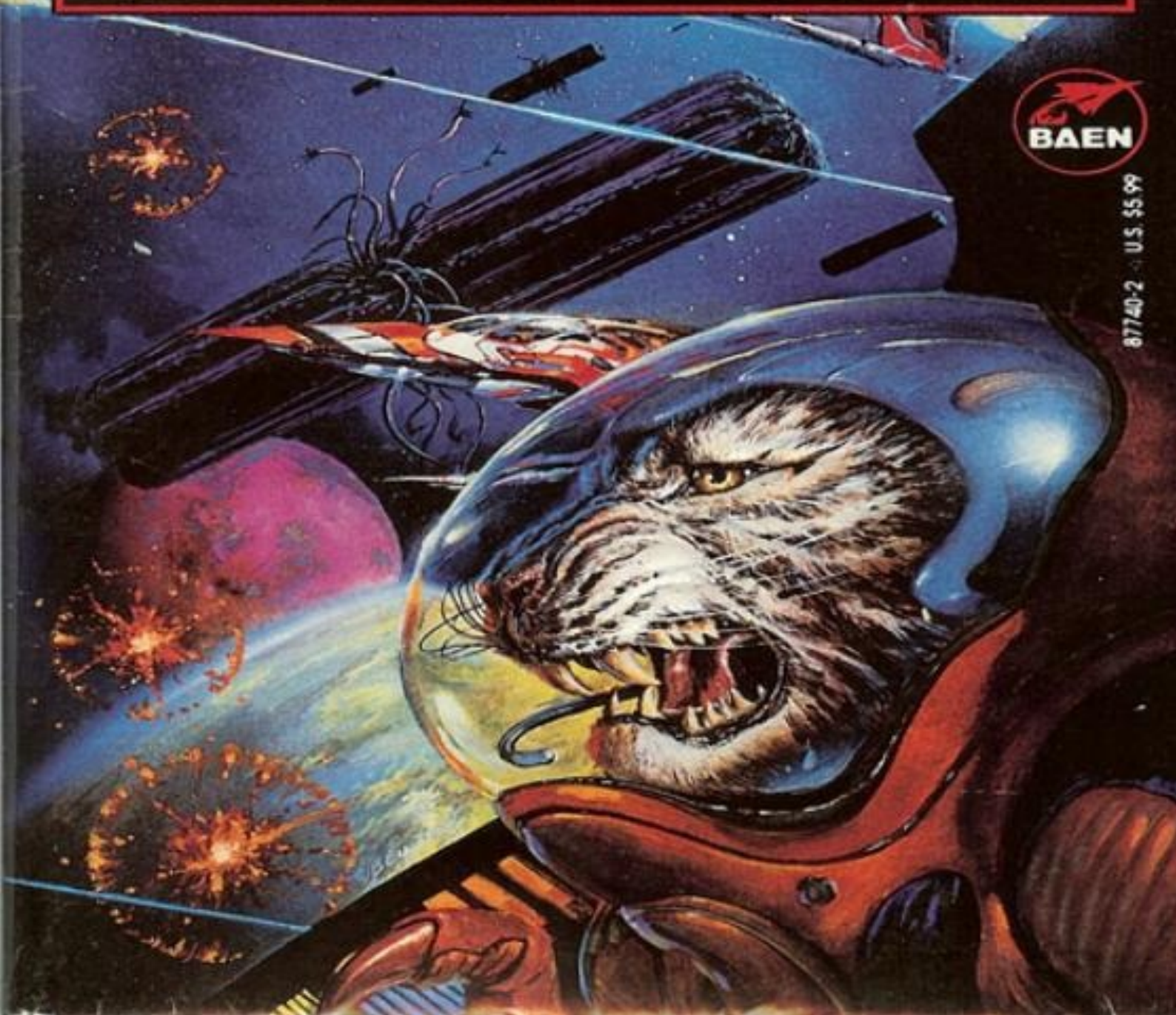
**MARK O. MARTIN**

**A DARKER  
GEOMETRY**

**GREGORY BENFORD**



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# **MAN-KZIN WARS VII:**

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## **A Darker Geometry**

**created by**

**Larry Niven**

**Mark O. Martin**

**&**

**Gregory Benford**

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# THE COLONEL'S TIGER

Hal Colebatch

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## India, Northwest Frontier, 1878

"Lie still. Rest," the doctor told him. "You're not recovered yet.

"Lie still? And listen to *that*?"

The wind brought to the field hospital the sounds of an intermittent drumfire from the barren snow-topped hills to the north, the flat thud-thud of screw-guns and the thorns-in-fire crackle of distant musketry.

"Rest, I say. You're out of this one, Captain Vaughn."

"I've had enough. Dreams. Sickness. Delirium."

The sick man swung his legs to the floor and rose to his feet. He took a half dozen steps, and the doctor caught him as he fell.

A punkah coolie took part of the emaciated soldier's weight and they helped him back to the bed.

"I'll make a bargain with you: When you can get as far as the latrine without help you can take the lead leading your squadrons in the mountains. Not before."

"I just feel so . . . useless lying here. Those are my men."

"If it's any consolation to you, the cavalry have been resting for the last week: It's work for mulattos and infantry up there. And if it's any further consolation, I had you marked off for dead a week ago. You and your friends."

The sick man smiled weakly. "I don't suppose my kit would have fetched much. There must have been a few auctions in the mess lately."

"It hasn't been too bad. Old Bindon's cautious with men's lives on punitive expeditions. Your tigerskin would have fetched something though . . . here, steady on!"

The doctor held the sick man's head as a violent retching shook him. Then, as he recovered, Vaughn raised his hand to the part of his scalp the doctor had held and gasped, "My head! What happened?"

"I suppose I can show you." The doctor held up a mirror.

"Oh, my God!"

"Curlewis and Maclean are the same. And that Afridi devil of yours. But you're all alive. It was your blood you were spewing a week ago, though you were in no condition to notice." The doctor held a glass of water to the captain's lips, steadying his trembling as he drank. "I must go. Rest, I say."

"Where is the skin?"

"Salted. The *gomashtha*'s got it. I advanced him a couple of rupees." He rose at the sounds he had been waiting for: hooves and the approaching wheels of ambulance carts from the direction of Dirragha.

Captain Vaughn sank back exhausted. He closed his eyes and saw again, hanging in blackness, the great cat's head, with its blazing gold and violet eyes and batwing ears, the interlocking fan of its teeth protruding beyond the lips, the great cat they called his tiger-man. The dark cave, the rockets . . .

The wounded were being brought from the carts. The unmistakable sounds recalled him from his own visions to reality, and the work that had been done that day. At the tail end of the Afghan Campaign, a force of no less than five thousand men was fighting to pacify these barren hills, with a death toll that implied in terms of death and wounds. Beside that, his own recent moment was nothing at all. But he was not fully clearheaded yet. The doctor could say what he liked, but at that moment the feeling of his weakness and uselessness oppressed him. He felt ashamed.

"They will forget you and me," he whispered to the image of his enemy. "But they will not forget the Dirragha Expeditionary Force."

Adding these statements together he was, at best, only partly correct.

# Chapter 1

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It was scarcely possible that the eyes of contemporaries should discover in the public felicity the latent causes of decay and corruption. The long peace, and the uniform government of the Romans, introduced a slow and secret poison into the vitals of the empire. The minds of men were gradually reduced to the same level, the fire of genius was extinguished, and even the military spirit evaporated.

—Edward Gibbon,  
*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*

One of the largest of all British local council libraries, at Brent, lately destroyed approximately 66,000 of its 100,000 books. The explanation which the council gave for this destruction was that the offending books were "books on war, history books and other books irrelevant to the community."

—R. J. Stove,  
*Where Ignorance is Bliss*,  
1993

Sir Bors had been taken away, so had Sir Kay, and Sir Launcelot and Lady May and Lady Helen and the rest. It was a routine matter, and the 'doc would soon be logging its report.

When they emerged from memory-wipe, the members of the Order of Military Historians restored to their proper names, plus numbers, would find themselves new people.

They would be privileged in a sense, with an all-expenses-paid trip into space, and actual paid jobs at the end of it. Not very far into space, and not the very best jobs, of course—tending elder machinery at the bottom of Martian canyons in a long-term, low-priority terraforming project, kept up mainly for its use in criminal rehabilitation. But work that some would envy, for all that.

Crime could pay in our civilized world: A coven of fantasists, who had given each other special names and titles of rank at bizarre ceremonies and who had cherished collections of ancient weapons and war-gaming programs, were going to get something to do to fill their lives after all.

They would have adequate medical and other care in the red canyons. Lady May and Lady Helen would still be beautiful when they returned to Earth. The "knights" when rehabilitated would be able to take part in approved sports. They were lucky, but even without the memory-wipe I doubt they would ever have known just how lucky they were. Some of their predecessors had gone into organ-banks.

I closed the files down and sent Alfred O'Brien my own report. Finding and closing the Order of Military Historians, as quietly and indeed as gently as possible, had been a piece of variety in my increasingly routine literary work. I reprogrammed my desk, wishing the 'doc could do something with my brain chemistry to make me immune from what a forbidden book I had once come across called *the Great Mystery of Human Boredom*.

At least I told myself it was boredom. There seemed to be less and less need now for the "gift" which had made me valuable to ARM. There was still plenty of desk work, but desk work anyone reasonably intelligent could do. The Games were of no interest to me when I knew how we had programmed them. What puppet master wants to join the puppets' sports? Two days later I was toying with a not-very-realistic idea of rearranging certain things to allow me a trip into space myself. (Wunderland had been a dream abandoned long ago, but would the Belt have use for anyone like me?)

doubted it.) when Alfred O'Brien called. He wanted to see me personally.

He began with a rundown of my report.

"Not so many of these people now," he remarked.

He had the statistics and the global picture. I didn't know, or want to know, much more than needed to: A long time ago, before my time, the militarist fantasy had been widespread. It had produced a great deal of pathological fiction and pseudohistory. We had had a lot of people working on it once. But our whole society had progressed in recent years.

Also, the study of *real* history was being progressively restricted. That, too, seemed to have helped put military fans out of business. A few years ago one in ten might have had clearance to study history. It would be one in thousands now.

Personally, I was not among that chosen few. My job was quite distinct. Literary, not historical.

The controller seemed talkative. Almost oddly so. He usually kept conversation either strictly business or strictly social. It was not like him to ruminate on what we were doing, at least to people like me. Even someone with less training than I possessed would have recognized him as being slightly ill at ease, and not bothering to disguise the fact overmuch. Something was, if not worrying him, I thought, puzzling him at least.

After a moment's pause he went on.

"It's a few years now since we had anything like this. But they're hard to clear out altogether. I sometimes think it's odd how military fan variations persist. Do you remember the Magnusson business?"

I did. Magnussen, a part-time volunteer helper at this very museum and a member of a now quietly closed-down body called the Scandinavian Historical Association, had evolved a theory from ceremonial objects he had examined that his ninth- and tenth-century Danish and Norwegian ancestors had been members of a warrior culture living in part by war and plunder. It might have seemed a very academic point to some, and frankly very few people would have been interested one way or another, but ARM had not wanted it sensationalized.

Actually, Magnussen had been hard done by: Those of us inside ARM, and working professionally in the field knew that indeed there still had been sporadic outbreaks of large-scale organized violence later than officially admitted, at least in remote areas away from the great cities of the world. I didn't want or need to know more of the details than my work required, but of course I had an outline. Well, whatever the reason Magnussen's ancestors had put to sea, he himself had gone on a longer voyage.

"I do think we're getting rid of them though," Alfred O'Brien said. "Sometimes I've thought there's no end to human perversity and folly. . . . Speaking of which . . ." He drummed his fingers on the table, hesitated again, and now I was sure he seemed embarrassed.

"There is another matter," he said at last.

"Yes?"

"An odd one."

"I can tell that."

"Yes. It's a bit out of our usual line, but we've been asked to look into it. Do you remember the *Angel's Pencil*?"

There had been a send-off a long time ago, shortly after I was seconded to the special literary research section of the program. It must be beyond the orbit of Tisiphone by now. "I've heard the name," I said. "A colony ship, wasn't it?"

"Yes. With a mixed Earth-Belter crew. It left for Epsilon Eridani eighteen years ago." He touched

a panel on his desk and a hemisphere map beamed up behind him. More time had passed than thought. The ship's telltale reached out to a point light-years beyond the last wandering sentinel of the Solar system.

"Don't tell me they've got military fants on board?"

I laughed. We had had a little worry recently about a scientific exploration ship named *Fanta Prince*. Finally we had decided after investigation that the name was an innocuous coincidence and had nothing to do with military fants.

He didn't laugh.

"I don't know. But it might be something like that. They've had trouble. If trouble's the right word for it . . .

"We thought we knew every tanj thing that could go wrong in space, but this one came out of nowhere."

He lit one of his "cigars." He'd copied that from Buford Early. It wasn't usual that he had trouble putting words together. This, I thought, is going to be something bizarre. But then, he would hardly have sent for me otherwise. ARM has plenty of people available for normal problems.

"It may be something mental affecting the crew. Something the ship's 'doc quite evidently can't handle. We're getting its readouts and it's diagnosed nothing wrong."

Docs failing in space were a nightmare, for spacers at least.

"Either that, or it's criminal behavior, which we like even less. . . . They're sending back messages about . . . Outsiders."

"Yes?"

He heard the excitement in my voice. Alien contact was one of the Big Ones. It was also a mirage. We had looked for friends among the stars for four hundred years and more and some false hopes had been raised and dashed. His next words damped my excitement.

"No. Not real Outsiders. There would be people involved at much higher levels if they *were* real. What they are sending back is quite impossible."

"Delusions?"

"Nothing so simple, though that would be serious enough. They've sent back pictures, holos. You can't transmit photographs of delusions. . . . There may be some sort of group psychosis. I know that's hardly a satisfactory description, but . . . they've made things . . . not very nice. . . ."

He nodded to himself, muttered something, and then went on.

"The whole report of alien contact is bizarre but carefully detailed nonsense. They've gone to a lot of trouble in some ways to try to be convincing, but in others they've made elementary mistakes. Mistakes in science so obvious they look deliberate. Why? Maybe one crew member has got control over the others."

"I don't see what that's got to do with me. I'm not a medical man. Or a psychiatrist. You know what I am."

"We've got medical men working on it too. But a stronger possibility is criminal conspiracy. Someone may stand to make a financial gain from this."

"But a criminal could only be rewarded on Earth—or in the Belt. Why commit a crime light-years beyond any reward? Besides, surely being crew on a colony ship . . . It just about guarantees a good life at the end of the trip."

"That may be taking a bit for granted. Colonies haven't always gone as planned. And being beyond reward means being beyond prosecution as well. But I won't speculate on possible Belt motives. You can think of some yourself. And even on Earth, family could be rewarded."



We didn't like families very much. But, thinking it over in silence for a moment, another question came to me that seemed rather obvious.

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"If it's a hoax, then, at the bottom line, does it matter? I mean, it's a long way away, isn't it?"

"You know the sort of money that's involved in colonization," he said. Then he continued. "Not on second thoughts you probably don't know. But think of this: What if it comes to be believed that long space flights send crews crazy, light-years from treatment?"

"Not so good."

"Another thing: A colony founded by criminals—or military fanatics—well, that's an entire world we're dealing with. Think about it."

I thought. It didn't take much thought to feel a chill at the long-term implications.

"Maybe that's a worst-case scenario," he went on, "but anything that might affect space colonization matters, given the type of money we're dealing with. A colony ship is *never* a good investment, Karl. It's money and resources thrown away, at least from the point of view of a lot of political lobbyists. It's never easy to . . . persuade . . . a politician to take the long-term view. One more negative factor at any time could tip the balance against the whole program.

"There's another thing, too: the obvious ARM thing. We don't like anything we don't understand. We can't afford it. One thing is sure: This business had its origins on Earth or in the Belt and we want to know why and where.

"It doesn't look like a simple practical joke. And the whole thing is detailed enough to make me believe it's not going to stop there. I think this was set up on Earth before they took off. There was once a practice called blockbusting. Have you heard of it?"

"No."

"It was marginally legal for a long time, or at least illegality was difficult to prove. A jokester wanted to buy real estate. He spread rumors of nasty diseases in the neighborhood, even paid nasty neighbors to move in, perhaps spread stories of nasty developments in area planning. Property values fell, he bought the property for less than its real value.

"For obvious reasons, that hasn't happened for a long time on any major scale, but this may be blockbusting brought up to date. The rumor gets out that space travel of more than a few light-years sends people crazy. Shares in all space and colonizing industries fall. Some smart guy buys them up then—"

"He'd be prosecuted, and treated. Unless—"

"Unless it couldn't be traced back. And if that's right, whoever thought it up is subtle and powerful."

"And you think this could have such an effect?"

"Not by itself . . . and not if this was to be the last we heard of it, perhaps. . . . Frankly, we're simply bewildered by it. I guess," he added, "quite a lot of what I've said is grasping at straws."

It was an unusual confession for someone in his position to make to someone in mine.

"So suppress it."

"We did. The reports were dead-filed by Director Bernhardt and Director Harms left them that way. With the cooperation of the Belt. But our new director feels that leaves too many questions unanswered. And the messages keep coming. Find out where this thing originated."

He touched the desk again and the heavens disappeared. We had windows and view again. Alfred O'Brien's office was on the fortieth floor of a museum complex, and out the window I could see the high leafy crowns of megatree oxygen factories and, on the ground beyond, a herd of pigmy mammoths, a gift from St. Petersburg, browsing on buttercups in their climate-controlled subarctic

meadow. There was a complex of sports stadia beyond that, part of the vast group ringing the city, and the river blue in the sun.

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"We're puzzled," he said, "not only as to why they should have delusions or whatever it is, but why *this particular one*. You see, they are trying to tell us that these Outsiders tried to destroy them!"

"The word is *war*."

He fell silent. It was as if the obscenity hung in the air before us.

"The word, Karl, we have been working for centuries to remove from human consciousness. Why did they resurrect the idea?"

The progressive censorship of literature had been my job for a long time. Search and closure operations of military fantasy cults went with it. It was an inescapable complement to the genetic part of the program.

"You remember 1938," he said.

It was one of the secret dates every ARM operative in my section knew: In that year a "radio" broadcast about an imaginary hostile Martian invasion had caused panic and terror and had paralyzed a large part of the United States of America for a night. One of the most serious landmark outbreaks of the Military Fantasy. The "War of the Worlds." It was pointed out to us in our training, lest we become complacent, that the idea of war had still had the potential to be taken seriously by large numbers of people only five years before the first test flight of the V-2 had launched the beginnings of the Space Age. Did the hoaxers know of that, too?

"I'll need to know more," I said.

"Of course. Look at these."

O'Brien touched his desk again. A succession of holos sprang up in the air between us. There were also a series of flats.

"Here are the pictures they sent back. Well, what do you think of the Outsiders they've dreamed up? Pleasant-looking sons of bitches, aren't they?"

There were humans in the pictures, evidently in order to give some idea of scale. The humans were less than shoulder-high to the other creatures, orange colored, fanged almost like ancient saber-toothed tigers, but with odd differences: four-digitated forepaws like clawed hands, shorter bodies and longer legs than real tigers, and triangular heads with bigger crania above feline faces. Distorted ears. The effect was of a monstrosity.

They appeared to be three-dimensional objects.

"Jenny Hannifers," said the controller. "Sailors in ancient times sewed together dead monkey and fish to sell as mermaids. These are a sophisticated version of the same thing."

I looked down at the little mammoths, whose DNA had come from specimens preserved in the Siberian permafrost.

"The tissue was grown in tanks, you mean?"

"No, I don't think so. It's possible perhaps. As a colony ship they had a lot of animal cell culture and they had plenty of advanced facilities for DNA sewing machines. But there are much easier ways. They had every kind of virtual reality simulator and program.

"We've checked what records there were of the loading of the *Angel's Pencil*, of course. The records weren't complete because a lot of personal property of crew members was never itemized.

"In any case the requirements of a colony ship are enormously complex. Some of the containers loaded might have held fake alien body parts. Some cargo had come from the Belt and we have no inventories of that. As you know, Belters hate keeping nonessential bureaucratic records and they have no any intrusions on their citizens' privacy. But they didn't need to carry physical props: Their computer

would do the job. Entertainment programs and computer space are things no deep-spacer—especially no colony ship—is short of."

"It seems a very queer sort of joke."

"Exactly. Normal minds wouldn't do such a thing. Which means, obviously, that we've got problems whatever the motive for producing them was.

"They say that these Outsiders approached them at an impossible speed, stopped dead in space in defiance of elementary laws of physics, and then tried to kill them by some sort of invisible heat ray after giving them all headaches. You can see how crazy it is. They haven't even bothered getting their basic science right, let alone the sociology.

"Then, they say, in trying to turn away they pointed their com-drive laser at the Outsider ship and a Belter crewman activated it. In one way we can be thankful: Suppose such a thing had *really* happened! When they examined the wreckage of the alien, so the message goes, they found it loaded with bomb-missiles, laser-cannon, ray-projectors: *weapons*, not signaling devices. Fusion-generators deliberately designed to destabilize at a remote command—sick, nightmarish things like that."

"You're right," I said heavily after the implications of what he said had sunk in. "There's real illness here. Something deeper than I've encountered or read of." Then, knowing my words sounded somehow lame in the context of such madness, "It makes no sense."

"No. It makes no sense. And you would think the crew of a spacecraft would know better than to tell us another spacecraft matched course with them at eighty percent of light-speed, *and* changed course instantaneously. As if anything organic wouldn't be killed by inertia. What about delta-v? It's as preposterous as expecting us to believe such an insanely aggressive culture would get into space at all!"

He projected another holo.

"Look at this. It's meant to be the Outsider ship."

Two main pieces of wreckage tumbling in space, leaking smaller fragments of debris. Cable ducting, unidentifiable stuff. I had the unpleasant thought that a living body chopped with an ax might leak pieces in the same way. There were tiny space-suited dolls maneuvering objects that included shrouded alien cadavers. There were other pictures, apparently taken from aboard the Outsider wreckage with the *Angel's Pencil* hanging in the background. But photographs taken in space have no scale. The objects could have been a mile across or the size of a man's hand. The EV humans could have been OO-scale figures from a child's model kit. But as he said, they were more probably electronic impulses than models. There were a lot of ways VR had already become a forensic problem.

"Can't we check it out? We've got good computers."

"So have they."

"I don't see anything that looks like a drive on it," I said. "Nothing like a ramscoop, no jets, no light-sail, no hydrogen tanks, no fusion bottles, nothing."

"That's right. Rather an elementary error to design an extraordinarily maneuverable spacecraft without a drive. I told you they've ignored the science. But we know the things are fakes. What we want to know is why they were faked."

He paused and contemplated his cigar, frowning. Then he switched his gaze to the pictures again.

"These things could be rather . . . disturbing, somehow?"

"Somehow, yes," I said, "I don't *like* them."

"No. Only a few people have seen these things yet, all trained ARM personnel and a few of the Belter security people, and everyone has the same response. There's art gone into this.

"We're descended from creatures that were hunted by felines, Karl. It's almost as if whoever

made up the morphology of these things has tapped into some sort of ancestral memory."

"I still don't see exactly how I come into it."

---

I did to some extent, though. And I saw another thing: If these holos of the alleged aliens became public, it was possible some gullible people might actually believe in them. Not as the symptoms of space madness, though that would be bad enough, but as being *real in themselves*.

There were, I knew, plenty of people around bored and stupid enough to believe anything. Indeed that was already a major social problem in itself. I understood why he had sent for me.

All right. I closed my eyes and leaned back in my chair. Let something come. Start with tigers.

"Tigers are Indian, aren't they?"

"I don't know. Someone downstairs could tell you." A lot of the museum below us was galleries and display rooms, and I knew Arthur Guthlac, the head guide and Assistant to the Museum's Chief of General Staff.

"Were there any Indians in the crew?"

He handed me a wafer. "Complete dossiers and pictures." I dumped it in my wrist-comp.

"Any more pictures of the . . . things?"

"Hundreds. They've been sending them back continually. This will give you the general idea. You see they remembered to give them thumbs."

He began flicking them up. No, I didn't like them. None of the Jenny Hannifers were whole, just as if they really had been burned or suddenly exposed to explosive decompression in space. Some were only fragments. Big catlike beings with thumbs. They were colored orange with some variations of shade from near red to near yellow and darker markings. One was smaller than the others. I was fairly experienced in dealing with sickness, pathology even, that was part of the job, but this was something different.

It was *wrong* that someone should have gone to so much care to concoct a hoax, and shown such ingenuity in its details. I thought again of what years in space might do to human beings—*real*—I thought about it—and realized for the first time how brave those first colonists of Wunderland and Plateau and Jinx and the rest had been.

There were holos of allegedly dissected "aliens," too: cartilaginous ribs that covered the stomach region, blood that varied in color between purple and orange, presumably an analogue for arterial and venous, streams of data that purported to be DNA codings, skeletons, analysis of alien alimentary canal contents and muscle tissue purporting to contain odd proteins, sheets of what was allegedly alien script, looking like claw marks. There were also holos of what purported to be alien skulls.

"There's possibly a connection with your other work," the controller went on. "Or in any case, it seems to fall into our area as much as anyone else's. Your clearance has been upgraded one threshold in case you need special information. With our own people, normal need-to-know should be enough."

I was getting signals that Alfred O'Brien was a nervous man taking a risk, and perhaps carrying me with him. I guessed opinion in the higher reaches was still divided on how to deal with this. A wrong decision, and early retirement; a *very* wrong decision, and . . . because, bizarre as it was, it could be serious.

Colonists were all volunteers, and could hardly be anything else. But they also went through rigorous screening and selection. It was quite right that rumors or reports of odd mental diseases in space could kill enthusiasm for colonizing ventures. And, yes, the ferocious three-meter tiger-cat images, however created, did have a disturbing quality about them. Somehow too many of them were difficult to look at for too long, whole or in pieces. But were they utterly unfamiliar? Why did I ask myself that question?

Deep, deep in memory, something stirred. What? I'd never seen anything much like the supposed aliens before, but . . . I looked at the dissection pictures again. There was the tiniest suggestion, somewhere in the back of my mind . . .

"The skulls might be a starting point," I said.

"Oh. How so?"

"I feel they look . . . familiar somehow."

"Good. It's good if you've got a starting point, I mean."

"Can I tell Arthur Guthlac about it? I know he's been interested in biological history."

"If you think so. But only what he needs to know."

"It's an odd job."

"That's why we need you."

"It's needle-in-a-haystack territory."

"I know." He picked up a sheet of paper and passed it to me. "I don't know if it's much of a start but I've had the computers search for literary references to 'space' and 'cat' together. There isn't much. Here's one you might not know: An ancient Australian poem by an author Gwen Harwood, called 'Schrödinger's Cat Preaches to the Mice':

*Silk whisperings of knife on stone,  
due sacrifice, and my meat came.  
Caressing whispers, then my own  
choice among leaps by leaping flame.*

*What shape is space? Space will put on  
the shape of any cat. Know this:  
my servant Schrödinger is gone  
before me to prepare a place . . .*

I looked down to the end:

*Dead or alive? The case defies  
all questions. Let the lid be locked.  
Truth, from your little beady eyes,  
is hidden. I will not be mocked.*

*Quantum mechanics has no place  
for what's there without observation.  
Classical physics cannot trace  
spontaneous disintegration.*

*If the box holds a living cat  
no scientist on earth can tell.  
But, I'll be waiting, sleek and fat.  
Verily all will not be well*

*if, to the peril of your souls  
you think me gone. Know that this house  
is mine, that kittens by mouse-holes  
wait, who have never seen a mouse.*

---

He handed me a card embossed with the symbol of a level of authority I had encountered on two or three times before.

"Stay away from 'docs," he said. "That's your permit to do so. In fact your order to do so. No medication till further notice. We're turning you loose exactly as you are."

"You do believe in taking risks, don't you?"

"You're not a schizie. You won't kill anyone. At least, I don't think so. But this is an intellectual problem. You'll need that intuition of yours as sharp as you can get it. And your wits sharp, too.

" 'Space will put on the shape of any cat. . . . ' " he quoted again as I left him. "It was written for a hundred years ago."

# Chapter 2

---

My first-year politics tutorials this week dealt with Nazi foreign policy and the lead-up to the war. I decided to loosen things a bit and just generally chat. . . . How strange that university politics students should *never have heard* of the little ships that took the British Expeditionary Force off the beaches in May 1940. Or de Gaulle. Or a Spitfire. No knowledge of any of it . . . This was the stuff that was supposed never to be forgotten thirty, forty years ago. Next week we do the Holocaust. . . .

—Letter to the author, October 10, 1991

Snow whirled round. A snarling roar shook the eardrums. Over the crest of a snow-covered ridge a saber-toothed head appeared, fangs dripping. With a single fluid motion the feline leaped to the top of the rock, poised for a moment, the eyes in its flat head blazing at us.

I caught myself flinching, sudden instinctive terror mixing with awe at the size and malevolence of the thing. Shrieking, the great cat launched itself through the air at us, its body suddenly seeming to elongate to an impossible narrowness.

It passed between us and there was a scream of animal pain and terror as its huge incisors sank into its prey. Blood spurted.

Arthur Guthlac turned off the holo, and the Pleistocene gallery faded.

"Kids love it," he said. "For some reason the Smilodon's even more popular than Tyrannosaurus Rex these days."

"Love it! It actually scared me!"

"Preschool children still have vestiges of the savage in them. You of all people should understand that. They like to be scared. They like a bit of bloodshed too."

"I'm aware of it," I told him. "Part of my job is to detect antisocial behavior early. And I don't particularly like to be scared."

Guthlac laughed. A laugh with an edge in it.

"But you, my dear Karl, are a mature, adjusted human being. Not one of our little savages."

Warm air flowed gently round as the gallery returned to its normal temperature. A voice announced the museum would be closing in ten minutes as we stepped out of the gallery into the corridor.

I wondered if he was aware of the real meaning of the word "adjusted" in my case. It probably didn't matter.

"That's better," I told him. "You make this place a lot too cold for comfort."

"The Pleistocene was cold. That's why you had the mammoth and mastodon, the cave bear and the dire wolf and the saber-toothed tiger. Big bodies save heat. An age of giants and ice. Then the monkey adapted to the cold by growing a big brain and that was the end of the story."

"I know that. But we're not in the Pleistocene now. I don't know how you can choose to work under these conditions."

"Well, the idea is we should at least know our planet's past. What's the point of a historical display if it isn't real? Nature really was red in tooth and claw once. Remember the *Africa Rover*."

"A good deal too red in tooth and claw for me to want to know about, thanks. I'll leave that to the children. But you know I don't mean you putting up with cold air currents and nasty holograms. I mean spending your life here."

"Look at this," said Arthur. He touched a display of letters below a permanent reproduction of a great felinoid. "It's a poem from an ancient children's book on paleontology called *Whirlaway*: 'The Song of the Saber-Tooth':

*On all the weaker beasts  
I work my sovereign will.  
Their flesh supplies my feasts,  
my glory is to kill.*

*With claws and teeth that rend,  
with eyes that pierce the gloom  
I follow to the end  
my duty and my doom.*

*For I shall meet one day  
a beast of greater might,  
And if I cannot slay  
I'll die in rapturous fight.*

"Don't you think it's got a sort of ring to it?"

It was my job, but I still found myself rather shocked, not just at the antisocial content of the poem, but because it seemed unpleasantly close to holos and flats I had been studying. Why had I chosen it to quote? "Do you think that's really suitable for children?" I asked.

"I don't think it can do any harm to show what prehistory—prehuman history—was like. You don't feel any sense of wonder looking back at the mammoth, the cave bear and the dire wolf?"

"Well, a bit, I suppose."

"You can be creative here."

Arthur turned to a smaller holo in a cabinet by the door leading into the main diorama space. A hominid on the shore of an alkaline lake screamed and ran from another great cat. Other hominids jerked up from their clam gathering to scatter before it. Long-extinct birds rose in a screaming cloud. This time the saber-tooth was foiled. Geological and evolutionary time had passed since the first scene. The hominids were taller and some of them had sticks.

The guard operated another switch and the scene changed again.

"We have a lot of things to do here. This is a new one for the children. Our might-have-beens." He spoke to a panel and a succession of prehistoric animals appeared, altered.

"You can do your own genetic engineering here: These are how our friends might have developed had conditions been different." He turned a dial and the holos changed. "Look! Here other creatures got the big brains."

Tigerlike creatures walked improbably erect, with fanciful tigerish cities in the background.

"It's been worked out what might have happened."

There was something here. I didn't understand it, but there was a hint of a scent. Had something been planted here?

Not, I thought, by Arthur Guthlac. All that was marked in his file was a certain interest in unsuitable games and reading, perhaps an occupational risk for someone in his job, and a general



restlessness and reluctance to apply himself (apply himself to what?). Further, I had already checked that he had no conceivable financial or other links with anyone or anything that might profit from stories of space madness. I kept my voice casual.

"Yes, I'm sure the children love it. But all the same, you must get sick of it, day after day. I don't know why you bother with such a job. If you want to work, there are plenty of better things to do."

"No," he said, "I don't really get sick of it. It can be fun working with the holos. The children can make it fun, too. In any case, what else should I be doing? Nobody's going to send me into space, are they?" There was resentment buried somewhere there, I noted. Buried none too deeply, at that.

"This wing is largely a children's museum, as far as display goes," he continued. "Which is why they have human guides, of course. You know it's impossible to make anything child-proof if they're left to run loose without supervision. A lot of the equipment here is expensive."

Arthur paused and then added, "And, after all, Karl, history is important."

"Of course it is. But the world is full of people telling themselves their hobbies are important. We've all got a great deal of leisure time to fill. All right, I agree we need people doing what you are doing. But you wanted to go into space once."

"What good is an amateur savant in space? They sent plenty of real professors to Wunderland, but someone like me would only take up valuable room on a colony ship. I know."

"I applied a long time ago. . . . I have no skill that would justify the expense of transporting me, or will allow me to earn enough money to pay my own way. One family seems to have been rationed to one space-farer. But you haven't heard me complaining, have you?"

"Not in so many words." I kept my voice neutral. There was nothing to be gained by thinking why *I* would never be allowed very far into space.

His sister, I knew, was a navigator on the *Happy Gatherer*, a genius, genetic engineer turned space pilot. He was proud of her and, I guessed, subconsciously resentful.

"Anyway, look at this." Arthur opened another door onto a vast panorama of the asteroid belt, as seen from the surface of Ceres, the rocky landscape lit by the blue-white fusion flame of a miner's ship passing closer than a real ship would ever be allowed.

He touched another switch, and we seemed to stand on the red surface of Mars. Our feet disappeared in dust.

"You can do a lot with holos," Arthur said. "Being a gallery supervisor can be a lot of fun if the museum's big enough and has VR as good as we have here."

He gestured. "Do you want to see our Great Moments in History? The Sportsman's Hall of Fame? The panorama of the Olympic Games? The Hall of Music? We've got it all here. Science, the history of space flight: Werner von Braun sending up the first V-2?" He pointed down the hall, to the strange yet familiar shape of the historic weather-research rocket's replica suspended from the ceiling.

"There's the Shame Gallery, too, the displays of creatures we exterminated, like the trusting dove bird. But the truth of the matter is I like working in the museum because we have an excellent library here. I'd still like to do something in the field of prehistory. Somehow."

The main doors of the great building whispered shut. On Arthur's computer a pattern of green lights appeared, as surveillance monitors locked into a nighttime control center. Security was light, precaution against accident more than crime.

A holo showed an outline of the complex, secured sections turning green, the last departing visitors white flashing dots of light. A few red dots for the skeleton human staff who would monitor the surveillance screens and occasionally patrol the corridors during the night. Cleaning and maintenance machines began to stir.

"I'm off duty now. I'm glad you made this visit, Karl."

~~"It's been a long time. I thought it would be a good idea if we caught up with each other."~~

"Well, we're closing down now. Would you like to come home for a while?"

"Would your family mind an uninvited guest?"

"I live alone. I thought you knew."

"Well, I've no engagements tonight. The little savages are having their tapes played to them b  
now. Yes, all right. Thank you."

We stepped into a transit-tube. Arthur Guthlac's quarters, I guessed from the near-instantaneous  
passage, were somewhere in the museum complex itself.

Psychologically the rooms were easy to read. There were high-detail models of spaceships,  
deep-space exploration vessel dominating them, and a flat map of the interstellar colonies.

Arthur was ARM, of course, with some clearances. Most of the museum personnel, certainly a  
the general staff, were under the organization's wing, even if they had no idea of what its real size and  
ramifications were (for that matter, I was well aware that I knew very little of that myself). They came  
in contact with too much history for any other arrangement to be conceivable.

*Anyone* involved with history had ARM's eye on them, and it was better to have such people  
inside the organization than out. We could afford that now. The occasional secret covens of military  
fantasists we came across—the Sir Kays and Lady Helens with their ceremonies and Namings—we  
a continuing if diminishing nuisance but were no longer seen as any real threat, and with modern  
medical science the organ banks had long been closed.

Still, our present problem was before us and there is wisdom in the book of sports about keeping  
your eye on the ball. I took him through most of what Alfred O'Brien had told me, with the major  
visuals. He thought it over for a while, then he said:

"Show me the picture of the skull again. . . . It's odd, but this almost reminds me of something."

"A skull is a skull, surely." I didn't tell him that it almost reminded me of something, too.

"Yes, but, somewhere, somehow, I've got a feeling I've seen something like this before."

"It's a pretty freakish-looking thing," I said.

"So it should be easy to identify."

He turned to a computer terminal.

"We've got a good identification program here for type specimens," he said. "Let me scan the  
in." He placed the picture in the slot and we waited as the display began to reel off numbers.

"We've got all the major type specimens here," he said, "but not the oddities." He pressed more  
keys.

"It's too much," he said after a while. "I was wrong. We'd have to write a new program to get  
anything in the next month or so."

"Surely not. I know these programs. They can carry virtually unlimited data. That's what they're  
for!"

"Yes, when the data's been given to them. This hasn't been. There is, it seems, no general  
catalogue of freaks."

"We'll have to go through this practically museum by museum," he said after a minute. "This  
broken down into ancient national collections, even provincial—as you probably know, most animal  
classification is very old and often parochial. It should have been updated, but it never has been.  
I don't even know what some of these countries were, let alone the districts and provinces!"

I thought of the poem the controller had shown me.

"Start with Australia," I said.

The screens rolled briefly. Guthlac shook his head. The poem seemed to exist in isolation, and the read in full seemed to have been concerned with quantum mechanics.

"There are no true felines native to Australia," he said after a while. "The Tasmanian tiger and so forth were marsupials—convergent evolution."

"Perhaps some sort of convergent evolution is what we're after."

More figures. Then lines of text.

"Abnormal feline morphology . . . teratology . . ." Guthlac read, muttering to himself. "Convergent evolution . . . See . . ."

He began to punch up pictures of fanged skulls. None had a cranium anything like the skull in the picture the crew of the *Angel's Pencil* had sent back.

"That's all the Australian collection has," he said. "Ordinary felines imported from elsewhere for zoos and so forth, domestic cats and a few convergent marsupials . . . Did you know there was once a marsupial lion? Died with the rest of the megafauna when man got there, though. Their main natural history concern as far as cats are involved seems to have been with the effects of domestics going feral."

*Gone feral*. It sounded a funny concept to apply to animals. Its ARM usage was reserved to apply to a certain rare type of human.

"Yes. The life-forms there had evolved in isolation, and had no defenses when the cats came with bigger teeth and claws and quicker reflexes. They wiped out a lot of species."

Was that why the hoaxers had chosen cats, I wondered? Some play on subconscious associations? *When the cats came*. The words seemed to hang in the air for a moment.

Then: "Wait . . . here's something else . . . the Vaughn Tiger-Man."

"What's that?" Was there the faintest ripple of memory somewhere in my own mind at the word?

"A tiger killed in India in 1878 by Captain, later Colonel, Henry Vaughn of the Fourth Lancers."

"What name did you say?" An alarm bell rang in my mind.

"Vaughn." He spelled it out.

One of the *Angel's Pencil's* crew was named Vaughn.

"What are lancers, do you suppose?"

"I don't know. What's a colonel?" As a matter of fact I knew what a colonel was, and from that I could guess what lancers had been, but there was no point in letting Arthur Guthlac know that. I made a mental note that these natural history records needed editing. And I saw from his body language, plainly, that he was lying too. He knew what those terms meant.

"Go on," I said.

"This is an old journal. Produced by some amateur natural history society. Colonel Henry Vaughn killed an abnormal tiger."

"But they're protected species!"

"Not then. And this one was a man-eater."

We knew that phrase: "Man-eater" had been a term of sensational horror recently. A boutique airship, carrying tourists slowly and silently fifty feet above the African savanna, had developed engine trouble and landed. The passengers in their closed and comfortable gondola need have only waited a few hours for rescue—less if they had said it was urgent. But they had left the craft and wandered out, apparently unaware of any danger. It had been a sobering thought during the investigation which followed that any of us might have done the same. Arthur went on.

"He kept the skull and skin and settled in Australia later. But it's not in the Australian Museum collection. When he died his family gave the skull to the British Museum."

"Is there a picture of it?"

~~"Yes. But it's only a drawing. And half of it is missing."~~

"Let me see."

Half a two-dimensional drawing. The front of a big skull, oddly distorted. There wasn't much detail, but such a skull *could* be the inspiration of the Jenny Hannifer. What there was of it was closer than anything else we had seen. And I felt I had seen that picture somewhere before. Somewhere connected with childhood, just as the words "Vaughn Tiger-Man" aroused some faint chord that had something to do with long ago. I felt almost sure that I had heard that phrase before.

I closed my eyes and concentrated: an image of a big room, with giant furniture, and giants. A child's-eye view of house and parents. My giant father reading to me from a yellow-covered book? I thought that was what it was, but I couldn't be sure.

Perhaps the original illustration had been reproduced in one of those books which were discouraged: *Strange Tricks of Nature*, *Great Unsolved Mysteries*, *The Wonder-book of Marvels*.

There had been a spate of them once. My father had collected them. Well, I was in a position to know where they were gone to now.

More screens of numbers. Then a beeping sound, and a pointer flashing red at one of them. Guthlac scrolled down another menu and searched again. "I've located a box number for it." He said. "It's in England, but I gather from this it's not been put on display, or not for a very long time. It was put into storage when it arrived there in 1908 and I gather it stayed there."

"Can you get any description?"

"Not much. A sport, a freak, it says here. There was some interest in it when it was first shot. But it wasn't regarded as scientifically important. It was just a piece of gross pathology."

"The only one of its kind?"

"Exactly. Like the Elephant-Man. Not much for an ambitious student to make a name on there. That was a great age of biological discovery, you know, with all sorts of larger projects to occupy researchers. Vaughn wrote about it himself. Abnormal limbs and fangs and a large cranial tumor. The specimen was grossly deformed. Pity he didn't keep the whole skeleton."

Arthur turned to me. He seemed suddenly embarrassed. When he spoke it was with an obvious hesitancy in his voice.

"Karl?"

"Yes?"

"How important is this?"

"I'm here, aren't I?"

"If this does matter, then I've done ARM a service, haven't I?"

"Of course."

"Would there be . . . a reward?"

"You have a real job. Isn't that reward enough? Important work. You said so yourself. You are one of the elite twenty-five percent who have something more than sport to fill their lives. How many people out there would give all they have for that?"

"I want to get into space."

"So save up for a few years."

"No! Not as a passenger. I want . . . I want . . ."

His voice trailed off. I knew what he wanted. Isolated, celibate, a square peg keeping a tight hold on normality. I knew. I was glad to break the awkward silence.

"Yes. You mentioned a skin."

"Nothing about that here." Then he burst out: "You have your hunts to enjoy!"

~~There was no point in arguing with him, but how wrong he was! Someone who enjoys my work~~ the sense I knew he meant would be useless. In any case, the mental preparation arranged for us thorough. What I do is a duty, and not an ignoble one. Our world has—no, our worlds, plural, have—become complicated beyond imagining. There is a phrase coming into use: "known space." Someone has to hold it together. It has never been a matter of the hunt for its own sake, or of searching for excitement.

Warn him off. Now. Arthur had quite a lot of museum junk littering a workbench. All there legitimately, I assumed, but among it was a small heap of brown paper, the pages of old books faded and gone in acid decay.

"What are these?" I asked casually.

"Sports history. It's been a hobby of mine."

"Oh." My eye caught the bottom of one of the loose pages:

At the end of March, 1943, the thaw started on the eastern front. "Marshal Winter" gave way to the still more masterful "Marshal Mud," and active operations came automatically to an end. All Panzer divisions and some infantry divisions were withdrawn from the front line, and the armor in the Kharkov area was concentrated under the 48th Panzer Corps. We assumed command of the 3rd, 6th, and 11th Panzer divisions, together with P.G.D. Gross Deutschland. Advantage was taken of the lull to institute a thorough training program, and exercise . . .

He looked over my shoulder at it. "Winter Olympics, I think," he said. "They were just starting to do things on a really big scale with team games then. The Space Age year."

It dealt with a period before the literary era I specialized in and it didn't mean a lot to me. I didn't particularly like it, but for a low-grade ARM officer to possess a few lines of old books without specific clearance was not exactly an offense, even if it might amount to skating on thinnish ice. In any case I had other things to do now.

ARM had special facilities for deep hypnosis available for people like me, since memory and association are our most unique assets.

Certain specific parts of my childhood and juvenile memory had been blocked as a routine precaution when I joined ARM but the block was intended to be bypassed in a matter of need. It wasn't perfect recall but I did bring back a clearer picture. An old, old book in my father's collection, *Great True Stories of Adventure for Boys*, with a story of a strange tiger hunt and crude black-and-white line drawings. Including the drawing of that odd skull.

Memory-wipe is not a form of death, whatever some people say. It can be controlled and stopped at a certain point. An individual's childhood memories might be left intact—they often were. I am not a killer. I am nothing remotely like a killer.

# Chapter 3

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One of Japan's ubiquitous television crews took to the streets last week to find out what people thought about the forthcoming fiftieth anniversary of Pearl Harbor. . . . Such has been the rewriting of history in Japan that many teenagers had not even heard of Pearl Harbor and several expressed amazement Japan had fought a war with the United States.

—Gareth Alexander  
"The War Japan Chose to Forget,"  
Press Item, December 3, 1991

London was gearing up for the first rounds of "Graceful Willow," and the streets were full of supporters wearing team colors when I arrived, bowing to one another, giving way in air-cars and on pedestrian walks, competing already among themselves in the game's values of courtesy and noncompetitiveness.

Dr. Humphrey of the British Museum had been contacted and briefed to help me. Together we read through all of the very little literature we had been able to find on the specimen. Of course he was an ARM too. He knew better than to ask why we were making this peculiar investigation.

The man who had taken the name of Sir Kay had had tears in his eyes when he was taken away, but he would in no other way betray fear. Why not? I knew how terrified he was. Was it something to do with courage, with the barbaric code of warlike "nobility" that they had dabbled in to their disaster? "Have you any conception of what you are destroying?" the girl who had called herself the Lady Mary had asked me when I identified myself and arrested them. Yes, I had a conception. ARM does not do what it does for nothing.

It took time to locate the storage data on the specimen, even with the search tools we had available, and then there was a further purely physical hunt for it, in the recesses of sealed vaults far underground, containing the detritus a great museum acquires over centuries.

An elevator took us down from street level past several floors of storage to a deep subbasement. There were ancient, primitive stuffed specimens of animals standing there with their hides falling apart into ghoulish sculptures of wires and bones. There were desiccated things in the bottoms of jars and crumbling stone figures that had once been worshiped. There were even mislaid pieces of sports history, such as a tiny rudimentary flying machine with open cockpit and three stubby wings, red fabric falling off its crumbling framework. The designers had given maneuverability and a rapid climb priority over all else. Some game long out of fashion.

Beyond this were further repositories in that great ancient warren of a building. We came to a row of shut metal doors, and entered another locked vault after consulting a plan.

The air was dank. Even cleaning machines had not been there for a long time. And then to a series of locked metal cupboards, so old they were actually rusted.

We found it at last, the label almost unreadable under dust. An ancient wooden box. The lid creaked as we prized it open.

The skull was huge, gray with age, and with some of the more delicate nasal bones obviously crumbled or broken in previous handling. There were several irregular, cracked holes.

Although these stacks were in Dr. Humphrey's charge, he had apparently not seen it before. That was understandable. There were miles of shelving on compactus tracks.

"It's no tiger," he said. "It's like no animal I've ever seen."

"A freak?"

"No. No tiger so abnormal would have grown to adulthood."

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"What about these lesions?"

"I've seen them on specimens before. Gunshot wounds when it was killed. And look at this!" He gestured at the literature he had brought and then down at the thing itself. "Cranial tumor indeed!"

It took the two of us to turn the skull over. He inserted a probe. "That's all braincase. Bigger than yours or mine."

I had a picture of a skull sent by the *Angel's Pencil* with me. There was no mistake about the identification: the *Pencil's* "alien" skull was copied from this one. I left the British Museum's storage section and headed for the archives, still as good as any in the world.

The Vaughn family were still in Australia. They had survived what happened there in 2025 and even emerged with some of their land intact and productive: The farm near the New South Wales rain forest which the colonel had retired to on his pension when all the British Empire was practically over the country. I was there a few hours later.

Arthur Vaughn-Nguyen seemed cooperative when I presented myself as a Historian. He was in late middle age, probably about a hundred and ten, unattached. There was still farming going on, but robots did the work. He had two sons (so his genes must have checked out well) but they were not there. One, I gathered, was off-planet.

Perhaps he was talkative because he was bored. How many bored people there were! Or was I being *too* cooperative? I felt suspicious from the start. The farm had a sense of history about it, too, and not just because it belonged to one of the Survivor families.

Too much history, I thought, as I looked at some of the books and artifacts preserved in cases and along the walls of the main hall.

It was probably just as well that Vaughn-Nguyen did not know my thoughts, as I sat in his main living room with a live dog resting its head on my feet and a glass of Bungle-Bungle rum, a local delicacy said to date from Old Australia, in my hand. The family appeared to regard it as traditional. There was a suspicious amount of tradition left at the Vaughn station.

Colonel Vaughn himself was there, an ancient larger-than-life-size portrait hanging on the wall. He was rather as my reading had led me to imagine a "colonel" might be: crook nosed, wearing an elaborate jacket called a "uniform," with decorations on it called "medals." I had seen such things before, both in books and in the military fan cults. Somehow it struck me as odd and after a little thought I saw why: The man in the picture had no hair at all. No mustache, no eyebrows. It was anachronistic. I didn't think there had been a fashion for hairlessness until modern cosmetics were developed.

Probably it didn't matter. In those days men did lose their hair involuntarily. But this continuing public display of a military fan-type uniform was a different story. ARM should have paid the Vaughn-Nguyens a visit before.

A lot of this was headed for Black Hole. I wondered what compensation it would be necessary to pay the colonel's descendant for the removal of his antiques. Not much. We had destroyed the market for this sort of gear long ago.

It reminded me of something from our first training. When what is now known as ARM began to prelude to the program, as long ago as the American and French advancements at the end of the eighteenth century, it had made one of its priorities the ridiculing and destruction of the notion of hereditary titles of honor.

It was amusing (our instructor had said) to think this had been done in the names of liberty, democracy, equality and progress, when the real purpose had been to consolidate power. Even

constitutional monarchy had been destroyed by a prolonged and often subtle political and media campaign, removing the only significant institution that remained as a rival and therefore a check upon its power (apart from the churches, for which there were other plans).

Family history and traditions were dangerous. Interest in the memory of an "ancestor" was but a short step from family pride and loyalty, and that was clearly and totally inimicable to the interests of Earth's good government, or, as far as they were distinguishable, of ARM.

But if the Vaughn-Nguyens thought too much of the past, that was useful to me now.

"The old colonel's tiger-man? Yes. Quite famous in its day," he said. Then he added perfectly casually, "Would you like to see the skin?"

I had not been expecting this. I looked at Arthur Vaughn-Nguyen closely. What was he really up to?

"You have it here?"

"Why, yes."

He led me into another room. The dog followed us for a few steps, and then stopped, making a peculiar noise.

"Is he all right?" I asked.

"You've just seen a family mystery in the flesh." He said, "No animal will go into that room." He laughed. "We say it's haunted by a ghost tiger."

Against the wall stood a large box of some dark wood, obviously very old, hand carved with intricate decorations. It was much more elaborate than the one at the museum.

Another antique, and this time, I would have guessed, of great value. There was, I noticed, no electronic lock on it, no recording device. Impossible to prove when it had been opened last. Had any of the *Angel's Pencil* crew been here? I didn't fancy the time-consuming job of tracking down the movements over the last generation.

"It's in there?"

"We keep it here. We used it for a rug once, but it was put away, a long time ago."

It had been a crime to keep the skins of rare animals. In the days when there was a never-ending demand for material for the organ banks, and crimes, however minor, attracted only one punishment. Those days were long gone, but the Vaughn-Nguyens must have some genes for either courage or foolhardiness for one of their ancestors to have risked keeping the thing at all. Did this point to involvement in criminal behavior today?

"I'd like to see it very much," I said.

The chest smelled bad when it was opened, not powerful at first, but like nothing I have ever smelled before.

Like nothing I have ever smelled before? There was something about that smell, something that made me want to be away from that place. I guessed what it was after a moment, though I had never encountered it before: It must be the tiger smell. I got it under control easily enough. I heard, from the next room, a howl and a frantic scrabble of claws on flooring as the dog fled.

My host pulled out the skin and rolled it out across the floor.

Although parts were missing, it was huge as the skull we had seen was huge. It had longer legs than any tiger and it was still a blazing orange. There were some darker markings but it was not a normal tiger's striped pelt. It almost looked as if it had been made of some synthetic fabric (Perhaps it was. Well, that would be tested).

The head was enormous. It felt toylike when I examined it because the cavity where the skull had been was stuffed with some sort of papier-mâché, now crumbling. The jaws were set in a huge gap



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