



A Greater Infinity

Michael McCollum

Del Rey
ISBN: 0345301676

CHAPTER ONE

DID you ever dream of doing great things with your life? You know, wish you had discovered penicillin, or a lost continent, or been a great general? Hal Benson is like that. Hal is my landlord and a good friend. But he lets his enthusiasms get the best of him. Not that his dreams are any of the things I just mentioned. Hal's dreams are more in keeping with the times. And unlike most people, he acts to bring them to pass. It makes him a bit strange. In fact, Hal is something of a crackpot

Chief among his interests is his abiding faith in life on other planets. True, he's also the local guru of the science-fiction fan club and something called the Society for Creative Anachronism, but his main interest is the UFO Spotters Club, of which he is founder and president. The three groups consist of an amorphous clique of lovers of the unknown who seem to travel through life in their own private worlds, unaffected by the things the rest of humanity considers important.

And that brings me in a roundabout way to my story. It has nothing to do with Hal Benson, although he did act as the catalyst so I thought I ought to mention him.

It was midwinter, one of those crystal-clear nights when a freezing wind whips in off the desert from the east and the Moon bathes everything in a bright, pearly glow. Hal was off to a science-fiction convention back East and the UFO Spotters were using our place—a dilapidated rooming house in the old section of Tempe near the university—for their monthly meeting. Since I was the only resident in residence (the others having taken off for parts unknown, it being semester break), I was assigned the job of keeping them from tearing up the place and making sure the cops had no probable cause for a drug bust.

They came drifting in about eight, and by the time the formal meeting had started, fifty-odd people were scattered in nooks and crannies around the old house. And I mean fifty *odd* people! In Hal's absence, Weasel Martin took over the meeting. Weasel is a short, bearded graduate student whose most prominent feature is his nervous no. He banged on a table with a wooden spoon to get attention, then called the meeting to order.

I was in the kitchen dishing out taco chips and bean dip. Jane Dugway was helping me, as well as pulling the pop tops from the half-case of Coors. Somehow the cans Disappeared into the other room as fast as she opened them.

I had first met Jane at school. Even though I was majoring in engineering, the university was determined that I get a well-rounded education. So in order to complete my eight hours of social sciences required to graduate, I took a course in anthropology. Jane was a graduate student in an thro and my discussion-group leader for one semester. She wasn't one of those lucky women blessed with the gift of beauty. Her hair had terminal frizzies, and Coke-bottle glasses did nothing to improve her profile. But the mind behind her mannish face was as sharp as a razor blade.

We carried the taco chips and bean dip into the living room just as Weasel Martin called for old business. Pee-Jay Schwarz got to his feet and began an excited narrative about an Alabama farmer who claimed to have been to the Moon on a flying saucer. Weasel ruled bun out of order. PeeJay's an overweight teenager with a bad skin condition and the personality of a bantam cock, so Weasel's censure didn't bother him at all. He just got red in the lace and talked louder.

Weasel took a couple of menacing steps toward PeeJay, his hands clenched into two white-knuckled fists, and his tic going a mile a minute. Gordon Trackmann, a grandfatherly type with a crewcut, stepped between them and got PeeJay cooled down with a promise that he could speak first when the agenda turned to new business. After that things settled down considerably. It might as well have been a meeting of the League of Women Voters, with everything being run in strict adherence to Robert's

Rules of Order. I was fast losing interest when Joel Peterson decided to launch the evening's debate. Joel is a prissy sociology major who wears bow ties with his blue denim shirts and dirty Levi's. He revels in being the club skeptic and is especially skilled in sparking controversy.

"I don't believe in UFOs," he declared loudly. "Not as interstellar visitors, anyway."

There was a murmured undercurrent in the crowd—the sort of thing that happens in the movies just before the lynching—and Weasel Martin prepared to smite the unbeliever with lightning.

"Then you're dumber than you look," he said to Joel. A scattering of applause sounded and someone muttered, "That must be pretty dumb considering his looks."

I had to give Joel credit. He stood his ground. "What makes you think UFOs aren't just a mammoth hoax? Have *you* ever seen one?" It was a good attack. Although several members claimed to have spotted UFOs, everyone knew that Weasel Martin never had, and that he considered it a personal affront

The wrangling went on for another half-hour before Weasel got fed up. "Okay, smart ass! If they aren't visitors from other stars, what are they? And don't tell me swamp gas!"

There was a pause, and a smug look spread across Joel's face. His trap had been set, baited, and sprung. "They're time travelers from the future or from a parallel universe," he said in triumph.

This was greeted by a chorus of Bronx cheers, boos, and catcalls. Weasel 'was about to launch his counterattack when Sam Grohs pushed open the kitchen door and diverted everyone's attention.

"Hey, what happened to the beer?"

"Gone," I said.

"Gone? Hey, man, I'm dying of thirst."

Then the chorus began—"BEER RUN, BEER RUN. WE WANT A BEER RUN!"

Weasel took time out from the debate to look around. He found a discarded cowboy hat and passed it to the assembled congregation. "Okay, you turkeys. Ante up for a beer run."

While the hat made the rounds, Joel gave us all the once-over. "Who's going to make this run?"

"Duncan MacElroy," someone in back piped up. "He's not doing anything."

The chant began again. "DUNCAN, DUNCAN, DUNCAN!"

I didn't join the chanting. I'm Duncan and I didn't want to go out into the cold.

"How about it, MacElroy?" Weasel asked. "Want to make a beer run?"

I shrugged. "Why not? But I can't carry it all by myself."

"I'll go."

I turned around to see Jane Dugway get to her feet. I 'light have predicted it would be her. Jane *is* one of the few people in the club who ever volunteer for anything.

"Okay, Jane. Wait a sec while I get my coat."

Jane waited for me on the sidewalk out front. She was bundled up in a fur coat with her black leather bag over one shoulder.

"Got the money?" I asked.

She nodded. "Shall we drive?"

I looked around. I could barely see my Jag through the cluster of cars that sloped over from the driveway onto the front lawn.

"I'm parked in," I said.

"Me too. I guess we walk."

"Okay," I said. "It's only two blocks."

We set out at a leisurely pace up Oak toward the red and white sign of our local convenience market. The rest of the houses on the street were dark because of midsemester break. Every couple of blocks a mercury vapor lamp illuminated a streetcorner. But the long spaces between were dark patches of flickering moonlight and shadow. The sidewalk was a white lane barred with the shadows of bare tree limbs, broken in dozens of spots where clumps of winter grass pushed up through cracks left by sixty years of summer heat and winter cold.

The liquor coolers of the market were sparse hunting. We finally ended up with half a dozen six-packs of four different kinds of beer. We loaded them into bags and started for home.

The conversation drifted to anthropology. I walked in front of Jane, feeling my way over the tilted, broken slabs of sidewalk, discussing a pet theory I'd developed about the affinity of modern Americans for vicarious enjoyment via the boob tube. Suddenly I felt a hard shoulder in the small of my back and was flying into a hedge of Texas sage. I landed on my belly as the beer crashed to the ground with a metallic clatter. Two of the cans burst open, spraying me with a cold shower of carbonated hops.

I spit out a mouthful of dirt and grass, and turned over. It was dark in the shadow of the hedge, but I could make out Jane, flat on her stomach, peering down and across the street at something.

"What was that for?" I asked.

"*Quiet*," she hissed.

"What the hell is going on here?" I asked, sitting up and brushing the sticky beer from my jacket. I wrinkled my nose at the smell.

She reached up with one arm and pulled me down again. She was surprisingly strong and I could feel the bruises on my upper arm where she had grabbed me.

"If you value your life, stay down!"

I opened my mouth to reply, then shut it again. I had just caught sight of the gun.

Except it wasn't a gun. Even with only scattered patches of moonlight to see by, that much was obvious. The thing in her hand was a weapon of some kind. It had a handle, a trigger, and a trigger guard. But the barrel was a long thin glass pipe that glowed with a faint blue fluorescence. My mind sorted through its dusty files and came up with a name for that glow. Cherenkov radiation! It was the glow of a nuclear reactor under two dozen feet of water.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Over there," she said, gesturing toward a large hedge halfway down the block on the other side. "At the base of the oleanders, about twenty feet from the end."

I strained my eyes, conscious of how the cold wind bit into me where the beer had soaked into my clothes. The spot *she* described was fairly well lit by the corner street lamp. "I don't see anything."

"Look closely at the area that seems to be fading out of focus."

I squinted. I wasn't sure, but I thought I saw what she referred to. Some trick of light and shadow

caused a small section of bushes to advance and recede while I watched. It was like watching something under running water.

"I see it," I said.

"That's a Dalgiri aversion field. One of them is watching your house."

"What's a Dalgiri?" I asked, thinking I was being set up for a joke. You know: "What's a Greek urn? Oh, about two dollars an hour."

"A Near Man and my mortal enemy," she said, glancing up and down the street. The lenses of her glasses caught the light from the street lamp, causing them to flash with blue-white fire as she moved her head. Somehow she didn't look the type to have enemies. "He will try to kill me if he can. You too, I'm afraid, if he sees us together."

"What the hell is going on here, Jane?"

"*Shh.*" She placed a finger to her lips. "I'll neutralize him. You stay put."

Without waiting for an answer, she crawled into the black, leaving me to listen to the rustle of the wind through the bare limbs of the trees. A block away I could hear the swish of tires on pavement.

I lay still for nearly five minutes, feeling more foolish by the second. Joel Peterson had put her up to this, I decided. It was just his kind of joke. The whole UFO Spotters Club was probably camped in one of the darkened upstairs bedrooms having a good laugh at me. I felt a Hush rise in my cheeks. I got to my hands and knees and peered over the Texas sage.

A bolt of lightning flashed before my eyes.

No thunderclap answered, no sound at all. But the searing light cut into my eyes like a knife, followed quickly by a sudden wave of heat. I dropped to my stomach once more, whimpering. The night returned to normal. Darkness closed in again except for the afterimage of the flash that continued to dance before my eyes. And besides the odor of stale beer, another stink penetrated my nostrils—the strong smell of ozone.

Nothing happened for two minutes and I risked raising my head once more. The white splotches were still carved into my retinas, but my vision was clear enough for me to see Jane make a crouching run across the street to where the oleanders reached the sidewalk on the other side. She disappeared into the dark. I waited one more minute, then scrambled to my feet and raced after her.

I found her kneeling over the body of a man. He'd been no beauty in life, and his looks hadn't improved in death. He stared unseeing at the Moon, a gaping hole burned in his chest. The wound smelled of seared flesh. I gagged twice, trying to keep the beer and taco chips down.

"My God, Jane! What have you done?"

She looked over her shoulder at me. "I thought I told you to stay where you were?"

"You killed him!"

"He would have killed me."

"With what? For all you know he was just some poor Peeping Tom."

She felt around in the bushes where the dead man's hand disappeared into the shadows, and came up with a gun similar to hers. It too had an oddly shining glass barrel.

"What's going on here?"

"No time, Duncan." She turned to look directly into my eyes. "I need your help. Where there's one

Dalgiri, there will be others. Can I count on you?"

"Sorry, but when it comes to murder, I draw the line. See you around!" I backed out of the hedge hastily, turning to run.

"Wait!"

I felt a prickling sensation run up my spine. I'd almost forgotten the gun she held.

"For what?" I asked, turning back to her.

"Hear me out. Then if you want to leave, go ahead."

"Okay, start talking."

"Well, firstly—this is a Dalgir, a Near Man."

"Okay, you've already told me that. Now what exactly is a Dalgir?"

"You would call him a Neanderthal. One of a race that died out fifty thousand years ago on this timeline. On others, however, they survived and prospered. It is such a line that I and my people war against."

I looked at the corpse. Damned if he didn't look like the Neanderthal exhibits in the museums. Jutting bony eye ridges, sloping forehead, slouching posture as he lay in death. But the Neanderthals in the museums hadn't worn hunting clothes straight out of the Sears Roebuck catalog. And they hadn't carried glass-barreled pistols that emitted Cherenkov radiation.

"Timeline?"

"An alternate universe with its own history, culture, and peoples. Joel Peterson was speculating on the concept only half an hour ago."

"I hope you think up a better story than that before the police arrive." I turned once more to leave.

"If I'm not from a parallel universe, how do you explain these?" She gestured to the two guns. Her voice carried a hint of humor.

She had me there. I'd attended a couple of lectures on laser weapons. Every expert agreed that a laser pistol was a theoretical impossibility. Except a man lay dead at my feet with a hole burned in his chest by just such a weapon.

"Okay," I said. "Let's suppose you are telling the truth. What do you want me to do about it?"

"This Dalgir was waiting to ambush me. They aren't even supposed to know about this timeline. The encounter must be reported."

"So report," I said. "But take this body with you when you go."

"I need you, Duncan. You have to help me dispose of the body. It would never do to have it discovered by the police."

I chewed my lip. I'd never even been late paying a parking ticket. And here I was being asked to help cover up a cold-blooded murder!

So why did I choose to help her? I'm not sure, even now. It certainly wasn't because she was beautiful. May-he down deep, I believed her story.

"Okay," I said, regretting the decision even as 't made it. "What do you want me to do?"

"We need to dump the body where it won't be found for eight hours or so."

I lifted my right arm and pointed west. "A weed-filled ditch parallels the Southern Pacific tracks half a block over."

"It'll have to do. Grab his arms. I'll take the legs."

"No."

"What?" she asked, perplexed.

"No. Not until you hand over that firepower."

Indecision flashed across her face.

"Look, Jane, you are going to have to trust me. You haven't any choice."

"You'll see me safely away?"

I nodded. "I don't know why I believe such an obviously ridiculous story—" She opened her mouth to say something. I held up my hand and she shut it with a snap. "—I know, you've got a Buck Rogers ray gun. Maybe that's enough, maybe not. In either event, hand both of them over or I take a walk."

She bit her lower lip, but held out her hand with the two lasers. I took them. They were warm to the touch.

"These emit anything that might disagree with my gonads?"

She shook her head. "Both beamers are well shielded."

I slipped the guns into my belt in back, under my jacket. "Fine, let's get rid of Mr. America."

The Neanderthal was heavier than he looked. He was barely five feet tall, but chunky. We half-carried half-dragged him through deserted backyards and trash-strewn alleys. When we finally lowered his body at the edge of the ditch, I stood up and puffed from exertion.

"Strip him!" Jane said, working to loosen the leather belt he wore. A dozen or so pouches protruded from the belt and she began to sort through them.

"What have you got there?" I whispered as I worked to peel his pants off.

"Equipment kit" she whispered back. She pulled each strange mechanism out of its pouch, examined it then replaced it. About the time I had managed to remove the Dalgir's shirt, she seemed to find what she was looking for. It looked like a tear-gas pen.

"Okay," I said as I stripped the last of the clothing off the body. "What now?"

The Dalgir lay obscenely exposed in the moonlight, but not because he was naked. It had more to do with the hole in his chest.

"Roll him face down into the ditch and then step back." Jane pulled on gloves from her purse then held the tear-gas pen gingerly in her gloved hand.

"What's in that thing?"

"A specially mutated bacteria. Get any of it on you and you'll be dead of what appears to be leprosy in a matter of hours."

That was enough warning for me. I backpedaled a good fifty feet, carrying the bundle of clothing with me. She bent over the body and did something with the pen. What she did made a certain amount of sense... in a gross way.

How does one solve the problem of introducing a strain of man-eating germs into a corpse? You can't very well ask the victim to swallow a pill. But we sometimes forget that the mouth is only one of two

openings into the alimentary canal. Jane used the other.

She quickly rejoined me, carefully pulled off the gloves, and buried them in the center of the clothing, which she tied in a bundle. She leaned down and stuffed the bundle into an old tire.

"Let's go back for the beer. The others will be getting worried." As she turned to leave, the light caught her face. Droplets of perspiration glistened on her forehead in spite of the chill wind that blew.

"What about?..." I thrust my thumb over my shoulder toward the irrigation ditch.

"In eight hours there will be no trace of our departed Dalgir. Now we have to report."

"How?" I asked. "I'm afraid my subspace radio is broken at the moment."

She laughed, a high nervous giggle. Reaction was setting in. "Then we'll just have to rely on Ma Bell. We'll use the phone in the rooming house."

The debate was still going hot and heavy. I lugged the beer into the kitchen while Jane went to the telephone in the hall. She carried it to the length of its cord into the bathroom and shut and locked the door. I stationed myself outside on guard duty. With my ear half pressed against the wall I could barely make out her side of the conversation. Not that it did me a lot of good. She spoke quickly in a language that was more than a little reminiscent of French. After a few minutes in which she did most of the talking—to judge by the short silences—she said good-bye in English and hung up.

I was waiting for her when she unlocked the door and stepped into the hall. "Well?"

"They're sending a shuttle to pick me up. It will arrive tomorrow after sundown."

"Where?"

"The Mogollon Rim, north of Payson."

"I know the area. One of my uncles has a cabin outside Christopher Creek at the base of the Rim."

"Then you'll take me there? I don't dare use my car. They may have put a tracer on it."

"You're out of luck. The whole north country is knee-deep in snow this time of year. My Jag was never designed to play snowmobile. We'll have to find a jeep."

Tony Minetti chose that time to head for the bathroom. He heard the last of our conversation.

"Jeep?" he asked. It was then that I remembered Tony had a relic of the Second World War that he kept parked in front of his apartment building six blocks away.

"Yeah," I said. "I promised Jane I would drive her up to Payson tonight. She just remembered that her Aunt Agatha was expecting her for the holidays. How about it, Tony? Can we borrow your jeep?"

"I don't know, man. You're talking about my pride and joy." He wrinkled his nose. "Boy, you smell like a brewery, Duncan."

"Spilled some beer on myself." I took a deep breath and made the ultimate sacrifice. "I'll let you borrow my XKE." Tony had cast a lecherous eye on my car for as long as I'd known him.

"It's a deal, man!"

We exchanged keys with me wondering if I was making the mistake of my life. Jane and I went to my bedroom and dug in the closet for some warm clothes.

When we were properly outfitted—Jane with my blue B-9 parka over her coat and me in a heavy leather jacket and snow boots—we slipped out the back. Joel Peterson was screaming something about parallel universes while the crowd around him booed.

As I stepped out into the cold dark on the back porch, I couldn't help smiling.

CHAPTER TWO

ARIZONA—land of parched, overheated deserts and a dozen different kinds of poisonous insect, snake, and lizard. Where rain doesn't fall for six months at a time and the natives huddle in air-conditioned warrens for a quarter of the year, dashing outside only long enough to dodge from one cool hidey-hole to another. Right?

Half right That's a pretty accurate picture of the southern desert. The northern part of the state, on the other hand, is blanketed with high mountains and lush forests. Driving down from Detroit on the Interstate, I had been amazed at the amount of climatic variation that could be found in a hundred-mile stretch. It made for interesting driving.

Except now I was driving like a madman into the high country in a forty-year-old jeep whose canvas top had never been meant to withstand a dozen years of desert sun. Two gaping holes allowed in a freezing slipstream of air to overpower the ancient heater. Jane and I were nearly blue with cold as the wan yellow headlight beams fell on the dilapidated log walls of my uncle's hunting cabin.

I pulled off the road into the high snowdrifts surrounding the cabin. The jeep's transfer case growled in protest as we slithered and bulldozed our way the last hundred feet. It almost sounded grateful as I turned the key, allowing the wheezing old engine finally to rest. I left the lights on to show the way to the front porch, with me breaking trail and Jane stumbling behind, shivering.

It was three A.M.

I got the door open and ushered her inside, before going back out to turn off the headlights. When I returned to the cabin, she had set up something that gave off a pearly white glow on the kitchen counter. I glanced at it and recognized one of the devices we'd removed from the Dalgir. I headed for the fireplace and began stacking wood against the blackened grate. Within five minutes cheerful tongues of flame were licking at the wood.

"Get over by the fire," I told her. "I'll go and start the generator."

My boots made soft crunching noises as I pushed through the virgin snow out back of the cabin. By the time I'd plowed a path to the shed—actually an old outhouse that had been expanded and converted for storage—I was panting from the high altitude and unaccustomed exertion. In spite of the cold, sweat beads rolled down my back. I took off my fur-lined jacket and hung it on a nail in the generator shack.

I checked the gas and oil in the old generator, using a 1-gallon can of kerosene I'd picked up in the cabin. Crossing my fingers, I pulled on the starter rope. For once the motor roared to life on the first try. I fiddled with the choke until the inevitable hiccups passed. Throwing the large knife switch on the cobwebbed wall, I listened for the sound of the generator coming on line. Its bearings had been deteriorating for the two years I'd been using the cabin, and when an electric load was applied, it would clatter softly as it turned.

When I got back to the cabin, the fire had taken some of the nip out of the air and the lights were burning brightly. I began to unlace my boots. It had been one *helluva* night and I was dead tired. Jane was puttering around in the bathroom, doing I had no idea what. With the water turned off for the winter to keep from bursting a pipe, the bathroom was one of the less functional rooms in the cabin.

I busied myself with the fire until I heard her soft steps behind me.

"Well, what do you think?" she asked. I turned around. "What do I think about what—" I caught my breath.

She stood on the Navajo rug in front of the fire and posed like a model out of *Mademoiselle*. She had made dramatic changes in her looks. Her hair was neatly combed, no longer standing out at right angles to her head. Her Coke-bottle glasses were gone, revealing a sensitive pair of eyes that were now violet. They had been brown. She had done something to her face, too. What, I couldn't be sure. It was a bit rounder and softer than it had been.

She still wasn't beautiful, but she was far from ugly. In fact, she was quite pleasant-looking. As I stood speechless and checked out the changes, I noticed that her figure seemed to have improved as well.

"Like it?" she asked, pirouetting for me.

"What happened?"

"How do they say it on television?—my cover is blown so there is no need to continue the masquerade."

Her comment brought me back to reality, a place I hadn't been in a number of hours. "Which reminds me. Tell me about parallel universes."

She bit her lower lip and looked worried. "I suppose I do owe you an explanation, Duncan." She sat cross-legged on the couch, patting the cushion next to her. I sat down beside her and noticed her perfume for the first time.

My heart began to beat faster. "You can begin anytime," I said, more to change the subject of my thoughts than anything else.

She looked down at the floor. "I really shouldn't. It's against regulations to discuss Paratime with the natives."

"We're both a little bit pregnant in that department, aren't we?"

"A little bit?..." She looked puzzled for an instant, then she laughed. "I see what you mean. After last night, the regulations don't make very much sense, do they?"

"No, they don't."

"I won't bore you with the technical details about temporal-energy balances and entropic shock waves. Just take it on faith that your concept of parallel universes is a gross oversimplification of the true situation. Timelines just can't be thought of as parallel!"

"Energy considerations are our biggest problem. They keep most of the timelines closed to us. And when a volume of low temporal energy *does* form—what we call a Paratime portal—it is usually limited to an area a few miles square. A portal's life can be measured anywhere from milliseconds to thousands of years. The one between Talador, my home timeline, and the Gestetni Republic, for instance, has been open for over six thousand years. Others come and go intermittently, eventually closing forever as the two timelines drift apart. That's the case with your timeline, Duncan. The portal between our universes opened five years ago. We will remain in intermittent contact for about a thousand years and then go our separate ways."

"So why have you people been skulking around?" I asked.

"Experience. It has taught us caution. Terrible things can happen to a Paratime shuttle once it makes the jump between universes."

"Such as?"

"Oh, a million things. You can spend an hour in a strange universe and return home to find a dozen years have passed... or that time has run backward while you were gone... or that no time at all has

passed. The flow of linear time is highly variable from timeline to timeline. We avoid situations where a large mismatch exists, but every member of the Time Watch can expect to age at a slightly different rate from family and friends.

"Then there are the nasty little surprises that people can pull on you. More than once a shuttle has jumped into an unknown timeline to discover the Earth ruled by powerful barbarians with both the yen and the military might for empire. A thousand years ago a Taladoran shuttle discovered the Dalgiri Empire that way. The discovery cost three cities, including two on my home timeline. Since then all of our efforts have been to contain that pack of wild dogs. They controlled eight timelines when we first met them—twelve now. In the same time we have grown from an alliance of three lines to a confederation of thirty-two. We've almost got them boxed."

"Okay, what about this universe—uh, timeline?" I asked. "What are your plans for us?"

You mean Europe-American?"

"Europe-American? What's that?"

"That is our name for this timeline. When we first arrived, we surveyed your literature to see what you knew of alternate universes. The name comes, I believe, from a science-fiction classic of the early 1960s. We liked the name so well, we adopted it!"

"And your plans for us?"

"To study you for the moment, perhaps establish diplomatic relations later. I really don't know, Duncan. Such decisions are made on a level much higher than mine."

"And the Dalgiri?"

"Their intentions are obvious. They want to add you to their Empire, probably as slaves. And they'll have that chance in twenty years when a direct portal opens between the Empire and here."

"Leaving us to play Poland to their Hitler and your Churchill!" So far, I didn't like the way this conversation was going.

She nodded. "Considering what happened tonight, the conquest may already be well underway."

"And so you've given up your job as a spy to report what you know."

She smiled. "I guess I deserve that. I'm not really a spy, you know, at least not in the classic sense of the word. I am exactly what I claim to be—a graduate anthropology student working on her thesis. But to answer your question: Yes, this is far more important than my information-gathering function."

I suddenly felt very tired. What had started out as a boring evening with Weasel Martin and the other UFO freaks had turned into something else again. Either I had stumbled into the greatest adventure of all time or else I was in the hands of a certifiable nut. The whole night had been like a dream, and fatigue had worn me down until I could hardly think.

"What's the matter, Duncan?" she asked, her voice a husky whisper. "Don't you believe me?"

"I don't know what to believe. I'm not making any decisions until I get caught up on my sleep."

"A good idea," she said, standing and stretching. Her newly lithe form flickered in the firelight.

"You take the bedroom and I'll take the couch," I said.

She smiled broadly and grasped her sweater at the hem, pulling it quickly over her head. My mouth dropped open at the sight of her. *Where had I ever gotten the notion that Jane Dugway was flat-chested?*

"No need for false chivalry, Duncan. My culture is not your culture and I have been celibate much too long in this charade I have been playing."

She turned and walked into the bedroom, her naked back beckoning me. After a moment's tussle with my conscience, I gave in and followed. Suddenly the thought of not getting to sleep for another couple of hours didn't bother me at all.

I woke to the sensations of a winter morning; the drip of melting snow running from the roof, the smell of breakfast on the stove, the heat of pine-speckled sunshine across my upper body. I smiled and stretched and opened my eyes. I was alone. I could hear Jane in the other room. By the elevation of the sun shining through the bedroom window, I judged the time to be around ten o'clock in the morning.

I raised myself up on one elbow and yelled, "Where are you, woman?"

She came to the door wearing oversized Levi's and a flannel shirt. "Morning, sleepyhead. I borrowed some of your uncle's clothes. I hope he won't mind."

"Uncle's a pussycat, at least where beautiful women are concerned." She blushed. I was surprised to realize that I really meant the compliment.

"I suppose I should let you in on one more little secret," she said.

"You're married?"

"No, agents of the Time Watch seldom marry, not even each other. Our lives are too fluid to make such a lasting commitment to another. I'm afraid we are married to our jobs."

"*You're a boy!*" I said, mock horror on my face.

She laughed. "You have ample proof that I am not, Sir Gallant!"

"I give up."

"My name is not Jane Dugway."

Now it was my turn to smile. "I thought that was a bit too convenient. Okay, I'm braced for it. Let me have it with both barrels!"

"The closest an English-speaking tongue can come to wrapping itself around my true moniker is Jana Dougwaix."

I said it twice, savoring the way the syllables bounced around inside my mouth. "I like it. When do we eat?"

"Breakfast is almost ready. Why don't you get dressed? Lots to do today. We have to be up on the Rim by full dark. The shuttle could make the jump anytime after dusk."

She went back into the kitchen while I dressed. I put on the same clothes I had worn the day before, feeling slightly itchy at the prospect. I wished the water had been turned on. I could have used a bath. Running a hand across my chin, I scraped over the day's growth of beard. My tongue caressed slimy teeth. In spite of my general slovenliness, I felt pretty good. Some of the mental haze that had plagued me since things had started was gone.

Jane/Jana ladled pancakes onto a plate as I came out of the bedroom. I crossed over to where she stood and nibbled on her ear. She giggled just like any red-blooded American girl. You'd never know to look at her that she was a creature from another universe. I let my hands roam lovingly.

There was a sharp rap on the door.

Jana stiffened in my arms. "Who's that?"

I tried to keep my voice light. "Probably just the neighbors from across the meadow. They've seen the smoke and come over to get the latest gossip. It gets damned lonely up here in the winter."

She looked around frantically. "The beamers?"

Now it was my turn to be startled. *The beamers!* What had I done with them? Then I remembered. They'd chafed me when tucked into my belt. So when we got back to the rooming house I transferred them to the pockets of my leather jacket—the jacket that I'd taken off in the generator shack and which still hung on a nail out there.

"Out back," I said, hooking a thumb in that direction. "Don't worry, I'll get rid of our visitors."

"Duncan Allen MacElroy?" the man standing on the porch asked.

I didn't bother to answer. There didn't seem a need.

The stranger was short and squat, with overhanging eyebrows. His wide smile showed a row of jagged teeth. Those weren't his most noticeable features, however. The I-earner he held in my face guaranteed that I barely noticed his physical peculiarities.

CHAPTER THREE

I stood paralyzed for a moment that seemed as if it would never end. From somewhere behind me came the tinkle of broken glass, followed an instant later by Jana's scream. I whirled around as a second Dalgir leveled his beamer at her through the broken window.

After that, things seemed like a dream again.

In a matter of minutes three Dalgiri—one had been hiding out back in case we'd made a run for it—had searched us with a brusque, impersonal efficiency and frog-marched us into the bedroom. I was ordered to turn and face the wall, then heard a scuffle behind me. When I was allowed to turn back, Jana lay face up on the rumpled bed. Her body was limp, her violet eyes gazed at the ceiling.

Then two of them grabbed my arms and the third applied a shiny steel box to my neck. A sharp prick, and I too was limp all over. It was as if my body had gone to sleep from the neck down. The two Dalgiri brusquely tossed me on the bed beside Jana then left the room.

From then on I saw nothing but the flyspecks on the ceiling, although I had no trouble hearing our guests in the next room. They'd left the door open to keep an eye on us.

"Jana?" I asked softly. My mouth and eyelids were about the only things that still worked.

"Yes, Duncan."

"What happens now?"

Just then the Dalgiri started speaking to each other in rapid-fire gibberish that reminded me of an orchestra tuning up. I heard a brief "*Shush!*" from Jana. She listened intently.

After five minutes the conversation quieted down and one of them glanced in at us. I waited for him to disappear then whispered to Jana, "What was that all about?"

"It's bad, Duncan. Very bad. They've got a Paratime communicator and are using it to call in one of their... call it a cruiser. It's an armed shuttle with a crew of two hundred. It's second in firepower only to our biggest warships."

"What for?"

"To ambush our transport when it arrives. This mission is very important to them for some reason. I

was right last night. They crossed over to this timeline through the Confederation—my home timeline of Talador, in fact. The cruiser must come the same way. Their transport must have been small enough to slip through our defenses without being observed. The cruiser has no chance of escaping detection. A lot of people at home will die tonight."

"What are we going to do about it?"

A short sob escaped from her throat. "What can we do?"

If my shoulder muscles had been free to move, I'd have shrugged. It didn't look as if there was much we *could* do.

"If only we had the beamers, Duncan."

I felt a brief Sash of anger at being so stupid. Then I savagely put the thought from my mind. There had been no reason to think they'd trail us here.

"Look, Jana—if we'd been armed, we would now be dead. You saw the way they were deployed when they jumped us!"

"Maybe we could have won a firefight. Now well never know because the beamers are out with the generator."

My mind began to race. I recalled several previous visits to my uncle's cabin. It was then that I smiled. Not being hooked into the power grid was a real pain in the ass. You were forever having to go out and pump some more gas into the generator's fuel tank. For years, Uncle had planned to build a reserve tank out of an old fifty-five-gallon drum. But he'd never gotten around to it.

That meant the generator had fuel for only eight hours or so, even at the idle setting it used when there was no electrical load on the line. "What time is it?"

"About eleven. Why?"

I listened to the far-off *put-put-put* of the generator. It was a sound that I'd not consciously heard since last night, even though it had been there all the time. Now it seemed louder. I licked my lips and waited, listening for the noise to stop.

I waited for an eternity that probably lasted only fifteen minutes. Finally, it came. The soft chugging of the generator ceased, bringing with it a silence louder than the noise it made when running.

A Dalgir was in the bedroom in seconds.

"What has happened?" he asked.

"Generator's out of fuel. Looks like you boys are going to get cold," I said.

"Never mind that. We need power for our communications beacon. How do we get it back?"

"Know anything about cantankerous internal-combustion engines?"

"I'm no barbarian," he growled.

"Then you'd better let me up so I can go get it started again."

He turned and yelled: "Rimbrick!" A second Dalgir, the leader by his demeanor, came into the bedroom and leveled a beamer at me. There was a sharp prick on my neck, then fire coursed downward through my body. My arms and legs began to twitch uncontrollably.

When the spasm had passed they helped me to stand. I walked around the kitchen to loosen up a bit. Finally the- leader turned to the other Dalgir and said something I didn't understand, but which sounded like a command, before ushering me out the back door. We crunched our way to the generator shack.

Once inside, I set to work refilling the tank with gasoline, using an empty mayonnaise jar to transfer it from the storage barrel to the fuel tank. When the generator was topped off I filled the jar once more for good measure. Rimbrick stood warily two arm lengths out of reach in the doorway. I set the gasoline down next to the generator and began to putter around the mechanism. Then I picked up the jar in my left hand and leaned over to the big knife switch on the wall.

"Got to disconnect the load before I start it," I said, throwing the switch. My body shielded my right hand from view as I straightened up, brushing against the coat on the wall. I waited breathlessly for the bolt of lightning to strike my back. Nothing happened. I reached into the jacket pocket and felt the cold handle of a beamer. Praying the safety was off, I mentally judged my distance from the doorway and whirled, throwing the gasoline in one quick motion.

It caught him full in the face. He screamed, instinctively reaching upward to cover his eyes. Then he realized his mistake and brought the beamer down to bear on my chest.

The hesitation was enough. I pointed my weapon at him and pulled the firing stud. There was a crash of light and the overwhelming stink of ozone. When I could open *my* eyes again, Rimbrick was down in the snow with the familiar bole burned through him. The gasoline had caught fire. Flames and a thin stream of black smoke flickered upward from his jacket.

I quickly grabbed the second beamer and headed for the cabin. I pushed the back door open and padded across the linoleum to the door opening on the living room. I hesitated. It had suddenly occurred to me that I couldn't answer a very basic question. Exactly whose side was I on? True, circumstances seemed to have thrown me in league with Jane Dugway (*a.k.a.* Jana Dougwaix), but was that what I wanted? She had killed the Dalgir without warning last night. What if she was with the bad guys and these Dalgiri represented the forces of law and order? Did the concept of good guys and bad guys even apply to a war that had been going on for a thousand years? What was an innocent bystander such as myself doing mixed up in this mess, anyway?

I pushed open the door to the living room, indecision laying on my shoulders like a sack of wet concrete. I'm not sure exactly what it was that I planned. Perhaps they would surrender if I got the drop on them. With the Dalgiri my prisoners and Jana still drugged from the neck down, maybe I could sort things out.

The door squeaked slightly as it opened. Suddenly the whole question of right and wrong became academic. The first Dalgir, the one who had come to see what was wrong when the generator quit, faced me from across the room. Surprise flashed across his features as he lunged for his beamer.

I shot him—and the other one when he tried to quick-draw against me as well.

Then I sat down and was quietly sick for a few minutes. Later I released Jana, following her instructions on how to administer the antidote to the drug they'd given us.

She wasted no time heading for the communicator. She did something incomprehensible to the controls and then cursed softly under her breath. Turning to look at me, she smiled sheepishly.

"Darling, would you mind turning the electricity back on? They've drained their power cells."

I grinned. "Sure thing, boss."

I trudged back to the generator and quickly had it going again. When I returned to the cabin, Jana had just finished talking into the thing that looked like a portable radio. She turned to look gravely at me.

"Well?"

"Made it. I can't use this thing to talk across timelines without the Dalgiri hearing, but I did get our office in New York. They'll relay the message and that cruiser will have a big surprise waiting when it

tries to cross over tonight. Funny, though."

"What?"

"This communicator. It wasn't tuned to the crosstime settings at all. I found it on the local... uh, channels."

"That important?"

She sighed. "Probably not."

"What do we do now?"

"We wait here. The shuttle will come through right after dark to pick us up."

"Us?"

A strange look came over her face, as if she were seeing me for the first time. Then she was in my arms.

"They could have killed us while we lay helpless in there," she said between sobs.

I held her, softly caressing the back of her neck. "Why didn't they?" I asked.

She lifted her head from my shoulder and dried her tears. "Because of you."

"Me?"

"Never mind just now," she said, sniffing. "There is something we must talk about."

We sat on the couch. I reached over to take her in my arms, but she pushed me away.

"Don't. You can't afford to have your mind clouded with emotion just now. You've a decision to make, the most important of your life."

"What decision?"

She gulped and regarded me with red eyes. "Whether you will submit voluntarily to having your memories of the last day erased, or will exile yourself from this timeline forever."

"I don't understand."

"Don't you see? You know about Para time! It's standard procedure in cases like this to memory-wipe any local who learns of our existence."

"That's gratitude for you." I could feel the flush rising in my cheeks. Maybe I *had* picked the wrong side in this war.

"I know, Duncan. It's wrong! But civilizations sometimes can't afford the luxury of gratitude. It's a cruel universe out there. In fact, there are thousands of cruel universes out there. Sometimes we don't have any choice."

"I don't suppose it would do any good to conk you on the head and make a run for it," I said.

She shook her head. "I reported your being with me when I called from the rooming house. Within a few weeks they would hunt you down and you'd lose an even bigger chunk of memory."

"And exile?"

"You could join us, Duncan. The Time Watch always needs good people. We patrol a hundred different universes and there are never enough Watchmen to go around."

"I don't care much for being drafted, Jana."

"Nobody does."

"For one thing, I'm not sure you people are right in all of this."

"All of what?"

"Your war with the Dalgiri. You *did* fire the first shot— and without warning—you know."

Jana's face darkened. It was as if a volcano was getting ready to erupt. She sat, considering her reply, for a dozen seconds. Then she exploded.

"You're damned lucky that I did, Duncan MacElroy!"

"Huh?"

"Don't you see? How did that Dalgir track me down at your rooming house? And the three others found us here at your uncle's cabin. How? How could they possibly have known where we were?"

I shrugged. "*Damfino*. Haven't had much time to think about it."

"They found us because they were *looking for you*, Duncan, not me!"

"I don't understand. Why would they be looking for me?"

"Because they were from our future, stupid! Sometime in the next fifty years you are going to become a major stumbling block in the path of the Dalgiri Empire. So much so that they will mount an expedition across timelines—one aimed at you *personally*. They found us so easily because they have studied your life since early childhood. The only thing that saved you was my chancing to spot that aversion field. Otherwise you'd be dead."

"From the future?" I mumbled stupidly about ten times.

"Yes, from the future," she said, finally. "The five-dimensional surface that describes Paratime is convoluted beyond belief. Travel into the past is completely feasible—if you're willing to spend a few years waiting on a skewed timeline for the right portal to open up. There are timelines without number where time flows in reverse."

"Then it must have taken them years," I said.

"Probably—decades if they were willing to spend them in cold sleep. But you are important to them. Important enough to expend four field agents and a cruiser in the attempt. That makes you important to us."

I couldn't think of anything to say.

"Well?" she asked. "Well, I'll *be* damned!"

"You certainly will."

The transport shuttle came through at full dark, guided to the cabin by the Dalgiri homer. It was an ebon egg some ten yards long that hovered a foot off the snowpack. The three-man crew was briskly efficient. Within minutes they had loaded the dead into a cargo hold and begun to clean up all evidence of the fight in and around the cabin. I wrote a note to Tony Minetti, explaining that the stranger returning his jeep was my cousin and asking him to hand over my Jag. I wrote another to Hal Benson, telling him to forward my clothes and stereo to an address in New York City. I wondered briefly what he would think of the three crisp hundred-dollar bills I enclosed in the envelope. Then it was out to the generator shack to kill the power for the last time.

Finally, it was time to go. The field agent pulled away from the cabin in the jeep. Jana and I watched the red taillights out of sight before we turned and walked arm in arm toward the rectangle of blue light

spilling from the shuttle's open hatch.

Suddenly the confusion, fear, and fatigue that had plagued me for the last twenty-four hours were gone. A feeling of exhilaration washed over me. It was the exhilaration of being alive and on the threshold of a great adventure. Of being nine feet tall and covered with hair, and ready to buckle my swash from one end of Paratime to the other. Of having seen the future and discovered greatness there.

"I'm sorry I called you stupid," Jana said, snuggling close as we walked.

"You're not the first." Suddenly I stopped in my tracks. A funny thought had just hit me. "What's the matter?"

"Your shuttle," I said with a chuckle. "What about it?"

"I just realized. Joel Peterson was right! UFOs *are* ships from another universe." Then I laughed. What started as a chuckle built quickly into a belly-jiggling guffaw. I laughed so hard tears began to run down my cheek.

Suddenly Jana was laughing, too.

When she'd finally managed to get control of herself, she wiped the tears from her eyes. "I don't know how to tell you this, Duncan. UFOs *really are* swamp gas! Or weather balloons, or airplane lights, or St. Elmo's fire. We shield our shuttles with aversion fields. They are practically invisible at night. There hasn't been a sighting of one of our ships in the whole five years we have been operating on this timeline."

I turned to stare at her. "Really?"

She nodded.

"Well, I *will* be damned!"

Then we started to laugh again. This time the joke was even funnier.

CHAPTER FOUR

MY first glimpse of Talador was via the forward viewscreen as the transport shuttle touched down at Jafta Port, the main terminus for traffic to and from the capital city of the Taladoran Confederation. Talador is the focal point for the trade of a hundred alternate Earths, giving Jafta Port an ambience instantly recognizable to anyone who had ever sailed into a major deep-water harbor. I changed planes at a large international airport. It reminded me of what JFK in New York will probably look like in a thousand years—only bigger.

Jana didn't give me time to sightsee on the ramp. She ushered me into a two-person car instead, a robot conveyance that whisked us through a dizzying series of tunnels, past rushing throngs of humanity, up a series of ramps, and finally braked to a stop in bright sunlight on a rooftop. I followed her out of the car, feeling more than a little wobbly in the knees. In less than a minute we had traveled nearly two miles and my senses had been assaulted by sights, sounds, and smells unlike any I had ever experienced. I suppose I should have been alive with the excitement of it all. I wasn't.

I was scared.

It was beginning to sink in that there would be no return from this voyage of discovery. I had plunged off the high board and was only now checking to see if the pool held any water.

Jana must have seen the blood drain from my face and my knees begin to shake, because she slipped her arm through mine and snuggled up close.

"Do you want to go back inside, Duncan?"

"Don't mind me," I said, shivering. "I'll get over it in time—say a year or two."

We walked arm in arm to a waist-high railing that ran along the edge of the rooftop. I gasped. Below me was a cubic mile of air and little else. Yet even from just shy of the clouds, Jafta Port stretched nearly to the horizon in every direction. And everywhere I looked, my gaze fell upon the myriad ships of Paratime.

There were huge globes, medium-size saucers, small and not so small cones, arrows, cubes, black eggs like the one I had arrived in, and other shapes not so easily categorized. Gnat-size aircars glided silently into and out of sight while at the extreme range of vision were two immense shapes that Jana said were dreadnoughts of the Taladoran Navy.

"Wow!" I whispered reverently, trying to take in everything at once, my fear nearly forgotten. Suddenly I was just a rubbernecker, eyes about to burst and mouth agape with the wonder of it all.

Jana smiled, luxuriating in my reaction to my first sight of her hometown. "Impressive, isn't it?"

"How do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"How can you possibly maintain such a civilization after having been at war with Dalgir for a thousand years? Your economy should have collapsed ages ago!"

She laughed. "Our 'economy' is a complex machine, not easily damaged. As for our war with the Empire, we have been at it so long that it is part of our lives. We have figured it into the 'equations.'" She went on with what I'm sure she thought was a simple explanation of the whole process. I listened carefully, nodded politely, and didn't understand a single word.

"Sounds a bit like the village idiot and his cannon," I said finally when she was through.

"I don't understand, Duncan."

So I told her the joke about the town council that wanted to give the village idiot something to do for his welfare check. After thinking on the problem awhile, they decide to hire him to polish the cannon on the courthouse lawn every Saturday. Years pass and one day the idiot gives notice that he is quitting. "Why?" the councilmen ask. "Because I've saved my money all these years, and have finally gotten enough to go into business for myself. I just bought my own cannon!"

Jana's laugh *sounded* genuine, but I still found it hard to believe that the joke was new to a civilization encompassing thirty-two alternate Earths.

Eventually, I tired of craning my neck this way and that, and Jana took me down into the building below us. We ended up inside a concourse big enough to have weather. There she guided me into one of the "gnat-size" aircars—that turned out to be slightly bigger than a 1958 Cadillac—and programmed it for Time Watch Headquarters.

I spent the next two months being poked, prodded, questioned, inoculated, indoctrinated, pinched, studied, and having things done to me that were just plain incomprehensible. Most of my time was spent hooked up to education machines of one kind or another. Most pumped knowledge into me by a process that looked like hypnosis, but wasn't. And just because I was in a state of trancelike concentration during the lessons didn't mean that the learning came easy.

First was Temporal Basic—the *lingua franca* of the Time Watch. When I had the basics of that liquidly musical language mastered, they started me on the hard stuff.

One of my first lessons after Temporal Basic was in the organization, purposes, and traditions of the Taladoran Time Watch. In many ways, it was similar to the quick "economics lesson" Jana had tried to give me. The words were all there, but the basic structure needed for understanding the concepts had yet to be erected. It was as if each fact had to be filed in a pigeonhole in my gray matter, but I had yet to drill the pigeonholes to file them in.

So I fell back on analogy. The Watch is a military organization of sorts, but then again, it isn't. Talador has both an army and a navy, with the prime responsibility for providing the military might that keeps the Dalgiri at bay. But then, the Time Watch has some kind of fuzzy responsibility over the army and navy, acting as an elite corps of specialists who direct operations.

Each timeline in the Confederation has its own laws and police powers, a practice Talador learned over the ages that other Paratime Civilizations frequently had not. Each timeline of the Confederation was an entire planet—each with its own history, customs, mores, and traditions. Such a situation requires a good deal of flexibility and home rule. But the Watch had police powers, too. It was responsible for policing all crosstime traffic to make sure that unscrupulous citizens of one timeline didn't take advantage of the inhabitants of another.

And, of course, the Time Watch ran the Taladoran espionage and diplomatic services. A Watchman could find himself anywhere in the known universes, doing almost anything. It was an elite service, and one few could qualify for. I was beginning to wonder if I had what it takes.

Not all of my teachers were machines, of course. I found myself meeting at all hours of the day and night with a bewildering variety of people. After a while I began to suspect that some of them were Very Important People indeed!

Mostly such sessions ran together in my mind. All except the last one...

It had been nearly six weeks, since I had been separated from Jana and turned over to my teachers—keepers?—and their machines. By that time my head felt as if it would split if forced to memorize even a single additional fact. I was notified that I was to report to Capitol Complex right after breakfast.

Capitol Complex turned out to be a city within a city, a single edifice so huge that it dwarfed even Jafta Port. I was met by a Taladoran naval officer—at least an admiral to judge by his uniform—who guided me through a maze that would have made the mad geniuses who built the Pentagon envious. He handed me off to someone of even higher rank, who guided me to what had to be the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, who guided me to someone more exalted still.

By the time I was ushered into an anteroom the size of a football field, I was deeply engrossed in guessing how long the escalation could go on. I was ushered immediately into the *sanctum sanctorum*.

I found Jana inside, seated before the desk of a silver-haired man with a harried look about him. Something about her expression restrained me from yelling for joy and hugging her until she turned blue. Instead I moved hesitantly to stand before the dignitary's desk.

Jana did the honors: "Duncan, I would like to introduce Tasloss Vios of the Oulra Timeline, the Speaker of the Ruling Council."

"Honored, sir," I said, bowing in what I hoped was the proper form. I may have been a hayseed from the boondocks, but I wasn't so ignorant that I hadn't heard of the Ruling Council.

"It is I who am honored, Mr. MacElroy. Please be seated." Tasloss spoke English with a curious accent. That he had learned it quite recently—say, that morning—was obvious. That he had bothered to learn it at all was amazing.

"Thank you, sir."