

BEER RUN

Michael McCollum

What if you went out for a six-pack and never came back?

It was midwinter, one of those crystal clear nights where the almost freezing wind whips in off the desert from the east and the moon bathes everything in a bright, pearly glow. Hal, my landlord, 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. Being the only roomer 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. By the time the formal meeting had started, there were fifty-odd people scattered in the various 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 tic. He banged on a table with a wooden spoon to get their attention and 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 off two dozen cans of Coors. Somehow, they managed to disappear into the other room as fast as she opened them.

I had first met Jane at school. Although I am an engineering major, the University is determined that I get a well-rounded education. Therefore, in order to complete my eight hours of social studies required to graduate, I took a course in Anthropology. Jane was a graduate student in Anthro and my discussion group leader for one semester. She is not one of those lucky women blessed with the gift of beauty. Her hair has a terminal case of the frizzies, and the coke bottle glasses do nothing to improve her image. However, there is a mind behind that mannish face of hers that is 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. PeeJay 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 him out of order. PeeJay sat down with a thump and a pout on his face.

After that, things settled down considerably. It might as well have been a meeting of the League of Women Voters, with everything run in strict adherence to Robert's Rules of Order. I was fast losing interest when Joel Peterson decided to get the evening's debate launched. 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 -- something like you see in the movies just before the lynching. Weasel Martin got red in the face and prepared to smite the unbeliever.

"Then you're dumber than you look," he said to Joel. There was a scattered round of applause and a couple of muttered comments that 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 never had, and considered that fact 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 pregnant pause. Joel got a smug look on his face. His trap had been set, baited, and sprung. "They're time travelers from the future, or maybe 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 general chorus began. "*Beer run, beer run, we want a beer run!*"

Weasel took time out from the debate to look around. He found someone's 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, Weasel gave us all the once over with his eyes. "Who'll make this run?" he asked.

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

The chant began again. "*Send Duncan, send Duncan...*"

I did not join in the chanting. I am Duncan and I did not want to go out into the cold to buy another case of beer.

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

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 might have predicted it would be her. Jane is one of the few people in the club who ever volunteer for anything.

"Okay, wait a sec while I get my coat," I said.

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

"Got the money?" I asked.

She nodded. "Shall we take a car?"

I looked around. I could barely see my classic Jag through the cluster of parked cars that slopped 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 liquor coolers of the market were sparse hunting. We finally ended up with twelve six packs of three different kinds of beer. I loaded them into two sacks and we started for home.

The conversation drifted to anthropology. I walked in front, feeling my way over the tilted, broken slabs of the sidewalk, discussing a pet theory I had developed about the affinity of modern Americans for vicarious enjoyment via the boob tube. The next thing I knew there was a hard shoulder in the small of my back and I was flying head over heels into a hedge of Texas sage. I landed on my belly amid the clatter of aluminum cans. Two of the cans burst on impact, spraying me with a cold shower of carbonated hops.

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

"What was that for?"

"Quiet," she hissed.

"What the hell is going on here?" I asked, sitting up. I wrinkled my nose as the wind carried an odor to me. I smelled like a brewery.

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

"If you value your life, stay down."

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

Except it was not a gun. Even in the gloom 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. However, 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 oleander hedge halfway down the street on the other side. "At the base of the oleanders, about twenty feet from the end."

I strained my eyes; conscious of how much the cold wind bit into me where the beer had soaked into my clothes. The spot she named was well lighted by the corner street lamp, but I could see nothing.

"I don't see anything," I said.

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

I squinted. I was not 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 seeing something under water, all blurry and changing.

"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. Somehow, she did not 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?"

"Shhh," she said, placing 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.

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. I felt a flush rising in my cheeks. I got to my hands and knees and peered over the Texas sage.

A bolt of lightning flashed before my eyes.

There was no answering thunderclap, no sound at all. However, the blast of 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 in panic. The night returned to normal. Darkness closed in again except for the whirling afterimage of the flash that continued to dance before my eyes. Besides the odor of stale beer, another stink penetrated my nostrils. There was a strong smell of ozone in the air.

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 to see Jane in 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 and then scrambled to my feet and raced after her.

I found her kneeling over the body of a man. He had been no beauty in life, and his looks had not improved in death. He stared unseeing at the moon, a gaping hole burned in his chest.

The wound smelled of cooked 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?" I asked.

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

"Well, firstly ... this is a Dalgir, a near man."

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

"You would name him 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 did not look like the Neanderthal exhibits in the museums. Jutting bony eye ridges, sloping forehead, slouching posture as he lay in death. However, the Neanderthals in the museums had not worn hunting clothes straight out of the Sears catalog. And they had not carried glass-barreled pistols that emitted Cherenkov radiation as they lay quiescent on the ground.

"Timeline?"

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

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

"If I'm not from a parallel universe," she said, a hint of humor in her voice, "How do you explain these?" She gestured to the two guns.

She had me there. I had attended a couple of lectures on laser weapons. One thing every expert agreed on: A laser pistol with a six-inch barrel was theoretically impossible. Except a dead man lay at my feet with a hole burned in his chest with 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 even though they aren't supposed to know this timeline exists. The very fact that he's here is a disaster. I must report."

"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 local authorities."

I chewed on my lip, squirming on the horns of the dilemma. I have never even been late paying a parking ticket. Here I was being asked to cover up a cold-blooded murder. So why did I choose to help her? Damned if I know! Maybe down deep I really believed her story.

"Okay," I said, regretting the decision even as I made it. "What do you want me to do?"

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

I lifted my right arm and pointed west. "There's an old weed filled ditch that parallels the Southern Pacific tracks half a block over. How about there?"

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

"No."

"No?" she asked, perplexed.

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

I could see indecision flash across her face.

"Look, Jane, you are going to have to trust me. You haven't got 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 closed it again. " -- I know, you have a Buck Rogers ray gun. So hand them over or I take a walk."

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

"These emit anything that might disagree with my gonads?" I asked.

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

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

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

"Strip him!" Jane said, working to loosen the leather belt he wore. There were a dozen or so pouches on the belt and she quickly sorted 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, and then put it back. About the time I had managed to remove the Dalgir's shirt she found what she was apparently looking for. It looked like a tear gas pen -- you know, the kind they advertise in all the men's magazines.

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

The Dalgir lay obscenely exposed in the moonlight, and 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 get back," she said, pulling on gloves from her purse. She held the tear gas pen gingerly in her gloved hands.

"What is in that thing?"

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

That was enough warning for me. I backpedaled until I was a good fifty feet away, 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 cannot very well ask the victim to swallow a pill. However, we sometimes forget the mouth is only one of two openings to the alimentary canal. Jane used the second.

She quickly rejoined me, carefully pulled off the gloves, and buried them in the center of the charred clothing that she tied in a bundle. She leaned down and stuffed the bundle into the storm sewer.

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

"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.

When she spoke, it was in rapid-fire gibberish that somehow reminded me of an orchestra tuning up for the big concert. After a few minutes in which she did most of the talking -- to judge by the short silences coming through the wall -- 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?" I whispered.

"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 do not dare use my car. They may have managed to 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 that Tony had an old relic of the Second World War that he kept parked in front of his apartment 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?"

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

"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 had 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 headed for my bedroom and began digging in the closet for some warm clothes. Coming originally from Michigan, I had an ample supply.

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

As I stepped out into the cold dark on the back porch, I could not help smiling. If they only knew!

#

Arizona -- land of parched, overheated deserts and a dozen different kinds of poisonous insects, snakes and lizards. Where rain does not 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 is 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 was amazed to discover the amount of variation in climate that can 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 ducted a freezing slipstream of air in to overpower the ancient heater. Jane and I were nearly blue with cold as the wan yellow headlights flashed across 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 bulled our way the last hundred feet. It almost sounded grateful as I turned the key, allowing the wheezing old engine to finally rest. I left the lights on to show the way to the porch, with me breaking trail and Jane stumbling after.

It was three A.M.

I got the door open and ushered her inside before going back 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 had gotten off the Dalgir's body. 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 out back and get the generator started."

My boots made soft crunching noises as I made my way through the virgin snow to the shed out back of the cabin. By the time I had plowed a path to the shed -- actually an old outhouse that had been expanded and converted for storage -- I was panting from the unaccustomed exertion and high altitude. In spite of the cold, beads of perspiration trickled down my back between my shoulder blades. 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, rusty generator using a flashlight I had picked up in the cabin. Crossing my fingers, I pulled on the starter rope. For once, it caught with a roar on the first try. I fiddled with the choke until the inevitable case of hiccups passed. Throwing the large knife switch on the spider web draped wall; I listened for the sound of the generator coming on line.

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 a 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 soft steps behind me.

"Well, what do you think?" she asked.

I turned around. "What do I think about what? ... " I asked, catching 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 to reveal a pair of sensitive eyes that were now violet. They had been brown. She had done something to her face too. What, I could not be sure. It was a bit rounder and softer than it had been.

She still was not 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 had not 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 said, sitting cross-legged on the couch, patting the cushion next to her. I sat down beside her and caught a whiff of her perfume for the first time.

My heart began to beat faster of its own volition.

"You can begin any time," I said, more to change the subject of my thoughts than anything else.

She cast her eyes down at the floor. "I 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 her eyes got wide and she laughed. "I confess that I hadn't heard that expression before, but I see what you mean. After tonight, 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 between universes and entropic shock-waves. A good temporist goes to school for twenty years to learn about such things. Just take it on faith that your concept of parallel universes is an oversimplification of the true situation. Timelines just cannot 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 -- a paratime portal in other words -- it is usually limited to a few square miles of area. A portal's life can be measured anywhere from milliseconds to thousands of years. There is one between my home timeline and the Gestetni Republic, for instance that has been continuously open for over six thousand years. Others come and go intermittently, eventually closing forever as the two timelines drift apart. That is 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 about?" I asked.

"Experience has taught us caution," she replied. "Terrible things can happen to a shuttle once it makes the jump 'tween universes, not all of them having to do with the temporal physics of the situation either."

"Such as?"

"Oh, a million things. You can spend an hour in a strange universe and return home to find a hundred years have passed ... or that time has run backwards while you were gone ... or that no time at all has passed. The flow of linear time can be highly variable from timeline to timeline. We avoid situations where a large mismatch exists, but every paratime operative can expect to age at a different rate than 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 alternate history to discover the Earth ruled by powerful barbarians with both the yen and military might for empire. A thousand years ago, one of our shuttles discovered the Dalgiri Empire that way. The discovery cost us three cities, including two on my home timeline. Since then, all of our efforts have been bent toward containing 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. Of course, every time we almost get them boxed, a new portal opens up onto a Dalgiri universe from somewhere else and the battle begins again."

"Like this timeline?"

"No, not yet, Duncan. We have twenty years or so of grace before the Dalgiri get a direct line to your universe."

"So how is it they are here?"

She looked troubled. "A puzzle that must not go unsolved. Either they passed through one of our universes on their way here, or they can jump energy barriers of unprecedented magnitude. In either case, it's not good for either of our peoples."

"And what are your plans for us?" I asked.

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

"So in twenty years we are going to play Poland to the Dalgiri's Hitler and your Churchill?"

"If not sooner."

"And you've given up your job as a spy to report that the Dalgiri are coming through earlier than expected."

She smiled. "I guess I deserve that. I am 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 student working on her thesis in anthropology. Paratime anthropology, that is. But to answer your question: Yes, this is far more important than my information gathering function."

I suddenly felt very tired. What had started as a boring evening listening to Weasel Martin and the other UFO freaks had turned into something else again. Either I had stumbled onto the greatest adventure of all time -- and I mean 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. I bit down hard on my lip, hoping the pain would clear my fuzzy head. I had some hard decisions to make.

"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 said. "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. "No need for false chivalry. My culture is not your culture -- and I've been celibate much too long in this masquerade I have been playing at."

She turned and walked into the bedroom, her naked back beckoning me to follow. 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 did not bother me at all.

#

I woke to the sensations of morning; the constant drip of melting snow running from the roof; the smell of breakfast cooking on the stove the heat of pine speckled sunshine across my upper body. I smiled, stretched, and opened my eyes. I was alone. I could hear Jane moving about in the other room. A sunbeam flashed through the window, scintillating dust particles in the air. By the angle, 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," I said. She blushed at the compliment. I was surprised to realize that I really meant it.

"Breakfast is almost ready. Why don't you get up and 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 since yesterday morning, 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 good. Some of the mental haze that had plagued me since things had started last night was gone.

Jane ladled pancakes onto a plate as I came out of the bedroom. I crossed over to where she stood and nibbled her ear. She giggled just like any red blooded American girl. You would 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.

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

I tried to keep my voice light. "Probably just the neighbors from across the meadow. They have seen the smoke and came over to get the latest gossip. It gets damn lonely up here in the winters."

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 had chafed me while tucked into my belt. When we had gotten back to the rooming house, I had transferred them to the pockets of my leather jacket. The jacket that I had 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 as I opened the door.

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

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

The tinkle of breaking glass sounded behind me and Jane screamed. I whirled around to see a second Dalgir level his beamer at her through the broken window.

After that, things seemed like a dream again.

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

Then two of them grabbed my arms and the third applied a shiny steel box to my neck. There was a

sharp prick and I too was limp all over. It was as though my body had gone to sleep from the neck down. They brusquely tossed me on the bed beside Jane and left the room.

From then on, I did not see anything but the fliespecks on the ceiling, although I had no trouble hearing them in the next room. They had left the door open to keep an eye on us.

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

"Yes, Duncan."

"What happens now?"

Just then, the Dalgirs started speaking to each other in their native tongue. I heard a brief "Shush!" from Jane as she listened intently. It is funny, but the Neanderthals are always portrayed in the movies as talking in grunts. Hollywood has never been more wrong. They spoke a language that was more than a little reminiscent of French.

After five minutes, the conversation quieted down and one of them glanced in at us. I waited for him to disappear out of the corner of my eye and whispered to Jane, "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 is an armed shuttle with a crew of two hundred. It's second only to our biggest warships in firepower and could easily destroy a continent."

"But why call in something that large?"

"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 my home universe. The cruiser must come the same way. A lot of people at home will die tonight."

"What are we going to do about it?" I asked.

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

If my shoulder muscles had been free to move, I would have shrugged. It did not look as though there was much we could do.

"If only we'd had the beamers," she whispered.

I felt a hot flash of anger at myself for being so stupid. Then I savagely put the thought out of my mind. There had been no reason to think they would trail us here.

"Look," I said. "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 fire fight. Now we'll never know because the beamers are out with the generator."

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

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

"What time is it?" I whispered.

"About eleven. Why?"

I listened to the far off *put-put-put* of the generator.

It was a sound that I had not consciously heard since last night, although it had been there all the time. Now it somehow 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 stopped, bringing with it a silence louder than when it had been running.

One of the Dalgirs was in the bedroom in a matter of 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, sounding a bit like Ralph Nader.

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

He turned and yelled, "Rimbrick!" A second Dalgir came into the bedroom, leveling a beamer at me.

Then there was a sharp prick on my neck, followed by fire coursing downward through my body. My arms and legs began to twitch uncontrollably.

When the spasm passed, they helped me to stand on weakened legs. I walked around the kitchen to loosen up a bit. Finally, the second Dalgir, the one called Rimbrick, ordered 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 one more time. 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. My body shielded my right hand from view as I brushed up against the coat on the wall. I waited breathlessly for the bolt of lightning in 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 throwing his arms up to cover his eyes. Then he realized his mistake and brought the beamer down to bear on me once more.

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, I saw Rimbrick down in the snow with the familiar hole burned through him. The gasoline had caught fire. Flames and a thin stream of black smoke rose upwards 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 could not answer a very important question. Exactly whose side was I on? True, circumstances seemed to have thrown me in league with Jane, 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? What was an outsider like me doing mixed up in this mess anyway?

I pushed open the door to the living room, indecision lying on my shoulders like a sack of concrete. I am not sure exactly what it was that I planned. Perhaps they would surrender if I got the drop on them. With the Dalgirs prisoner and Jane 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 leader faced me from across the room, a look of blank surprise on his face as he lunged for his beamer.

I shot him ... and the other 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 Jane, following her instructions on how to administer the antidote to whatever drug they had 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 batteries."

I grinned. "Sure thing, boss."

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

"Well?" I asked.

"Made it. I cannot use this thing to talk across timelines without the Dalgiri hearing, but I did get our office in New York. They will relay the message and a certain cruiser will have a big surprise waiting when it tries to cross over tonight. As for us, we wait here. The shuttle will come through right after dark to pick us up."

"Us?"

It was as though I had thrown a switch. Her eyes got a strange look in them, as though 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?"

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

"Me?"

"Never mind just now," she said, sniffing. "Come over here. 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 decision 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 paratime! It's standard procedure to memory wipe any local who learns of our existence."

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

"I know, Duncan. It is wrong! However, civilizations sometimes cannot afford the luxury of gratitude. It is a cruel universe out there. In fact, there are thousands of cruel universes throughout paratime. Sometimes we just 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?"

She shook her head. "I reported your being with me the first time I called New York from the rooming house. By now headquarters has every bit of information filed with the federal government. By next week, they will be down to the state and local levels. Within a few weeks at most they would hunt you down and you'd lose an even bigger chunk of memory."

"And exile?"

"You could join us, Duncan. The Paratime Service always needs good field agents."

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

"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."

Jane's face darkened. It was as though a volcano was ready to erupt. She sat there considering her reply for a dozen seconds. Then she exploded.

"You are damn lucky I did, Duncan MacElroy!"

"What?"

"Don't you see? How did that Dalgir track me down at your rooming house? And the three others. They 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."

"Well I know! They had a most interesting discussion when you went out with that one to fix the

generator," she said.

"So?"

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

"I don't understand," I said in the understatement of the year. "Why would they be looking for me?"

"Because they were from our future, stupid! Don't you see what that means?"

"Huh?"

"It means that sometime in the next fifty years you are going to become a major problem for the Dalgiri Empire. In fact, you will be such a pain in their collective behinds that they will be willing to mount an expedition across the timelines for the sole purpose of killing you! Don't you see? They found us so easily because they have studied your life since early childhood. They know you like an open book. 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 are willing to spend a few years waiting on some skewed timeline for the right portal to open. There are timelines without number where time flows in reverse, you know."

"Years? They invested that much time in killing me?"

"Probably. You are important to them. Important enough to expend four field agents and an armed cruiser in the attempt. That makes you important to us."

I suddenly could not 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 snow pack. 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. A fourth man, their passenger, conferred hurriedly with Jane while I wrote a note to Tony Minetti.

The note explained that the stranger returning his Jeep was a cousin and asked him to hand over my Jag. I wrote another note to Hal Benson, my landlord, 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 included 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. Jane 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 open hatch of the shuttle.

Suddenly the confusion, fear, and fatigue that had plagued me in 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 discovering greatness lay there.

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

"You're not the first," I said. It was then that I stopped in my tracks. A funny thought had just hit me.

"What's the matter?" Jane asked.

"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 cheeks.

Suddenly Jane was laughing too.

When she had 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, 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.