

A Greater Infinity

A Novel By
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CHAPTER 1

Did you ever dream of doing great things with your life? You know, wish you had discovered penicillin, or a lost continent, or possibly been a great general? Hal Benson is like that. Hal is my landlord and a good friend. However, 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 is 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 seemed to travel through life in their own private world, unaffected by the things the rest of humanity considers important.

Which 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 where the almost 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, there were fifty-odd people scattered in 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 from half-a-case of Coors. Somehow, they managed to disappear 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 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 was not one of those lucky women blessed with the gift of beauty. Her hair had a terminal case of the frizzies, and the Coke-bottle glasses did nothing to improve her image. However, there was a mind behind that mannish face of hers that 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. 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 is an overweight teenager with a bad skin condition and the personality of a bantam cock,

so Weasel's censure did not bother him at all. He just got red in the face 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 crew cut, stepped between them and got PeeJay cooled down with a promise that he could go first when they got to the new business portion of the meeting.

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 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 with lightning.

"Then you're dumber than you look," he said to Joel. There was a scattered round of applause and a couple of 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 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, 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 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 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 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.”

Jane waited for me on the sidewalk out front. She was bundled up in a fur coat with her black leather purse 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 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 rest of the houses on the street were dark because of mid-semester break. Every couple of blocks a mercury vapor lamp illuminated a street corner. However, the long blocks between were dark patches of flickering moonlight and shadow. The sidewalk was a white lane speckled with the shadows of bare tree-limbs, broken in dozens of spots by clumps of winter grass pushing up through the cracks in the cement 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 sacks 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 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 as my cargo of beer crashed to the ground in a clatter of aluminum cans. Two of the cans burst open on impact, spraying me with a cold shower of carbonated hops.

I spit out a mouthful of dirt and grass I had managed to collect and turned over. It was dark there in the shadow of the hedge, but I could see Jane lying 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 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 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 pile 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 much the cold wind bit into me where the beer had soaked into my clothes. The spot she named was fairly well lighted by the corner street lamp, but I could see nothing. “I don’t see anything.”

“Look closely. See 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 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 replied, 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 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?”

“Sssh,” 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. A block away I could hear the swish of tires on

pavement as some late night reveler headed for home.

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 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. 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 — the 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, 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 demanded.

“No time, Duncan.” She turned to look directly into my eyes, “I need your help. Where there is one Dalgir, 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 had 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 name 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. However, the Neanderthals in the museums had not worn hunting clothes straight out of the Sears-Roebuck catalog. Nor had they carried glass-barreled pistols that emitted Cherenkov radiation as they lay quiescent on the ground.

“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 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. Every expert agreed that a laser pistol was a theoretical impossibility.

Except a dead man lay 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 are not even supposed to know about this timeline. This 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 local authorities.”

I chewed my lip, squirming on the horns of a dilemma. I had never even been late paying a parking ticket. Here I was being asked to help cover up a cold-blooded murder. So why did I choose to help her? I am not sure, even now. It certainly wasn’t because she was beautiful. Maybe down deep, I 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.”

“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.”

I could see indecision flash 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, but I held up my hand and she shut it with a snap.

“I know, you’ve got a Buck Rogers raygun. Maybe that is 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, 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 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. There were a dozen or so pouches on the belt and she quickly sorted through them.

“What have you 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 hand.

“What’s in that thing?”

“A specially mutated bacteria. Get any of it on you and you will 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 that the mouth is only one of two openings to the alimentary canal. Jane used the other.

She quickly rejoined me, carefully pulled off the gloves, and buried them in the center of the charred clothing, which 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.”

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Three hundred years after humanity made its deal with the Life Probe to search out the secret of faster-than-light travel, the descendants of the original expedition return to Earth in a starship. They find a world that has forgotten the ancient contract. No matter. The colonists have overcome far greater obstacles in their single-minded drive to redeem a promise made before any of them were born...

3. Antares Dawn - US\$6.00

When the super giant star Antares exploded in 2512, the human colony on Alta found their pathway to the stars gone, isolating them from the rest of human space for more than a century. Then one day, a powerful warship materialized in the system without warning. Alarmed by the sudden appearance of such a behemoth, the commanders of the Altan Space Navy dispatched one of their most powerful ships to investigate. What ASNS Discovery finds when they finally catch the intruder is a battered hulk manned by a dead crew.

That is disturbing news for the Altans. For the dead battleship could easily have defeated the whole of the Altan navy. If it could find Alta, then so could whomever it was that beat it. Something must be done...

4. Antares Passage - US\$7.50

After more than a century of isolation, the paths between stars are again open and the people of Alta in contact with their sister colony on Sandar. The opening of the foldlines has not been the unmixed blessing the Altans had supposed, however.

For the reestablishment of interstellar travel has brought with it news of the Ryall, an alien race whose goal is the extermination of humanity. If they are to avoid defeat at the hands of the aliens, Alta must seek out the military might of Earth. However, to reach Earth requires them to dive into the heart of a supernova.

5. Antares Victory – First Time in Print – US\$7.50

After a century of warfare, humanity finally discovered the Achilles heel of the Ryall, their xenophobic reptilian foe. Spica – Alpha Virginis – is the key star system in enemy space. It is the hub through which all Ryall starships must pass, and if humanity can only capture and hold it, they will strangle the Ryall war machine and end their threat to humankind forever.

It all seemed so simple in the computer simulations: Advance by stealth, attack without warning, strike swiftly with overwhelming power. Unfortunately, conquering the Ryall proves the easy part. With the key to victory in hand, Richard and Bethany Drake discover that they must also conquer human nature if they are to bring down the alien foe ...

6. Thunderstrike! - US\$7.50

The new comet found near Jupiter was an incredible treasure trove of water ice and rock. Immediately, the water-starved Luna Republic and the Sierra Corporation, a leader in asteroid mining, were squabbling over rights to the new resource. However, all thoughts of profit and fame were abandoned when a scientific expedition discovered that the comet's trajectory placed it on a collision course with Earth!

As scientists struggled to find a way to alter the comet's course, world leaders tried desperately to restrain mass panic, and two lovers quarreled over the direction the comet was to take, all Earth waited to see if humanity had any future at all...

7. The Clouds of Saturn - US\$7.50

When the sun flared out of control and boiled Earth's oceans, humanity took refuge in a place that few would have predicted. In the greatest migration in history, the entire human race took up residence among the towering clouds and deep clear-air canyons of Saturn's upper atmosphere. Having survived the traitor star, they returned to the all-too-human tradition of internecine strife. The new city-states of Saturn began to resemble those of ancient Greece, with one group of cities taking on the role of militaristic Sparta...

8. The Sails of Tau Ceti – US\$7.50

Starhopper was humanity's first interstellar probe. It was designed to search for intelligent life beyond the solar system. Before it could be launched, however, intelligent life found Earth. The discovery of an alien light sail inbound at the edge of the solar system generated considerable excitement in scientific circles. With the interstellar probe nearing completion, it gave scientists the opportunity to launch an expedition to meet the aliens while they were still in space. The second surprise came when *Starhopper's* crew boarded the alien craft. They found beings that, despite their alien physiques, were surprisingly compatible with humans. That two species so similar could have evolved a mere twelve light years from one another seemed too coincidental to be true.

One human being soon discovered that coincidence had nothing to do with it...

9. Gibraltar Earth – First Time in Print — \$7.50

It is the 24th Century and humanity is just gaining a toehold out among the stars. Stellar Survey Starship *Magellan* is exploring the New Eden system when they encounter two alien spacecraft. When the encounter is over, the score is one human scout ship and one alien aggressor destroyed. In exploring the wreck of the second alien ship, spacers discover a survivor with a fantastic story.

The alien comes from a million-star Galactic Empire ruled over by a mysterious race known as the Broa. These overlords are the masters of this region of the galaxy and they allow no competitors. This news presents Earth's rulers with a problem. As yet, the Broa are ignorant of humanity's existence. Does the human race retreat to its one small world, quaking in fear that the Broa will eventually discover Earth? Or do they take a more aggressive approach?

Whatever they do, they must do it quickly! Time is running out for the human race...

10. Gibraltar Sun – First Time in Print — \$7.50

The expedition to the Crab Nebula has returned to Earth and the news is not good. Out among the stars, a million systems have fallen under Broan domination, the fate awaiting Earth should the Broa ever learn of its existence. The problem would seem to allow but three responses: submit meekly to slavery, fight and risk extermination, or hide and pray the Broa remain ignorant of humankind for at least a few more generations. Are the hairless apes of Sol III finally faced with a problem for which there is no acceptable solution?

While politicians argue, Mark Rykand and Lisa Arden risk everything to spy on the all-powerful enemy that is beginning to wonder at the appearance of mysterious bipeds in their midst...

11. Gibraltar Stars – First Time in Print — US\$7.50

The great debate is over. The human race has rejected the idea of pulling back from the stars and hiding on Earth in the hope the Broa will overlook us for a few more generations. Instead, the World Parliament, by a vote of 60-40, has decided to throw the dice and go for a win. Parliament Hall resounds with brave words as members declare victory inevitable.

With the balance of forces a million to one against *Homo sapiens Terra*, those who must turn patriotic speeches into hard-won reality have their work cut out for them. They must expand humanity's foothold in Broan space while contending with a supply line that is 7000 light-years long.

If the sheer magnitude of the task isn't enough, Mark and Lisa Rykand discover they are in a race against two very different antagonists. The Broa are beginning to wonder at the strange two-legged interlopers in their domain; while back on Earth, those who lost the great debate are eager to try again.

Whoever wins the race will determine the future of the human species... or, indeed, whether it has one.

12. Gridlock and Other Stories - US\$6.00

Where would you visit if you invented a time machine, but could not steer it? What if you went out for a six-pack of beer and never came back? If you think nuclear power is dangerous, you should try black holes as an energy source — or even scarier, solar energy! Visit the many worlds of Michael McCollum. I guarantee that you will be surprised!

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