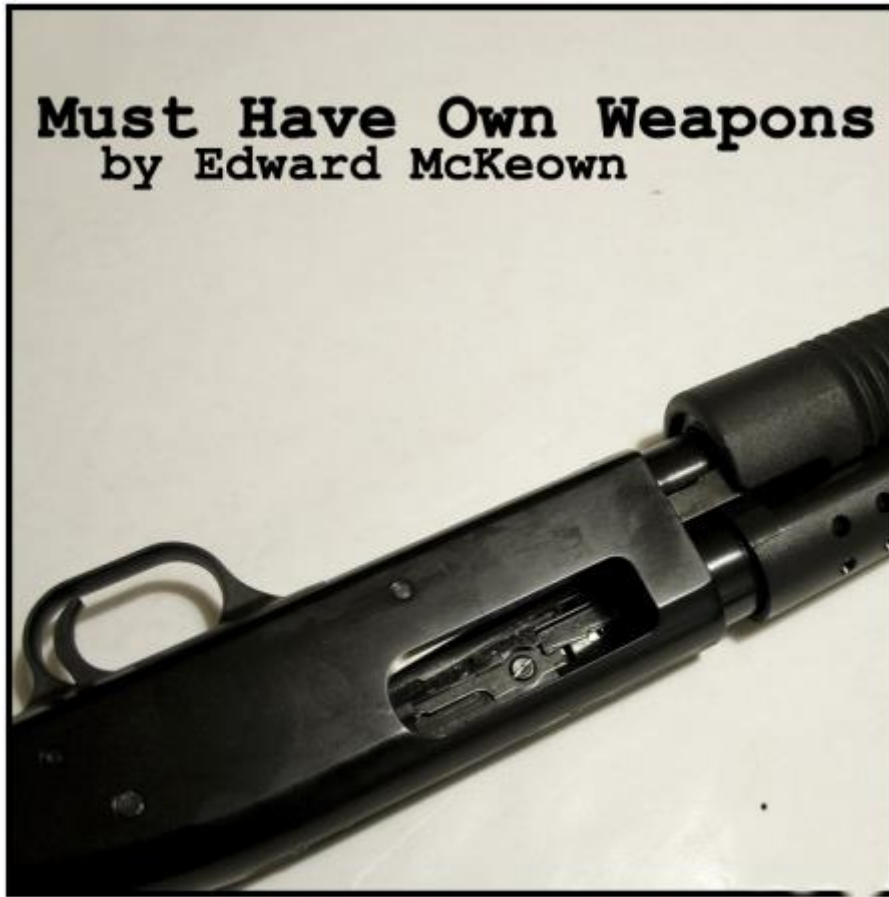


Must Have Own Weapons by Edward McKeown



The ad read: Time traveler seeks active companion. Must have own weapons. I've done this before. Call 978-251-6239.

On any other day, I'd have done what any sensible person reading the paper would have done: laugh, shake my head, and move on. But today, sitting in my one-room apartment, surrounded by the debris of my first real relationship, with my rejected engagement ring refracting accusingly at me, was not any other day. Today, I was trying to figure out what I had to live for now that Cynthia had left me for another

guy. I took another swig of Jim Beam. Yeah. On any other day, I hated the taste of hard liquor. But not today.

What the hell, I thought, rereading the ad. I had weapons. Knew how to use them. Four years with the 82nd Airborne had taught me that.

I looked over at the .357 revolver I'd bought from my job in the convenience store next to Boston University where I was restarting my education. I'd idly speculated on what it would be like to put it to my head and end the pain. There'd been a lot of it in my life. A long trail from childhood to here. Seemed like only more lay ahead.

The bottle decided me. It was empty.

"The hell with it," I said, "college, the store, and most of all her."

Despite my best efforts, I was still too damn sober. Being twenty-five and fresh out of the Airborne made me tougher than the punk college kids at B. U. who I could drink under the table. Even the punks shoplifting at the store didn't do it when I was there. Army conditioning had been good for something. But right now, it was stopping me from being as utterly hammered as I wanted to be. I picked up the phone and dialed the number.

"Hello," said a mature male voice in a British accent.

"Read your ad," I said.

"Yes? Who's this?"

"Staff Sergeant Dan Coulter at your service. Well, ex-staff sergeant."

"Are you drunk, sir?"

"Don't call me sir. I work for a living. Sorry, army humor. And yes, I am drunk, though not as much as I would like to be. You getting a lot of calls from sober people for your expedition?"

"Not so much. But I am quite ready to deal with disbelief. I have no need for drunks or fools."

"Well, I've been a fool lately," I replied. "But it was over a woman like it's supposed to be. I'm not an alky. And no, I don't believe you, but I don't care either. I need something to kill time and build distance. You'll do."

“Ah, young man. But will you? I need an active companion, sharp of wit and quick of hand. What are your qualifications?”

I was caught between ticked off and amused. The nutjob was interviewing me!

“Well, let’s see. I’m 6’ 2 and 185. I can hit anything I can see with any rifle or pistol made. And I taught unarmed combat in the 82nd.”

“Are you smart?”

“Not about women.”

“No man is. Otherwise?”

“Some college. Good mechanical aptitude,” I said. “I’m in B. U. in liberal arts.”

“Oh well. I shall be doing the thinking in any event.”

I had no quick reply for that.

“Weapons?” he asked.

“What do you need? I’ve even got my own body armor.”

“Bring a pistol, rifle, a very good knife or sword if you have it, and your body armor. I’ll provide other supplies. You’ll need clothes for at least a week’s rough travel.

“Okay.”

“Aren’t you going to ask me where and when we’re going?”

I shrugged, although he couldn’t see it. “No one ever told me before. Just get me out of here.”

“Well,” he said. “I can certainly do that. I’m Professor Basil Chandler. I’ll see you at 9 AM.”

“0900, got it”

I awoke at 0600 with a splitting headache and sat up. At the foot of the bed lay my kit and a tightly packed duffel. Another bag held weapons and armor. The task had taken my mind off the empty hours. But now came the morning after.

Crap, I thought as I pulled myself up to sitting. I had a class at 0900 and a long day beyond that with a shift at the Circle K.

God. I can't do this. Can't go through the meaningless motions. Can't face the dreariness of reality.

I decided to blow off class. I'd told Chandler I'd be there, and what the hell? So I threw on boots, field pants, a shirt, and a tac vest over it. I humped the kit down to my old Saturn, then grabbed a cup of coffee and an egg biscuit from McShithole's and drove out of Boston.

The trip took an hour, during which I told myself ten times what an idiot I was.

When I got to the address, I found a rambling, brick saltbox home, two stories tall with a garret above. It telescoped into a garage and what looked like a workshop in the back. Fencing surrounded the building. The homes nearby had that shut-in, semi-abandoned look of poverty. I reached into my bag and pulled out the holstered .357, putting the rig on under the vest. I left my rifle in the duffel. It was early May and the weather was still crisp. Stone and grit crunched under my boots as I walked up to the door. Before I could knock, it opened.

A handsome older woman with red hair and a bun eyed me with a guarded expression. She wore a business suit and looked like a lawyer.

"You're prompt, Mr. Coulter," she said, in a crisp English accent. "The professor likes that."

"Thanks."

"I'll show you to my brother's study."

I followed her into the large building, surprised by how beautifully decorated and lit the inside was. Furniture, telescopes, lamps, rugs, and souvenirs from all over the world filled the space. The woman led me back to a room with a walk-in fireplace and heavy leather furniture. On the floor lay a lion-skin rug.

"The professor will be in to see you in a moment," she said. "Would you like some coffee?"

"Sure, thanks."

She slipped out of the room and I took the opportunity to look about. The walls held swords, a hunting rifle, even a few Zulu shields. But it was the lion rug that caught my eye. There was something wrong about it. It was not big for an African lion, but the head looked wrong, as did the teeth. When I knelt to get a closer look at the head, I noticed the fangs were over seven inches long.

“*Smilodon Populator*,” said the cultured British voice. “One of my little indulgences.”

I looked up. The gray-haired man at the entrance of the room was about five-ten, slim, and by God, he even wore a tweed jacket and gold-rimmed glasses. He carried in a tray with coffee and mixings and put it down on a campaign table.

“Also known as?”

“A saber-toothed tiger,” I finished. “Nice fake. Where did you have it made?”

“I tell people that my students created it for me,” Professor Chandler said.

“Actually, I shot it 73,000 years ago in what will be Brazil.”

I smiled and stood. “So, is this a reality show? Is a guy going to jump out with a camera?”

The professor smiled. “Of course, nothing can be accomplished without proof. Well, you are here and you seem to fit the bill for an active companion and, ironically, I am short of time.

“Let's have a practical demonstration.” He reached for a scoped rifle on the wall. I slipped my hand under my vest, to the pistol.

He spotted the movement. “Good, you're armed. “A rifle would be better, but we should be only a minute or two.” He worked the bolt. “Weatherby *Grand Safari*, one must have the right tools. I normally applaud gun control laws, but it's been deuced inconvenient for my purposes.”

“Yeah,” I said, pulling the .357 and holding it down by my side.

“I've already set everything up for the quickest and easiest of proofs. Follow me.” The professor went up to the walk-in fireplace and studied a curious instrument that looked like an astrolabe next to it. An arrow pointed into the fireplace. The professor waved me up. And, feeling like an imbecile, I joined him in the fireplace, facing the brick wall.

“Now,” he said, “prepare yourself for a shock.”

I started to laugh as the professor leaned forward.

The sky above was a blazing blue and the air stank of growth and decay. It was hot. I brought up my pistol and swung in a circle. We stood in a vast plain.

“What?” I managed. Then words failed me. Several hundred yards away, dinosaurs walked by. Big, four-legged dinosaurs with long tails balanced behind them. One bellowed like an ox. I could smell their heavy, musky scent. I turned to the professor, nerves and senses simply numb.

He was scratching an arrow in the dirt with his boot. “Have to have the exact entry point right, my boy, or God knows where we’ll end up. Don’t suggest we stay long, but the experience is worth a million words of explanation.”

I pointed mutely at the beasts, unable to speak.

“Apatosaurus,” he said. “We’re in the late Jurassic, 170 million years ago in Colorado. It’s summer.”

A harsher roar sounded. And the Apatosaurus shuffled into a trot.

“Drat,” the professor muttered as twenty feet of something two-legged and nasty jogged into view. It looked at the Apatosaurus. It looked at us. It decided on us. I brought up the pistol.

“Take two steps straight back,” the professor ordered. “Now, sergeant.”

We stood in the fireplace. I staggered over to the nearby chair and flopped down on it. The professor unloaded his rifle, leaned it against the fireplace, and took off his jacket. His shirt stuck to his ribs.

Of course, I thought, it had been blazing hot in the Jurassic.

“When you said time travel—,” I managed.

“—You thought there would be a machine I’d tinker together, like H. G. Wells’ Victorian time traveler? No. Man-made time travel may be possible. But the amounts of energy, money, and equipment would doubtless drain the world’s economy.

“This device,” he pointed to the astrolabe affair, “allows me to control my destination. But that’s all. It’s only by these rare natural entry points that we can access the time river. I do not know why they occur. But I and others have learned to detect them. This one had been here for a hundred years, as best I can tell. Giving rise to disappearances and legends of haunting.

“Isn’t this dangerous? I demanded. “Suppose you—?”

“Step on a butterfly and change the future? No. It doesn’t work that way. Time is

like a mighty river. Its current is irresistible, pushing us forward to where we exit space-time. If you try to alter its course, it resists you. Some think that the time river is sentient. Perhaps that it is even God.

“Have you heard of Maurice Bovard?”

No, I said.

“Few have, and none know the true story. He was reported to be a young idealist who tried to kill Hitler. Actually, he was a fellow time traveler trying to prevent the Holocaust. But he found that history protects its timeline. He was balked at every turn, until eventually he was captured and killed.

“So if you went back in time to kill your grandfather—

“—Likely the gun would misfire, your train connection would be missed, or he would not be home.”

“Then it’s impossible?”

“No,” the professor said grimly. “But it is very difficult, like damming a great river. But it may be that alternate timelines have flowed along. The river has eddies, backflows, and whirlpools.”

“Are there more of you...time travelers?”

“Yes.” Chandler said, as he sat back in his chair. “Most are human. Some are not. Some are lost wanderers, not even aware of what has happened to them. Others are brilliant people, some from our future. It was one of these who taught me what I know of time. Before she...before she was killed.”

Recent grief has a familiar face. “When?” I asked.

“A question with many different answers,” Chandler said. “But as you mean it, two months ago. We were investigating the spread of Homo Sapiens into Europe. We were supposed to meet in time near a known site of early man. Some 53,000 years ago. I found her there, along with the natives. They’d all been shot dead by a high-powered rifle.”

“Shot by who?”

“I don’t know, Mr. Coulter.”

“Call me, Dan.”

“Well, Dan. I don’t know, and that’s why I need your help. There’s something dangerous going on in the past. I don’t know what, and I don’t know why. But I need a stout companion to watch my back. I’m prepared to pay you \$10,000 for the trip.”

I’d happily have gone for free, but the \$10,000 was nice, too. “I’m in.”

“Excellent.”

“Professor, why didn’t you go back in time farther and warn your friend?”

A haunted look entered his eyes.

“That was the first month,” he said in a low voice. “But the time river did not permit it. Once, I came close enough to see her face, as if through a mist, but…”

“Sorry,” I said.

He nodded then, with a sigh. “Did you bring any other equipment with you?”

I went out to the car and brought in my duffels. Despite the bottle and my disbelief, I’d packed well. Life in the 82nd had taught me to pack in my sleep. The only thing I wished for was more ammo. I’d thrown in one box of .357 and twenty rounds of .50/110 for my dad’s old Winchester lever action. When I returned, I found an impressive breakfast laid out for us.

Chandler’s sister didn’t join us. She merely kissed her brother on the cheek with a whispered, ‘Good luck’ and left with a nod to me. Breakfast was consumed in silence. Then we walked back to the study and kitted up. I loaded the rifle. The professor had backpacks already made up. I added my clothes and supplies and checked the rig. The professor was obviously an experienced field man.

“Normally I would take swords or other primitive weapons to defend ourselves,” Chandler said. “I’m careful about disturbing the Time River unnecessarily and leery of invoking its tendency to protect itself. Woe to us if our guns jammed because the Time River didn’t want bullets in the head of a very particular Smilodon destined for the Museum of Natural History.

“However, we are after an enemy who is not playing by the rules and may be trying to deliberately change the riverbed.”

I hefted my big bowie, almost a short sword in itself. The professor nodded his approval. He turned to his astrolabe thing and began fiddling. In a few minutes, he

was satisfied.

“Follow me.”

We emerged from the fireplace into summer on the edge of a densely forested slope. Above, the sky was clouded, but the air was still warm. A shallow stream bubbled and sloshed behind us. The professor cut his return arrow in the sod with an entrenching tool. “This is the way back. Fix the details of this place in your mind in case we become separated.”

I gathered stones from the riverbed and we filled in the cut arrow. I marked every landmark in my mind.

“We got maps?” I asked, kicking myself for not asking earlier.

“No,” Chandler said with asperity. “Nor GPS, nor cell phones or any other help.”

“Yeah, I guess we should have gotten the Rand McNally 5,300 BC before we left.”

Chandler didn’t answer but started off at a goodly pace, rifle still on his shoulder. I levered a round into the .50/110 and walked trail, three meters behind. An hour’s walk brought us to a small valley and the scene of tragedy. Six human skeletons decorated the landscape. The bodies had been scattered and torn up by small scavengers.

Chandler walked past the bones to a mound of stones. He paused and gathered some nearby wildflowers to place on the cairn, adjusting some rocks that a curious scavenger must have moved. Fortunately, it must have found easier pickings elsewhere.

I hung back as the professor sat by the cairn for five minutes. It gave me a chance to examine the bones. I wasn’t a paleontologist, but I had seen such sights in Africa and the Mideast. Four men and two women, I guessed. If there had been children, they’d gotten away. Though what chance they had without their family, I didn’t know. Two skulls showed bullet holes. The killer was either good, lucky, or both.

I looked up from my dismal research as Chandler walked up, his face gray and grim.

“Her name was Sitara,” he said.

“Sitara,” I said, knowing that it was important to remember. Suddenly, the situation with Cynthia seemed so trivial, so damn silly, that I was ashamed of myself. “Beautiful name.”

“Yes.” He stared at the ground.

“What do you say we get to the top of that hill there?” I pointed with my rifle. “It commands a view of the area. Maybe we’ll see something.”

“Excellent idea.”

Another hour saw us atop the hill and above the skirt of trees and bushes that encircled it. I had to admit that the real estate was beautiful.

“Where are we?”

“A broad, shallow valley, rather like your Shenandoah in what will be southern France. Homo sapiens used this as a highway into Europe, into the land of the Neanderthal.”

I pulled out a set of field glasses and scanned the vast valley below. I saw the glint of another river and figured if there was anyone around, they’d be near water.

“Ah,” I said, “smoke. Somebody has a small fire going down by the river, near where it forks.”

Chandler nodded. “Worth checking.”

I took a compass reading and noted it in the crude map book I was making. Chandler might be happy to go by dead reckoning, but I wasn't. This time I led off, and Chandler unlimbered his rifle. We walked in silence, staying undercover, and by late afternoon we reached the campsite. We could have saved the precautions.

Another family group of shaggy humans lay scattered about a well-established campsite of rough lean-tos and fire pits. One of these trailed the thin rill of smoke we had seen. Chandler and I huddled behind a boulder near the riverbed.

“Those bodies are fresh,” I said. “The fire’s still going. This had to have just happened.”

We scanned the area with field glasses and scope, but saw nothing.

“Cover me,” I said. I jogged out of cover, rifle up, and zigzagged into the camp. I waved Chandler up. A stink of blood hung in the air. Something dog-like was

worrying one body on the stream side.

Chandler cursed and raised his rifle. “Bollocks!”

“No,” I snapped. “Don’t give away our location.”

The critter heard us and bolted. We turned our attention to the campsite. There were twelve dead, and this time two children were among them. All had been shot. They were small, dirty, covered with tattoos and wearing skins, and probably hadn’t smelled so good when alive. But the kids looked like kids. And the adults’ faces, if shaved or made up, wouldn’t have attracted a second glance on any street.

I climbed atop a boulder to survey the pattern of the slaughter.

“What do you see?” Chandler demanded.

“From the way everyone was cut down, the bad guys were over there.” I gestured to the other side of a shallow tributary. “I’m thinking, because they weren’t all cut down together, that there were only a few bad guys, or they have slow-firing weapons. Those in the center tried to rally. Then people tried to run.”

Chandler looked up at the lowering clouds and westering sun. “Too late to start tracking them.”

“Maybe we can pull the bad guys back,” I said.

“What?”

“The shooters can’t have gone far, and their objective seems to be wiping out the people in this area. If they thought they missed someone, they might come back.”

With the sun sinking, Chandler threw wood and wet leaves in the fire to generate smoke. Then we moved most of the bodies into the lean-to. I did the unpleasant task of propping up three dead men by the fire, bending stiff limbs as best I could, and putting spears on their shoulders. I was glad I’d packed gloves. Hopefully the shooters would think that a late hunting party had returned and sat grieving in the camp.

We heated up some food and took it with us as we retreated into the woods opposite where I’d guessed the shooters would return. Chandler looked at his food without interest.

“Chow down, Professor. We’ve got a long, cold night, and if things go well, we’ll be killing somebody. You’ll need your strength.”

Chandler nodded and forced himself to eat.

I felt queasy, too, but I'd been in ambushes before. Hours passed, and it grew cold. A hunter's moon rose and contributed to the growing feeling of unreality I struggled with. Was I actually back fifty thousand years ago in a European forest listening to the yowls of God-Knew-What in the hills?

A gun stuttered out a short burst, yanking me back into focus. The three dead hunters were knocked over by the impacts. My rifle snapped up to cover the spot where the weapon had flashed.

"Hold your fire," I whispered. "It's one shooter. Let's see if he comes into the light."

The burst of fire had silenced all the forest creatures. Bugs started up first. The river gurgled and sloshed, and the fire crackled. We waited.

He stepped out, and between the firelight and the moon we saw him clearly. Brow ridges, broad nose, sloped skull, barrel ribcase.

"Neanderthal," Chandler whispered.

The creature moving down the draw was a Neanderthal, but not from our timeline. He moved over the rocks with an easy, muscular stride. No clumsy caveman here. The weapon he held under one arm was unfamiliar, but had the nasty look of an assault rifle with a long magazine. He wore a fine-looking safari suit, with what looked like a pith helmet. The beard was trimmed, and he practically bounced with the energy of a powerful and athletic body. He moved warily toward the corpses.

I nodded at Chandler, and we sighted in. Our rifles cracked together.

Whether we'd made some sound, or he caught a light off one of our weapons, or he just got lucky, the Neanderthal jumped. My round tore the helmet off his head, snapping away half the brim. Chandler missed clean. The Neanderthal rolled up flat and opened up with a long burst from his military-style weapon, firing at our flashes. We ducked as wood and leaves rained down on us. Then we returned fire. His weapon had the greater rate of fire, but there were two of us, and he was in the open. Our shots threw up dirt around him, and brought down a lean-to. He sprayed more rounds at us. Splinters nicked my face, and I ducked.

The Neanderthal took advantage of suppressing us to kick a load of sandy soil into the fire, which guttered. Then he raced for the woods, faster than I would have imagined possible.

My rifle clicked empty. I whipped out the pistol and cracked off two rounds, hoping for a lucky hit. If I hit him, it didn't slow him. Then he disappeared into the dark embrace of the forest.

"God damn it!" Chandler shouted.

"Shut up" I hissed, reloading frantically. "Follow me"

We shifted from our known position, heading for where we'd cached our supplies. The Neanderthal might have friends, or he might be hunting us now. I doubted both, but guessing wrong was fatal. We reached our equipment, and climbed out onto a rocky promontory nearby. It would be near impossible to sneak up on us now.

I scanned with my field glasses for a few minutes before turning to Chandler.

"Who was that?" I demanded, keeping my voice low.

"I know little more than you do. He looks like a Neanderthal, but obviously he's no primitive. I wonder..." Chandler was silent for a few minutes, and the moon reflected off his gold-rimmed glasses.

"Of course," he said finally. "Remember that I told you how the River of Time has eddies and backflows?"

"Yeah."

"I have heard that the Time River sometimes overflows, like when the Nile floods and creates smaller, temporary rivers that run into the desert before being absorbed. He must be from one such where Neanderthal survived. A freak fragment of time, destined to dissolve in entropy. Only he won't go quietly into that good night. He's trying to burrow back to the main river, running through time, killing the early Homo Sapiens that moved into Europe."

"Surely he can't get them all?"

"He can use time effectively," Chandler said. "And he is determined. Maybe he will recruit others. The population of Homo Sapiens is tiny now, and few came to

Europe. He needs only tip the scale a small amount to keep his kind alive until some pivotal event for his own timeline gives them the advantage that allowed them to survive there.”

“Then we have to kill him.”

“Yes. For our species, for the people in the village below us, and for Sitara.”

The night was cold, and we slept badly in shifts. As the sun brightened in the east, we headed back, circling the camp in case the Neander was waiting on us.

We dashed across the river simultaneously but drew no fire. His trail was easily spotted from where he’d crashed through the underbrush. A few hundred yards in, the Neander must have realized he couldn’t continue in the dark. With us hunting him, he didn’t dare show a light. So he’d huddled up and had a meal. We found empty packets of dried food that looked like ours. Only the writing on them was like no script even the professor had ever seen.

“He must have moved out at first light, I said. “The question is, where?”

Chandler’s mouth drew into a grim line. “We gave him a terrible shock. My bet is that he is heading for home. No indication that we hit him?”

“No blood trail,” I said. “But they’re easy to miss. It’s been hours.

“Then we will have to move very rapidly to overtake him.”

Now it was my turn to frown. Close pursuit of a fleeing enemy was dangerous. But I couldn’t get the faces of the dead kids off my mind.

“Drop the packs. Weapons only.”

The Neander hadn’t done a very good job of hiding his trail. And I’d hunted deer in Ohio and men in Africa and Afghanistan. Freed of our equipment, we made good time for all of the roughness of the hills. We munched power bars and sipped from our canteens as we hoofed it. Hours later, we left the shade of the forest into a glacial moraine with boulders ranging from the size of cars to small buildings, half buried in the sod.

“Look,” Chandler said, pointing.

Ahead, in a tumble of huge white stones, was a place of torn up soil and two markers in the shape of stone arrows, much like the one we had left at our entry point.

Before I could stop him, the professor jogged up.

“Damn. He’s escaped back into his own world. It’s his own time. We’ve lost.”

“Maybe not,” I said. “Will he dare come back not knowing if we’re waiting for him on this side?”

“Damn.” Chandler swore again, shaking his rifle in frustration. It saved his life as the flung stone struck his weapon before knocking the professor over like a bowling pin.

I spun and fired at the charging Neanderthal as he sprang from behind a massive boulder. My shot missed and before I could lever in another round, he flung his empty rifle at me. I blocked with mine, but he hit me like a Green Bay lineman. My rifle went one way and I the other. The Neander fell over me, but scrambled up, pulling out a machete of ugly black metal as I clawed for my pistol. He swung, and the blade thudded home, forcing a cry from me. But the body armor beneath my jacket stopped the machete from penetrating.

Behind the Neander, Chandler recovered enough to scramble toward his weapon. The Neander must have thought he’d finished me, because he leapt at Chandler. As he raised the machete, I pulled my .357 and fired. Two shots took him in the back. He slewed about and flung the machete as I emptied the rest of the cylinder at him. The machete clipped my shoulder, again cutting through my jacket, and this time drawing blood, grazing my arm. But the last shots did it. The Neander groaned and sank to his knees, then fell on his back.

Chandler and I recovered our rifles and stood over the downed Neanderthal. He looked up at us with glazed eyes. In the clear light of day, his face was even more striking, with the heavy brows, broad nose, and lips. Neatly trimmed hair covered most of the face. I noted a bandage on his right leg. I’d hit him last night, after all.

“You win,” he said, in a gravelly voice.

“You speak our language,” Chandler said, in obvious surprise.

“S-several,” he coughed. “I studied your kind well.”

“Why?” Chandler asked, tight-lipped. “Why all this?”

“Surely you guessed. I’m from a tributary to the Time River. I learned that my

people were doomed unless the main Time River could be altered. At first I tried to advance them. Give them weapons, leadership, technological advances. But I failed. Either the Time River resisted me, or it was some inherent weakness in my people.

“So I had to resort to destroying yours. Gods forgive me. But the Time River has ordained that your kind will inherit the future.” He coughed again, and bright blood speckled his lips.

“How come you didn't jump out?” I gestured at the rock arrows.

The Neander shook his head. “Couldn't let you find the real entry to my time. It's far from here.”

“Afraid we'd do to you what you tried to do to us?”

“Yes.”

I slapped a bandage on my cut arm, and looked at Chandler. He shook his head. I knew we could do nothing for the Neander, and marveled he'd lasted this long.

“May the condemned ask a final wish?” the Neanderthal asked.

“Chandler looked down at him. “Ask.”

“I'm not sorry to die. I always intended to kill myself to atone for my murders. Bury me among my own kind.” He gestured with a weak hand. “By the leaning rocks is a cave, my people lived in before fleeing yours. Their dead are within. I've failed them, but perhaps my soul can find rest with theirs.”

Chandler looked at me, and I nodded.

“We'll do it.” he said. Then, to my surprise added, “What was your name?”

“Ula,” he said, voice fading. “I was a teacher at University. Ah, that I had never left.” A shudder racked the powerful body, and animation faded from the eyes. He sank into the ground in the shapeless relaxation of the dead.

We dragged the heavy body up to the cave. Neither of us had the heart to strip him of his modern clothes. But we took all of his equipment, and trusted that the clothes would rot off. A covering of stones hid the body from view, and we started the long, weary trek back to our own entry point.

This time, when we slipped into the future through the fireplace, I hardly marveled at the change. We dropped our packs, and the professor fetched two Cokes

from the kitchen. The sugar and caffeine brought me back to life, and I noted the clock on the wall.

Chandler followed my eyes. "We used time only in the past. Today we have been gone only a few minutes." He rose from the chair and walked over to a closet. Inside was a wall safe. Chandler opened it, extracting an envelope, which he handed to me.

"For your services, and your silence, and with my thanks."

"I think I'll head home for a long bath and a good meal," I said. Mostly, I wanted to be alone to think. The world had changed for me.

"Sound plan." Chandler helped me with my duffels. Then we stood facing each other in the doorway.

"Makes you wonder," I said. "Did we have free will in this? Or were we just the Time River's agents? Was the past really ever in danger?"

"I don't know," Chandler said. "That question has faced man since he first became sentient. All we can do is act, and hope our actions are right and proper."

I stuck out my hand, and Chandler shook it. "Will we meet again, Professor?"

Chandler looked at me over his glasses. "I'm sure we will, young man. I'm sure we will. In time." The door slid smoothly closed.

The End