

Amazing

Fact and Science Fiction

stories

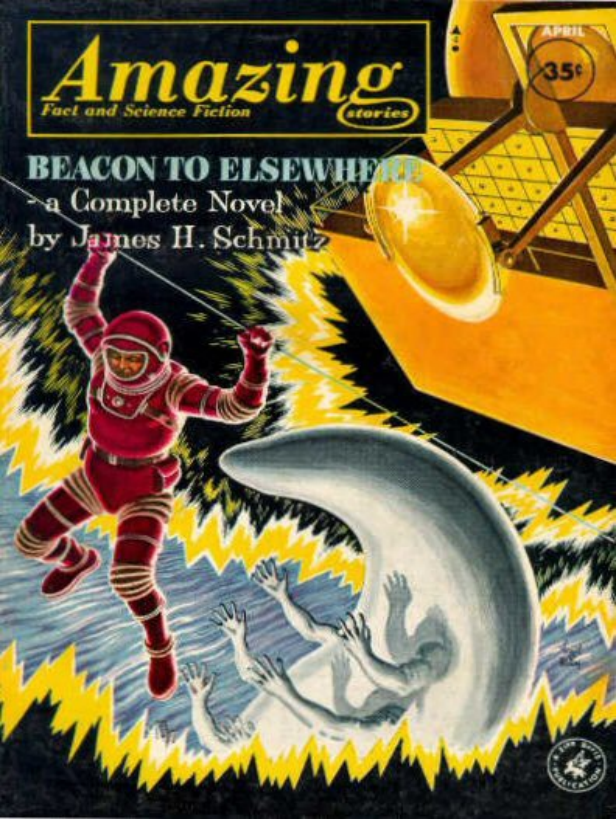
APRIL

35¢

BEACON TO ELSEWHERE

- a Complete Novel

by James H. Schmitz



"The Beacon to Elsewhere"

James Schmitz

Published in *Amazing Stories*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (April 1963), with illustrations by Virgil Finlay, though this version is taken from *Agent of Vega and Other Stories* (2001) and has suffered unknown amounts of editing.

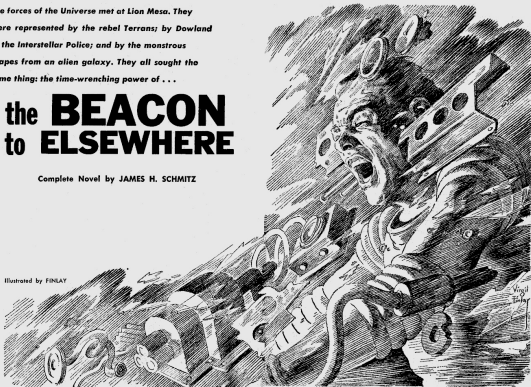


The forces of the Universe met at Lion Mesa. They were represented by the rebel Terrans; by Dowland of the Interstellar Police; and by the monstrous shapes from an alien galaxy. They all sought the same thing: the time-wrenching power of . . .

the **BEACON** to **ELSEWHERE**

Complete Novel by JAMES H. SCHMITZ

Illustrated by FINLAY



»

It didn't happen twice a year that Gustavus Robert Fry, Chief Commissioner of the Interstellar Police Authority, allotted more than an hour in his working day to any one appointment. However, nobody in the outer offices was surprised to learn that the chief expected to remain in conference until noon today, and was not to be disturbed before then. The visitor who had been ushered in to him—without benefit of appointment—was Howard Camhorn, the Overgovernment's Co-ordinator of Research. It was a meeting of political mastodons. Portentous events would be on the agenda.

Seated at the desk in his private office, Gus Fry, massive, strong-jawed, cold-eyed—looking precisely like the powerhouse, political and otherwise, which he was—did not feel entirely at ease. Howard Camhorn, sprawled in a chair half across the room from the Chief

Commissioner, might have passed for a middle-aged, moderately successful artist. He was lanky, sandy-haired, with a lazy smile, lazier gestures. But he was, by several degrees, the bigger vip of the two.

Camhorn said, "There's no question at all, of course, that the space transport your boys picked up is the one we're interested in. But is it absolutely certain that our Ym-400 is no longer on board?"

Fry shrugged. "It's certain that it isn't in the compartment where it was stored for the trip--and the locks to that compartment have been forced. It's possible that whoever removed the two Ym cases has concealed them in some other part of the ship. That would be easy to do, but... ."

Camhorn shook his head. "No," he said. "Nobody would benefit from that. I'm afraid we'll have to resign ourselves to the fact that the stuff has been taken."

Fry said, "It looks like it. The police search will go on until your own investigators get there, but there's no reason to believe anything will be found."

"The ship's course had been reset so that it was headed into unoccupied space?"

"Yes," said Fry. "It was only by a very improbable coincidence that an ipa boat happened to spot it. The transport's new course wouldn't have brought it anywhere near a traffic lane, inhabited planet, or normal patrol route. Three weeks later, when its fuel was exhausted, the planted explosives would have blown it up without a chance that the wreckage would ever be detected."

"How about the cargo? Have you heard about that? Was it otherwise intact?"

"As far as we can tell. The shippers will check everything in detail when the freighter gets back to port. But it's a good guess that the Overgovernment's Ym-400 is the only item missing."

Camhorn nodded. "A group which was planning to pick it up wouldn't

be very interested in ordinary loot. That seems to make it conclusive." He wrinkled his nose reflectively. "Modus operandi?" he asked.

"Two possibilities," Fry said. "They had themselves loaded aboard with the cargo, or they intercepted the transport en route and entered it in flight."

"Which do you like?"

"The first. In fact, the other is hardly a possibility. Even the ipa couldn't get aboard a modern automatic freighter between ports without setting off an explosion of alarms in every flight control station on its course. No such alarm was recorded. And there is no indication of a forcible entry."

"So our thieves had themselves loaded on," said Camhorn. "Now, Gus, I've always been under the impression that the check system which keeps stowaways out of the automatic transports was foolproof."

The ipa Chief shrugged. "It's been foolproof so far. But not because it was impossible to circumvent. It's simply that circumventing the check system would add up to so enormously expensive a proposition that the total cash value of a transport and its cargo wouldn't be worth the trouble. These people definitely were not considering expenses."

"Apparently not," Camhorn said. "So how did they get the Ym-400 off the ship?"

"They had a small boat loaded on board with them. That's a supposition, so far; they left very few traces of their activities. But it's the only way the thing could have been done. They had obtained exact information of the transport's plotted route and time schedule. At a calculated point, they picked up the two cases of Ym, rerouted the ship, timed and planted their explosives, disconnected the alarm system at the entry lock, and left in the boat. Naturally, another ship was moving along with the freighter by then, waiting to pick them up.

"That's all there was to it."

"You make it sound simple," said Camhorn.

"The difficulty," said Gus Fry, "would be in preparing such an operation. No matter how much money these people could lay on the line, they must have spent several months in making the necessary arrangements without once alerting the port authorities."

"They had enough time," Camhorn admitted reflectively. "Ym-400 has been shipped for a number of years in the same manner and over the same route."

"I've been wondering," Fry remarked, "why this manner of shipping it was selected."

Camhorn smiled briefly. "When was the last time an automatic transport was hijacked, Gus?"

"Fifty-seven years ago," Fry said. "And the method employed then wouldn't have worked on a modern transport, or under the present check system."

"Well, that's part of your answer. Automatic shipping risks have become negligible. The rest of the answer is that we've avoided too obviously elaborate safeguards for Ym-400. If we put it on a battleship each time it was moved, the technological espionage brethren would hear about it. Which means that everybody who might be interested would hear about it. And once the word got out, we'd start losing the stuff regardless of safeguards to people who'd be willing to work out for themselves just what made it so valuable to the Overgovernment. As it is, this is the first sample of Ym-400 to go astray in the thirty-two years we've had it."

"Two thirty-four kilogram cases," Fry said. "Is that a significant amount?"

"I'm afraid it's an extremely significant amount," Camhorn said wryly.

Fry hesitated, said, "There's something very odd about this,

Howard... ."

"What's that?"

"I had the definite impression a few hours ago that you were almost relieved to hear about the transport."

Camhorn studied him for a few seconds. "As a matter of fact," he said, "I was. Because of one thing. If this hadn't been obviously a criminal act, humanly engineered--if the transport, say, had simply blown up en route or vanished without giving an alarm... ."

"Vanished without giving an alarm?" Fry repeated slowly. "Without human intervention?"

"If," said Camhorn, "any least part of the Ym-400 it was carrying had been radioactive, I wouldn't have been surprised to learn something like that had happened. But, of course, the shipment was stable. And stable Ym-400 has shown no more disturbing potentialities to date than the equivalent amount of pig iron. If it ever develops them, the research programs connected with the substance will be indefinitely delayed. They may have to be abandoned." He gave Fry his lazy smile. "Does that explain my apparent relief, Gus?"

"More or less," Gus Fry said. "Would it be a calamity if those particular programs had to be abandoned?"

"The Overgovernment would consider it a calamity, yes."

"Why?"

"If and when," said Camhorn, "the bugs get worked out of Ym-400, it may ensure our future control of space against any foreseeable opposition."

Fry kept his face carefully expressionless.

"So, naturally," Camhorn went on, "we'd prefer to keep dissident groups from playing around with the substance, or becoming aware of its possibilities."

Fry said, "There seems to be at least one dissident group which has much more complete information about Ym-400 than, for example, the Interstellar Police Authority."

Camhorn shook his head. "We can't say how much they really knew, Gus. The theft might have been arranged as a speculative operation. There's enough loose money in large quantities around to make that quite possible."

Fry grunted. "Do you have any definite suspects?"

"A great many. Unfortunately, there seems to be at least some probability that the people involved won't turn out to be among them. However, those lists will provide an immediate starting point. They're being transferred to the ipa today."

"Thanks," Fry said sourly.

"I wouldn't do it if I didn't have to, Gus. Our Research investigators can't begin to cope with a number like that. They will cooperate with you closely, of course."

"Nobody else will," said Fry. "I've come to the conclusion that our current populations are the least cooperative people in the history of the race."

Camhorn nodded. "Naturally."

"Naturally? Why should they be? Most of them are a little short of living space--unless they're willing to put up with frontier conditions--but otherwise humanity's never had it so good. They're not repressed; they're babied along--nine-tenths of the time anyway. They do just about as they damn well please. Thirty percent of them won't turn out a stroke of honest work from the beginning of their lives to the end."

"True enough. And you've described an almost perfect setting for profound discontent. Which is being carefully maintained, by the way. We don't want humanity to go to sleep entirely just yet. Gus, how

much do you know personally about Ym-400?"

"Nothing," said Fry. "Now and then some rumor about it comes to the ipa's attention. Rumors of that kind go into our files as a matter of course. I see the files."

"Well, then," said Camhorn, "what rumors have you seen?"

"I can give you those," Fry said, "in a few sentences. Ym--or Ym-400--is an element rather recently discovered by the Overgovernment's scientists; within the past few decades. It has the property of 'transmuting space-time stresses'--that's the rumor, verbatim. In that respect, it has some unspecified association with Riemann space phenomena. It has been located in a star system which lies beyond the areas officially listed as explored, and which at present is heavily guarded by Overgovernment ships. In this system is an asteroid belt, constituting the remnants of a planet broken up in an earlier period by Ym action. And three," Fry added, grinning wolfishly, "I can even bring in a factual detail. I know that there is such a guarded system, and that it contains nothing but its star and the asteroid belt referred to. I could give you its location, but I'm sure you're familiar with it."

Camhorn nodded. "I am. Any other rumors?"

"I think that sums them up."

"Well," Camhorn said judiciously, "if the ipa is to be of much use to us in this investigation, it should be better informed than that. The rumors are interesting, though satisfactorily inaccurate. Ym-400, to begin with, is not a single element. It's a compound of several elements of the same series. The symbol attached to it is quite meaningless... ."

"For security reasons?"

"Of course. Now, with one notable exception, all elements in this series were discovered during the Overgovernment's investigation of Riemann space properties in the two intragalactic creation areas we have mapped to date. As you may recall, that program was initiated forty-five years ago. The elements we're talking about are

radioactive: half-life of up to an hour. It was suspected they had a connection with the very curious, apparently random distortions of space-time factors found in the creation areas, but their essential properties made it impossible to produce them in sufficient quantity for a sufficient length of time to conduct a meaningful examination.

"Ymir, the last element of this series, was not discovered in the same areas, or at the same time. It was located ten years later, in stable trace-quantities in the asteroid belt you've mentioned, and to date it has not been found anywhere else. Ymir is a freak. It is chemically very similar to the rest of the series and has an unstable structure. Theoretically, its presence as and where it was found was an impossibility. But it was recognized eventually that Ymir produces a force field which inhibits radioactivity. Until the field is interfered with the element is stable... ."

"What interferes with it?"

Camhorn grinned. "People. Until it's deliberately tampered with, Ymir is changeless--as far as we know. Furthermore it will, in compound, extend its inhibiting field effect instantaneously to three other elements of the same series. A very fortunate circumstance, because Ymir has been found only in minute amounts, and unknown factors still prevent its artificial production. The other three elements are produced readily, and since a very small proportion of Ymir retains them in stable--or pseudostable--form, they can be conserved indefinitely."

"*That's* the Ym-400 compound?" Fry asked.

"That's it."

Fry said thoughtfully, "Perhaps I should remind you, Howard, that this conversation is being recorded."

Camhorn nodded. "That's all right. Now that we know someone else is in possession of sixty-eight kilograms of Ym-400, we're confronted with radically altered circumstances. The loss incurred by the theft isn't important in itself. The Ymir component in such a quantity is

detectable almost only by its effects, and the other components can be produced at will.

"The question is how much the people who have the stolen compound in their hands actually know about it. We would prefer them to know several things. For example, up to a point Ym-400 is easily handled. It's a comparatively simple operation to reduce or restore the force field effect. The result is a controlled flow of radioactivity from the compound, or its cessation. Now, you've mentioned having heard that Ym-400 transmutes space-time stresses--"

Fry nodded.

"Well," Camhorn said, "as a matter of fact, that's exactly what it appears to do--as was surmised originally of the unstable elements in the series. The active compound transmutes space-time stresses into a new energy with theoretically predictable properties. Theoretically, for example, this new energy should again be completely controllable. Have you picked up any rumors of what our experiments with the substance were supposed to achieve?"

Fry said, "Yes. I forgot that. I've heard two alternate theories. One is that the end result will be an explosive of almost unimaginable violence. The other is that you're working to obtain a matter transmitter--possibly one with an interstellar range."

Camhorn nodded. "Potentially," he said, "Ym-400 is an extremely violent explosive. No question about it. The other speculation--it isn't actually too far-fetched--well, that would be the equivalent of instantaneous space-travel, wouldn't it?"

Fry shrugged. "I suppose so."

"However," Camhorn said, "we haven't transmitted even a speck of matter as yet. Not deliberately, at any rate. Do you know why, Gus?"

"No. How would I?"

"No rumors on that, eh? I'll tell you. Ym-400, when activated even in

microquantities, immediately initiates the most perverse, incalculable effects ever to confront an experimenter. There has been, flatly, no explanation for them. I've had ordinarily unimpressible physicists tell me with tears in their eyes that space-time is malevolently conscious of us, and of our attempts to manipulate it--that it delights in frustrating those attempts."

Gus Fry grinned sourly. "Perhaps they're right."

"As it happens," Camhorn observed, "the situation is very un-funny, Gus. Experiments with Ym-400 have, to date, produced *no* useful results--and have produced over eleven hundred casualties. Most of the latter were highly trained men and women, not easily replaced."

Fry studied him incredulously. "You say these accidents have not been explained?"

Camhorn shook his head. "If they were explicable after the event," he said, "very few of them would have happened in the first place. I assure you there's been nothing sloppy about the manner in which the project has been conducted, Gus. But as it stands today, it's a flop. If the stakes were less high, it would have been washed out ten years ago. And, as I said before, if there were reason to believe that the stable compound was involved in the disappearance of a space transport, we probably would postpone further operations indefinitely. One such occurrence would raise the risks to the intolerable level."

Fry grunted. "Is that what those accidents were like? Things--people--disappear?"

"Well ... some of them were of that general nature."

Fry cleared his throat. "Just tell me one more thing, Howard."

"What's that?"

"Has any part of what you've said so far been the truth?"

Camhorn hesitated an instant. "Gus," he said then, "can you erase your question and my reply from the recording?"

"Of course."

"Erase them, please. Then blank out our further conversation."

. . .

A few seconds later, Fry said, "All right. You're off the record."

"Most of what I told you was the truth," Camhorn said, leaning back in his chair. "Perhaps not all of it. And perhaps I haven't told you the whole truth. But we're out to spread some plausible rumors, Gus. We could not afford to get caught in obvious lies."

Fry reddened slowly. "You feel the Interstellar Police Authority will spread those rumors?"

"Of course it will. Be realistic, Gus. Naturally, you'll transmit the information I've given you only to qualified personnel. But there'll be leaks, and ... well, what better authentication can we have for a rumor than precisely such a source?"

"If you know of any potential leaks among the ipa's 'qualified personnel,'" Fry said, "I'd appreciate seeing the names."

"Don't be stuffy, Gus," Camhorn said affably. "We're not slandering the Authority. We're banking on the law of averages. As you've indicated, the ipa can't be expected to carry out this investigation unless it's given some clues to work on. We're giving it those clues. In the process, we expect to start the spread of certain rumors. That's all to the good."

"But what's the purpose?"

"I've told you that. Our criminals may or may not be caught as quickly as we'd like. The group actually in the know may be--probably is--quite small. But they should have a widespread organization, and they'll be alert for counteraction now. They certainly will get the

information we want them to have, whether it comes to them through the ipa or through some other channel; and that should be enough to keep them from committing any obvious stupidities. Meanwhile, we'll have avoided making the information public.

"We want to make sure they know--if they don't already know it--that Ym-400 is unpredictably dangerous. That leaves them with several choices of action. They can abandon those two thirty-four-kilogram cases, or simply keep them concealed until they obtain more complete information about the material. Considering the manner in which the theft was prepared and carried out, neither is a likely possibility. These people are not ignorant, and they aren't easily frightened--and they certainly have the resources to handle any expense factor."

Fry nodded.

"The probability is," Camhorn went on, "that they'll evaluate the warning contained in these rumors realistically, but proceed with experimentation--perhaps more cautiously than they would have done otherwise.

"Which is as much as we hope to accomplish. I've told you of the losses among our personnel. We have no real objection to seeing someone else attempt to pull a few chestnuts out of the fire for us. That's the secondary purpose of sacrificing some quite valid information. By the time we catch up with our friends, we expect the sacrifice will have been--in one way or another--to our advantage."

"And suppose," said Fry, "that their secret experiments with Ym-400 result in turning another planet into an asteroid cloud?"

"That's an extreme possibility," Camhorn said, "though it exists. The point is that it exists now whatever we choose to do about it. We can only attempt to minimize the risks."

"You'd still sooner catch them before they start playing around with the stuff?"

"Of course we would. But we're working against time there."

"How much time do we have before the thing gets critical?"

"Well," said Camhorn, "assume they've had at least four or five years to prepare for the day when they could bring a quantity of Ym-400 into their possession. They'll have made every necessary arrangement for concealed full-scale experimentation. But, unless they are utterly reckless, they still have to conduct a thorough preliminary investigation of the compound and its possibilities. That phase of the matter shouldn't be too dangerous, and it can't be concluded in less than six months."

Fry shook his head exasperatedly. "Six months!" he said. "We might get lucky and pick them up next week, Howard ... but there are eighteen planets and planet-class satellites at peak population levels, seventy-three space cities with a total of eight times the planetary populations, five Freeholder planets on each of which you could keep an army concealed indefinitely if you wanted to go to the trouble. Add in close to a hundred thousand splinter populations on semi-habitables, asteroids, spaceborne in fixed stations and mobile craft—we can't do it, Howard! Not in six months. We've already started putting anyone who might have the slightest connection with that space transport job through the strainer, and we'll get on your lists of suspects as soon as they're placed in our hands."

"But don't expect results in anything less than a year... ."

• • •

Fry, for once, had been too optimistic.

A year and a half went by. Endless series of more or less promising leads were run into the ground. The missing Ym-400 didn't turn up.

The ipa put out its nets again, and began to check over the possibilities that were left.

Seen from the air, Lion Mesa, in the southwest section of the American continent on the Freehold Planet of Terra, was a tilted, roughly triangular tableland, furred green with thick clusters of cedar and pinyon, scarred by outcroppings of naked rock. It was eight miles across at its widest and highest point, directly behind an upthrust mass of stone jutting toward the north and somewhat suggestive of the short lifted neck and heavy skull of a listening beast. Presumably it was this unusual formation which gave the mesa its name. From there the ground dropped to the south, narrowing gradually to the third point of the triangle. Near the southern tip in cleared ground were the only evidences of human habitation—half a dozen buildings of small to moderate size, handsomely patterned in wood and native stone. Directly adjoining one of the buildings was a large, massively fenced double corral. This was an experimental animal ranch; it and the mesa plus half a hundred square miles of surrounding wasteland and mountain were the private property of one Miguel Trelawney, Terrestrial Freeholder.

For the past twenty minutes, Frank Dowland—Lieutenant Frank Dowland, of the Solar Police Authority—had kept his grid-car moving slowly along the edges of a cloud bank west of the mesa, at an unobtrusive height above it. During that time, he was inspecting the ranch area in the beam of a high-powered hunting-scope. He had detected no activity, and the ranch had the general appearance of being temporarily deserted, which might be the case. Miguel Trelawney's present whereabouts were not known, and Lion Mesa was only one of the large number of places in which he was periodically to be found.

Dowland put the scope down finally, glanced at the sun which was within an hour of setting. He was a stocky man in his early thirties, strongly built, dressed in hunting clothes. The packed equipment in the grid-car, except for a few special items, was that of a collector of live game, the role regularly assumed by Dowland when at work on the planet.

The Freeholder Families traditionally resented any indication of Overgovernment authority on Terra, and would have been singularly uncordial to a Solar City police detective here, regardless of the nature of his mission. But the export of surplus native fauna was one of the forms of trade toward which they were tolerant. Moreover, they were hunting buffs themselves. Dowland ordinarily got along well enough with them.

He now opened a concealed compartment in the car's instrument panel, and brought out a set of pictures of Trelawney's ranch on the mesa, taken from an apparent distance of a few hundred yards above it. For some seconds, Dowland compared the depth photographs with the scene he had been observing. There appeared to have been no changes in any of the structures in the eight months since the pictures were taken. At least not above ground.

Dowland rubbed the side of his nose, scowling slightly. If the ranch really was deserted, it would be best to leave it alone for the time being and search elsewhere for Trelawney. To go down uninvited in the absence of the owner would be as much out of character for an experienced visitor on Terra as for a Freeholder. If observed at it—a remote possibility perhaps in this area, but the possibility was there—he could offer the excuse of a suspicion of engine trouble in the grid-car. The excuse would be good, once. He preferred to reserve it as a means of introducing himself to the Trelawneys when he caught up with them—either Miguel, the current head of the dwindled family, or Miguel's younger half-brother, Dr. Paul Trelawney. Neither rated as a serious suspect in the matter of the Overgovernment's missing Ym-400, but it had been a little difficult to find out what they had been doing with themselves during the past year and a half. Dowland's assignment was to find out, and to do it unobtrusively. Strictly routine.

. . .

Terra, in terms of the Ym search, hadn't seemed like too bad a bet at first. The Freeholders entertained an open grudge against the Overgovernment, which had restricted their nominally unclouded title

to the planet by somewhat underhanded legal means, when the principle of the Freehold Worlds was laid down. Essentially, the Families became the very highly paid caretakers of Terra. To Dowland, raised in the crowded tunnels of the system of artificial giant asteroids known as Solar City, the conservation of the natural resources of a living world looked like a good idea. The Terran Families were interested in conservation, but on their terms and under their control. The Overgovernment politely refused.

That was one part of it. The other was that numerous contentious factions in the space cities and on the so-called open worlds wanted to spill over on the Freeholder planets. Again the Overgovernment refused, and again it made sense to Dowland. But the Freeholders feared--perhaps with justification, so far as Dowland could tell--that political pressures would mount with each increase in excess population and eventually lead to such measures. Many of them, probably the majority, led by Anthony Brand Carter--Firebrand Carter, head of the largest and wealthiest of the Families--believed that the only safe solution was to arm the planet. They wanted heavy weapons, and enough of them: the right to build them, to man them and, if necessary, to use them to beat off encroaching groups. The Overgovernment pointed out that the possession and use of major implements of war was by law its own exclusive privilege. Litigation on the matter had gone on for decades, was periodically renewed by Carter and his associates. Meanwhile, many of Terra's sportsmen became members of an extremely able-bodied group called Carter's Troopers, and assiduously practiced the skills of battle with the means allowed them. Dowland and the Solar Police Authority knew the Troopers were crack shots, excellent fliers and horsemen, but the Overgovernment was not worrying about it at present.

Mr. Paul Trelawney, the younger of the brothers, had been a Trooper for two years while in his twenties, then had quarreled violently with Firebrand Carter, had left Terra to major in physics at the Overgovernment's universities, and presently received his degree. What he had done after that wasn't known. He appeared occasionally on Terra, might be here at present. Miguel, Paul's senior by almost twenty years, now in his early fifties, had also taken an interest in physics, attending an Overgovernment university a

quarter of a century earlier. Miguel's studies terminated before he obtained a degree, as a result of a difference of opinion with the president of the university, whom he challenged to a duel. The records of both brothers indicated, in Dowland's opinion, more than a trace of the megalomania not too uncommon among men with excessive wealth and no real claim to distinction. But, in spite of their choice of studies, there was nothing to link either Trelawney to the missing Ym. Mental brilliance might have made them suspect; but their i.q. readings, while definitely better than average--a number of notches above Dowland's own, for that matter--were not outstanding. Their scholastic performance had been of comparative quality. Miguel, on his return to Terra, had dropped physics in favor of experimental biology. The ranch on Lion Mesa was adapted to his hobby, which at the moment was directed to the production of a strain of gigantic wild hogs for hunting purposes. Presumably the breeding of bad-tempered tons of bacon on the hoof satisfied his urge to distinguish himself as a gentleman scientist. Aside from Paul's brief connection with Carter's Troopers neither brother had shown any interest in Terran politics.

. . .

Rather poor prospects, but Dowland's information was that after a year and a half the better prospects were regarded as nearly exhausted, and hadn't produced the slightest results, putting the various divisions of the Interstellar Police Authority in the discouraging position of now having to suspect almost anybody. If there was no sign of Miguel Trelawney's presence here by sundown, he decided, he would move on to the next check point. Trelawney's pets would be cared for by automatic machinery; it might be several weeks before their owner showed up to look them over.

His gaze shifted briefly around the plain out of which the mesa loomed. It was turbulent today; gusty winds shook the car and electric storms were boiling along the northern mountain ranges. Below, sand and dust whirled up the mesa's steep flanks. Picking up the hunting-scope again, Dowland began moving the visibeam almost at

random and with low magnification over the back of the tableland. Dense masses of trees swept past, shouldered aside here and there by wind-scarred rock. A thoroughly wild place. He brought the glasses back to the ranch area, suddenly checked them there... .

Somebody was in sight, moving toward the edge of the mesa nearest him. He caught a flash of something white. Centering carefully on the figure, Dowland turned on full magnification, and in the lenses, the image of a young woman appeared at closeup range.

She had come to a stop; and for an instant Dowland was startled to realize she was peering back at him through a pair of binoculars. But lacking the visibeam of the ipa, her glasses couldn't, of course, do much more than show her there was a grid-car up there. Now her free hand lifted the long white cloth it was holding, and began swinging it in swift, vigorous gestures through the air above her head.

In spite of the binoculars, Dowland was immediately sure of the woman's identity--having, in the past few days, studied a number of pictures of her. She was Jill Trelawney, the youngest of the three surviving members of the Trelawney Freeholders. Miguel and Paul were her uncles--and if she was here, one or the other of the men must certainly be here also.

It was obvious that she was signaling to the car. Dowland glanced at the communicator in the panel before him, saw it was turned on but registering no local calls. His eyes narrowed with speculation. This suddenly looked just a little bit interesting. If the Trelawneys were expecting a visitor but preferred not to address him over the open communication system, it indicated that they intended to be hard to find.

Which might mean a number of things of no interest at all to the ipa. But... .

Dowland took his police gun from the pocket of his hunting jacket, and began checking it by touch, as he swung the car's nose about toward the ranch and went slanting down toward the air. Either of the

brothers might decide to make trouble, particularly if they had something to conceal—but, at any rate, they couldn't claim he hadn't been invited down.

Picking up the girl in the scope again, he saw that she realized he was coming in. She had dropped the cloth but was still gazing up toward the car, her free hand shielding her eyes from the setting sun.

In the next instant, without the slightest preliminary warning, every instrument in the panel before Dowland went dead. Then the grid-car began to drop like a stone.

• • •

The world-wide gravity grid was Terra's general power source. It had been an idiotically expensive installation; actually, no other planet could have afforded it at present. Once installed, it was drawn on for idiotically minor services. There weren't enough human beings on Terra to begin to make a significant use of the grid.

But there were compensating features. The grid was esthetically unobtrusive, and available everywhere. It supplied power for anything from personal wrist watches on up through the giant docking machines at the spaceports. And it was reliable. There had been no power failures and no accidents connected with the grid recorded in its eighty years of operation.

That shining safety record, Dowland thought, manipulating the flight controls with desperate haste, might become seriously marred in something like three-quarters of a minute now. He'd be lucky to get down alive. And another thought was clamoring for a different kind of action with almost equal urgency—unusual and unexplained physical phenomena of any kind were one of the things the Ym searchers were alerted to look out for; and he'd certainly run into one of them here. He shot a glance down to his camouflaged wrist communicator. Just a few seconds to spare, and he could get a private-beam alarm in to the Solar Police Authority representative at

the Columbia spaceport.

He didn't have a few seconds to spare. The gird-car was a lousy glider--ponderous, sickeningly slow to respond. The rim of the mesa swayed up. If he missed that stretch of cleared ground around the Trelawney ranch, the car would either tear itself to pieces in the forest beyond or do a ditch into the piled rubble at the mesa's foot. He hauled back on the controls again, felt the car actually begin to rise for an instant--

. . .

"I'm sorry," Jill Trelawney was crying, running up the slope toward him. "I'm so terribly sorry. I tried to warn you. I simply didn't realize--are you hurt?"

Her face, Dowland thought, was probably no whiter than his own. The canopy had caved in around him, and a jagged chunk of engine was nestling in the passenger seat to his right. As he tried to stand up, a section of the plastic floorboard collapsed; his foot followed it through and struck solid ground. He worked himself out of the seat. The grid-car creaked tiredly and settled another six inches. Dowland shoved a piece of canopy aside and found he could straighten out.

He cleared his throat. "I don't think I'm hurt. Anyway, not much."

"Your face--it's bleeding!"

Dowland probed at a cut lip with his tongue and winced. "Didn't notice it happen ... a lot of stuff flying around there for a moment. Now, just what's going on?"

The girl swallowed nervously, staring at him. "The power's off."

"That I noticed." Something occurred to Dowland. "That's why you couldn't call me on the communicator."

"Yes. I... ."

"How long has it been off here?"

"Since this morning."

He looked at her thoughtfully, and a quick flush spread up into her face. "I know," she said. "It was terribly stupid of me to--to get you to come down. It just didn't occur to me that... ."

"It's all right," Dowland said. "I'm here now." She was very good-looking, though her face was strained at the moment. Strained and scared. "You could not know how far the failure area extended." He glanced over at the buildings. The crash of his landing hadn't brought anyone into sight. "You're not alone here, are you?"

"No." She hesitated, went on half apologetically, "I'm sure I should remember you, but I don't."

"Well, you wouldn't," Dowland said. "I'm not a Freeholder."

. . .

The flicker of reaction in her eyes brought a prickling to the hairs at the back of his neck. The thing looked hot, all right. He continued, "You just may have heard of me by name, though. Frank Dowland, of Dowland Animal Exports."

"Oh, yes." Apparently she did recognize the name. "I'm Jill Trelawney, Dowland. I ... there's been an accident. A bad one, I'm afraid."

"Another accident? What kind?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. Do you have a medical kit with you?"

"Of course. Who's hurt?"

"My uncle. Miguel Trelawney. He's up in the house."

"What's wrong with him?"

"That's what I don't know. Looks--I think he's terribly sick. In some way."

"How long has he been sick?"

She hesitated. "This morning."

"Since the time the grid-power went off?"

Jill looked startled. "Why, yes."

And that about cinched it, Dowland thought. He said, "You two were alone here?"

"No. I'm sure this all sounds very crazy, but--" She nodded at one of the buildings down the slope from them, a long wooden structure identified as a feed barn in Dowland's pictures of the ranch. "My other uncle, Paul Trelawney--he's locked up in there."

"Locked up?" Dowland repeated.

"Yes. There's a key to the door somewhere, but I can't find it."

"Would Miguel know where it is?"

"I think so."

"Then we'll try to get him conscious again at least long enough to tell us. You'd better get back to the house, Miss Trelawney. I'll dig out the kit. Be up there in a minute."

He watched the tall supple figure start back across the slope, shook his head a little, and turned to the wrecked car. She was either somewhat stupid, or being cagey with a non-Terran. The last seemed a little more likely. Too bad if she turned out to be involved with something like the Ym business, but that was out of his hands. He'd have to report immediately, and the Overgovernment specialists would be here in an hour. It wasn't his job.

He climbed cautiously back into the car. Out of sight of the house, he pressed a key on the wrist communicator, said, "Chris? This is Dowland. Emergency," and waited for the hum of response from the instrument.

There was no hum.

Half a minute later, he had the communicator off his wrist and opened. He couldn't remember having struck his wrist hard enough against anything to have damaged it, but the delicate mechanisms inside were a crystal shambles. There was a portable communicator packed in with his camping equipment. But it operated on grid power.

It looked like it was going to remain his job for a while, after all.

. . .

Miguel Trelawney, in Dowland's unvoiced opinion, was a man who was dying. He was big-boned and heavily muscled, but on the low couch in the living room he looked shrunken. Lead-colored skin and thready pulse. Internal bleeding at a guess—an informed layman's guess. Radiation burns.

Dowland looked over at the girl. She was disturbed and tense, but nowhere near hysteria. "We might bring him around," he said bluntly. "But it will take some hours at least. He's in bad shape."

Her hands, clasped together in her lap, went white around the knuckles. "Will he ... can you save... ."

Dowland shook his head. "I don't know if we can save him here. If we got him to one of your hospitals tonight, he should have a very good chance. But we can't do that—unless the grid-power cuts in again."

She said faintly, "What's happened to him?"

"Lady, that's fairly obvious. He's been ray-burned."

"Ray-burned? But how?"

"I wouldn't know." Dowland opened the medical kit, slid out several of the tiny containers, turned one of them over in his hand. He asked, "Where was he when you found him?"

"Lying outside the door of the lab."

"Lab?"

Jill Trelawney bit her lip. "The building I showed you."

"Where Paul Trelawney's locked up?"

"Yes. They call it a lab."

"Who are they?"

"Miguel and Paul."

"What kind of lab is it?" Dowland asked absently.

"I don't know. They're building something there. Some sort of a machine."

"Are your uncles scientists?"

"Yes." Her tone had begun to harden--a Freeholder lady rebuffing a non-Terran's prying.

Dowland said, "If we knew whether they had radiation suits in that lab... ."

"I believe they do."

He nodded. "That might account for Miguel."

He took a minute hypodermic syringe from the kit, inserted the needle through a penetration point on the container he had selected,

filled it slowly. Jill stirred uneasily, asked, "What are you giving him?"

Dowland glanced over at her. "I don't know exactly. The brand name's 'medic'. There are around thirty other names for what's probably the same preparation. They're all very popular wherever good doctors and good hospitals aren't readily available. I haven't run into medic on Terra, but I bring along my own supply."

"What will it do for him?"

"Well, as I understand it, as soon as I inject this into his arm, it will spread through his body and start looking things over. Medic appears to know what a healthy human body should be like. So it diagnoses what's wrong--cold symptoms, burned-out lung, hangover, broken ankle--and then tries to bring the situation back to normal."

. . .

He slid up Miguel Trelawney's sleeve, inserted the needle tip into the thick, flaccid biceps, slowly depressed the plunger. "Medic's supposed to be in the class of a virus--a very well-intentioned virus when it comes to human beings." He removed the needle, glanced at his watch. "Almost six-thirty... A hangover'd get knocked out in three minutes. But judging from the condition your uncle seems to be in, it might be four or five hours now before the stuff really begins to take hold with him. If it can bring him back to consciousness by itself, it probably won't happen much before morning. Might be earlier; but I don't think we should wait for that before trying to get your Uncle Paul out of the lab. If he hasn't come out on his own, he may be in the same shape as Miguel. Or worse."

Jill's face paled slightly. "Yes. I've been thinking of that."

Dowland stood looking down at her, chewing on his lower lip. "You know, Miss Trelawney, there's something very odd about the fact that you found Miguel lying outside the lab when the door was locked."

She nodded. "I know. I don't have any explanation for it."

"Isn't there a storeroom of some kind around--where they might be keeping radiation suits, for instance?"

"The ranch storehouse is the small square building just south of here. I went through it this morning looking for a key to the lab. There aren't any radiation suits there."

"You know what those suits look like?"

"Yes. I've worn them when taking part in attack drills."

"Would you recognize the lab key if you saw it?"

"Yes. Miguel showed me the one he usually carries with him." She got up, went over to the mantle above the fireplace, took down a circular wedge of metal, a half-inch thick, with smoothly beveled rim. She handed it to Dowland. "The key is very similar to this one, but at least three times as large."

Dowland hefted the object shook his head. "Lady, by the weight of it, this thing's metasteel. The stuff they use for bank vaults and the hulls of battleships. And it looks as if the door to your uncles' laboratory has an atomic lock because that's what this type of key is made for. Do you know if the building's lined with steel inside?"

"It might be. Miguel told me that it had been extremely expensive to build, that he had wanted to make sure no one could get into it while he was away."

"If it's built of metasteel, he's done just that," Dowland said. "And that makes it tough." He looked at the key in his hand. "What does this key fit into?"

"I don't know. But I'm sure there's no other door on the ranch that has an--an atomic lock. I found the key in Miguel's pocket this morning."

"Well, it's probably no good to us," Dowland said. "Now look, Miss Trelawney. I'm carrying a protection gun that can be stepped up to around six times the shock power of a heavy rifle slug. I'll try that out

at full charge on the lock to the lab, and then around the walls. But if it's all metasteel, shooting at it won't get us anywhere. Then we might make another search for that key. Or I could try getting down off the mesa to get help."

Jill looked doubtful. "There's no easy way down off the mesa even in daylight. And at night it would be worse."

Dowland said, "That part of it won't be too much of a problem. I brought mountaineering equipment along this trip—planned to pick up a Marco Polo ram and a few ewes—piton gun, clamp pitons, half-mile of magnetic rope; the works. Question is, how much good will it do? I've got a camp communicator, but it's grid-powered, and we don't know how far the power failure extends around here at ground level. Is there anyone down in the plain we could contact? They might have horses."

She shook her head. "I would have heard of that. You could wander around there for weeks before you were seen."

Dowland was silent a moment. "Well," he said, "it should be worth a try if we can't accomplish anything within another few hours. Judging from my car's position when its power went off, it shouldn't really be more than a ten-mile hike from the bottom of the mesa before I can start using the communicator. But, of course, it will take up a lot of time. So we'll see what we can do here first."

He slipped his jacket on. "You'd better stay with your uncle, Miss Trelawney. I—"

He interrupted himself. An unearthly din had begun suddenly outside the house—whistling squeals, then an angry ear-shattering noise somewhere between a howl and a roar. The girl started, then smiled nervously. Dowland asked, "What is that?"

"Miguel's pigs. I expect they're simply hungry. The feeding equipment in the animal house isn't operating either, of course."

"Pigs? I've heard pigs make a racket, but never anything like that."

"These," said Jill, "are rather large. My uncle is interested in experimental breeding. I understand the biggest tusker weighs nearly two tons. They're alarming beasts. Miguel's the only one who can get close to the boar."

. . .

Outside it was early evening, still light, but Dowland went first to the wrecked grid-car to get a flashlight. He'd need it during the night, might even need it immediately if he found he could force an entry into the laboratory. In that case--if the building wasn't metasteel after all--he probably would find no Ym inside it. Which, Dowland admitted to himself, would be entirely all right with him.

But he was reasonably certain it was there. The Overgovernment's instructions about what to watch for remained annoyingly indefinite, but uniformly they stressed the unusual, in particular when associated with the disastrous. And so far, that described the situation here. The large and uncomfortable question was what kind of disaster might be about to erupt next.

There were other questions, somewhat too many of them at the moment. But the one he wanted answered immediately concerned Jill Trelawney's role. There was a guaranteed way of getting the information from her, but he had to be sure she wasn't as innocent as she acted before resorting to it. At the very least, he had to establish that the activities in the laboratory constituted some serious violation of Overgovernment law--even if not directly connected with Ym--and that the girl knew about it. Otherwise, the whole present pattern of the Ym-400 search on Terra might become very obvious to all interested parties.

He thought he had a method of forcing Jill's hand. If she had guilty knowledge, she might consider a non-Terran animal trader, who'd just happened to drop in, literally, a convenient tool to use in this emergency. She wanted to get help, too, though not from the Solar Police Authority. The Trelawneys couldn't possibly be alone in this

thing.

But she couldn't, if guilty, take the chance of trying to make use of an Overgovernment cop. A policeman wouldn't be here at this particular moment by accident. There was some risk in revealing himself--she might react too hastily--but not much risk, Dowland thought. From what he'd seen of her, she'd use her head. She'd make sure of him.

The uproar from the animal building lessened as he went back across the slope to the entrance of the lab. Miguel's beasts might have caught his footsteps, and started to listen to see if he was coming in. The outer door to the lab--a frame of the weather-proofed wood that covered the building--stood slightly open. Dowland pulled it back, looked for a moment at the slab of metasteel behind it, and at the circular depression in the slab which was the atomic lock.

In character, so far. Three windows at the back of the house where he had left Jill Trelawney with Miguel overlooked the lab area. Guilty or not, she'd be watching him from behind one of those windows, though she mightn't have come to any conclusions about him as yet. The reference to his "protection" gun had been a definite giveaway; he'd described an ipa police automatic, and that was a weapon civilians didn't carry--or didn't mention to strangers if they happened to carry them.

But a Freeholder lady might not know about that.

She couldn't avoid noticing the implications of an ipa antiradiation field... .

. . .

Dowland moved thirty steps back from the door, took out his gun, and pressed a stud on the side of his belt. Immediately, a faint blue glow appeared about him. Not too pronounced a glow even on the darkening slope, but quite visible to anyone watching from one of the windows. He took a deep breath, sucking air in through the minor

hampering effect of the field.

The rest was a matter of carrying through with the act. He'd known from the instant of looking at the door that he was wasting his fire on metasteel. But he slammed a few shots into the five-inch target of the lock, then worked his way methodically about the building, watching the weatherproofing shatter away from an unmarred silvery surface beneath. The gun made very little noise, but Miguel's hogs were screaming themselves hoarse again by the time he was finished.

Dowland switched off the ar field, and went back to the house. When he came along the short entrance hall, she was waiting for him, standing half across the living room, hands clasped behind her back. She looked at him questioningly.

"No luck, Dowland?"

Dowland shook his head. "Not a bit." He started to shrug the jacket from his shoulders, saw her dart the gun out from behind her, and turned his left hand slightly, squeezing down on the black elastic capsule he was holding between thumb and forefinger. Jill probably never noticed the motion, certainly did not see or feel the tiny needle that flashed from the capsule and buried itself in the front of her thigh. Shocked bewilderment showed for an instant on her face; then her knees gave way, the gun dropped from her hand. She went down slowly, turned over on her side on the thick carpet, and lay still.

Well, Dowland thought, he had his proof... .

Jill Trelawney opened her eyes again about five minutes later. She made a brief effort to get out of the deep armchair in which she found herself, then gave that up. The dark blue eyes fastened on Dowland, standing before the chair. He saw alarm and anger in them; then a cold watchfulness.



THE BEACON TO ELSEWHERE

"What did you do?" she asked huskily.

"I shot first," Dowland said. "It seemed like a good idea."

Her glance shifted to Miguel on the couch across the room.

"How long was I unconscious?"

"Just a few minutes."

"And why... ." She hesitated.

"Why are you feeling so weak? You've absorbed a shot of a special little drug, Miss Trelawney. It does two things that are very useful under certain circumstances. One of them is that it keeps the recipient from carrying out any sudden or vigorous action. You might, for example, be able to get out of that chair if you tried hard enough.

"But you'd find yourself lying on the carpet then. Perhaps you'd be able to get up on your hands and knees. You might even start crawling from the room--but you'd do it very slowly."

Dowland paused. "And the other thing the drug does is to put the person into an agreeable frame of mind, even when he'd rather not be agreeable. He becomes entirely cooperative. For example, you'll find yourself quite willing to answer questions I ask."

"So you *are* a police investigator," she said evenly.

"That's right." Dowland swung another chair around beside him, and sat down facing her. "Let's not waste any more time, Miss Trelawney. Were you going to shoot me just now?"

She looked briefly surprised.

"No," she said. "Not unless you forced me to it. I was going to disarm you and lock you in a cellar downstairs. You would have been safe there as long as was necessary."

"How long would that be?"

"Until I get help."

"Help from whom?"

Angry red flared about Jill's cheekbones. "This is incredible!" she said softly. "Help from Carter."

"Firebrand Carter?" Dowland asked.

"Yes."

"He's associated with your uncles?"

"Yes."

"Who heads the group?"

"Miguel and Carter head it together. They're very close friends."

"And who else is in it--besides Paul and yourself?"

She shook her head. "There must be quite a few people in it, but I don't know their names. We feel it's best if we know as little as possible about one another at present."

"I see. But they're all Terran Freeholders?"

"Yes, of course."

"How did you happen to be told about Carter?"

"In case of an emergency here, I'm to contact him on a tight-beam number."

"And just what," Dowland asked, "have your uncles been doing here?"

"Building a machine that will enable then to move back through time."

"With the help of Ym-400?"

"Yes."

. . .

Dowland stared at her thoughtfully, feeling a little chilled. She

believed it, of course; she was incapable of lying now. But he didn't believe it. He'd heard that some Overgovernment scientists considered time-travel to be possible. It was a concept that simply had no reality for him.

But he thought of the rumors about Ym--and of Miguel found lying inexplicably outside the laboratory building. He asked carefully, "Have they completed the machine?"

"Yes. They were making the first full-scale test of it this morning--and they must have been at least partly successful."

"Because of Miguel?"

"Yes."

"You feel," Dowland said, "that Miguel first went somewhere else--or somewhen else, let's say--and then came back and wound up a little bit away from where he'd started?"

"Yes."

"Any idea of how he was hurt?"

The girl shook her head. "The grid-power failure shows there was an accident of some kind, of course. But I can't imagine what it was."

"What about Paul? Do you think he's still in the lab?"

"Not unless he's also injured--or dead."

Dowland felt the chill again. "You think he may be in some other time at this moment?"

"Yes."

"And that he'll be back?"

"Yes."

"Can you describe that machine?" he asked.

"No. I've never seen the plans, and wouldn't understand them if I did. And I've never been inside the lab."

"I see. Do you have any reason, aside from the way Miguel reappeared, to think that the test was a partial success?"

"Yes. At three different times since this morning I've heard the sounds of a river flowing under the house."

"You heard what?" Dowland said.

"A river flowing under the house. The noises were quite unmistakable. They lasted for about thirty minutes on each occasion."

"What would that indicate?" he asked.

"Well, obviously ... this time period and another one--the one in which that river flows--have drawn close to each other. But the contact is impermanent or imperfect at present."

"Is that the way the machine is supposed to operate?"

"I don't know how the machine is supposed to operate," Jill Trelawney said. "But that's what seems to have happened."

Dowland studied her face for a moment. "All right," he said then, "let's leave it for now. Who developed this machine?"

"Miguel did. Paul helped, in the later stages. Others have helped with specific details--I don't know who those other people were. But essentially it was Miguel's project. He's been working on it for almost twenty years."

And that simply couldn't be true. Unless... .

"Miss Trelawney," Dowland said, "do you know what Miguel's i.q. reading is?"

"Of course. It's 192."

"And Paul's?"

"189." She smiled. "You're going to ask whether they faked lower levels when they were tested by the university authorities. Yes, they did. This thing has been prepared for a long time, Dowland."

"What's your own i.q., Miss Trelawney?"

"181."

. . .

Her dossier i.q., based on records of her known activities and behavior, was an estimated 128. The Freeholders did seem to have planned very thoroughly for the success of this operation.

"Do you know who hijacked the Ym-400?" Dowland asked.

"Yes. Paul arranged for that."

"Have you seen the stuff yourself?"

"I have. Two small cases of blue ingots. A very dark blue. Individually, the ingots appear to be quite heavy, though they aren't very large."

That described exactly what the Overgovernment was looking for. Dowland asked, "How much of it is in the laboratory?"

"It's all there."

He felt his scalp crawling. "All of it! Haven't your uncles heard that Ym is an incredibly dangerous thing to play around with?"

"Of course. But Miguel examined it very carefully after it was obtained. If reasonable precautions are taken, there is no way in which it can become dangerous. The conclusion was that the Overgovernment has spread rumors as a bluff, to try to prevent the Ym from being used."

"What's happened around here," Dowland said, "might indicate it wasn't a bluff."

"You're jumping to conclusions, Dowland. A great many other things may have gone wrong."

"Perhaps. But an i.q. of 136 keeps telling me that we're in considerable danger at the moment."

Jill nodded. "That's very probably true."

"Then how about giving me your full cooperation until we--you, I, your uncles--are all safely out of this?"

"At the moment," Jill observed, "I don't appear to have a choice in the matter."

"I don't mean that. The drug will wear off in a few hours. You'll be able to move around freely again, and whether you cooperate or not will depend on you. How will you feel about it then?"

"That depends," Jill said, "on whether we have reached an agreement."

"Agreement about what?"

"A price for your silence, and for any assistance you can give in keeping things quiet. You can, of course, set the price as high as you wish. Terra will meet it."

Dowland stared at her, somewhat astounded. It was as cold-blooded an attempt at bargaining as he'd run into, considering the circumstances. And--considering an i.q. of 181--it seemed rather unrealistic. "Miss Trelawney," he said, "the only thing silence might get me is a twenty-year stretch in an ipa pen. I'm not quite that foolish."

"You're also not aware of the true situation."

"All right," Dowland said, "what is it?"

"Miguel and Paul have earned the right to carry out the first of these tests. They may not complete it. But duplicates of their machine in the laboratory are concealed about the planet, waiting to be put into action by other teams of Freeholder scientists. You see? The tests will be continued until any problems connected with shifting back through time are recognized and overcome."

Dowland said, "Then why is the entire haul of Ym stacked away in the laboratory here?"

"Because that's where it's to be used at present. You still don't understand the extent of this operation, Dowland. If we need more of the Overgovernment's Ym, we'll simply take it. It can be done at any time. The only way the Overgovernment could really prevent future raids would be by destroying its supplies of Ym-400. And it isn't going to do that—at least not before we've obtained as much as we can use."

half way

As far as his own information went, she could be right, Dowland thought. He said, "So supposing some Freeholder scientists do succeed eventually in traveling back in time. What will that accomplish?"

"Everything we want, of course," Jill said. "There'll be no more reason to conceal our activities--and we'll have *time*. As much time as we need. Thirty or fifty years perhaps. Scientific centers and automatic factories will be set up in the past, and eventually the factories will be turning out weapons superior to anything the Overgovernment has. And then the weapons will come to the present--to *this* present, Dowland. Within a year from now, Terra will have become a heavily armed world--overnight. There'll be no more talk then of forcing us to remain under Overgovernment rule. Or of making Terra another Open Planet... ."

Theoretically, Dowland could see that such a plan might work. With the time to do it in, and the resources of a world at the Freeholders' disposal ... and there would be nothing to keep them from taking back spaceships and mining the asteroids. For a moment, while Jill Trelawney was talking, she had made it sound almost plausible.

Only for a moment. She was, of course, telling the truth as she knew it. They were up to something very dangerous--and very illegal--here, whatever it was, and they'd spread the time travel idea around among the lesser members of the group to help keep the real purpose concealed. He said, "Just how far back in time are they planning to go, Miss Trelawney?"

"Six hundred thousand years. The period is regarded as particularly suitable for what is being planned."

Six hundred thousand years. Nothing half-hearted about the Freeholders, Dowland thought sardonically, even as to the size of the lies they put out. "When you waved me in here this evening," he said. "I had the impression you were expecting someone else. Was I

right?"

"Yes. But I wasn't waving you in, Dowland. I was attempting to wave you off. If you'd been the man I thought it was, you would have realized it... . Have you considered my suggestion?"

"About selling out to the Freeholders?"

"If you wish to call it that."

"Miss Trelawney," Dowland said amiably, "if I did sell out, would you admire me for it?"

Her cheeks flushed. "No. You'd be despicable, of course."

Dowland nodded. "That's one thing we agree on. Now, just who was this man you were expecting, and just why were you expecting him?"

The girl's lips twisted reluctantly for a moment; then words broke out again. "Carter is to send a man to the ranch with some pieces of equipment. The equipment either was unloaded at Columbia spaceport this afternoon, or will be, early tomorrow morning. I thought you were the messenger. Strange grid-cars don't come through this area more than once every few weeks. If you'd been the man, you would already have attempted to call our house communicator by the time I saw you... ."

"To make sure the coast was clear before coming in with odd-looking equipment."

"Yes. You would then have reported to Carter that there was no answer, which would have resulted in an immediate investigation. I was attempting to warn the messenger that he shouldn't come closer, that something was seriously wrong here."

Dowland reflected, nodded. "That would have worked—if I'd been the man. And now it seems it's a good thing I inquired about this, Miss Trelawney. Because the messenger actually may have arrived this evening, received no answer from the ranch, reported the fact, and gone away again—mightn't he?"

"Yes, that may have happened." Her eyes were furious with frustration.

"And what would Carter do then?"

"He would rush a few squads of Troopers here to investigate."

"Hedgehopping," Dowland nodded, "in approved Trooper style to avoid detection. They hit the power-failure area, and the first few cars crash. They report the matter. What would happen then, Miss Trelawney?"

"Damn you, Dowland. They'd scout around Lion Mesa to see how close they could get by air. Carter would have horses and climbing equipment flown in to that point, and they'd continue on horseback."

. . .

There were other methods, Dowland thought. Parachutes, gliders--they could even try ditching a few cars on the mesa as he'd done. He considered, and mentally shook his head. Aside from the difficulties, the Troopers would be warned to avoid spectacular stunts in the vicinity of the mesa. They'd come exactly as she'd said. It was a completely unobtrusive form of approach, even for a large body of men, and it would still get them here fast.

He said, "Well, let's suppose all that has happened. Carter's Troopers are on their way here at this minute, riding pell-mell. Giving them every break, what's the earliest moment we can expect them to show up?"

She said, "Not before morning."

"I'd figured it at perhaps two hours before sunrise," Dowland said. "What would hold them up?"

"They can't climb the mesa at any point near the ranch by night. A

descent might be possible, but even that would be difficult and dangerous. And they'll be carrying repair equipment to take care of whatever's gone wrong. So they'll have to come up the northern end, where it isn't so steep."

"And then," Dowland said, "they still have to come down across the mesa on foot. Makes sense. And, of course, that messenger actually may not get here before tomorrow. If he comes then, at what time would he arrive?"

She shrugged. "Before noon. The hour wasn't specified."

"In any case," Dowland said, "you were figuring on stalling me around here until Carter's boys turned up. Then you realized I must be an Overgovernment man, and decided it would be too dangerous to allow me to prowl about the ranch until help came."

Jill nodded.

Dowland considered her reflectively. "You understand, I believe, that unless I can somehow get word to the Solar Police Authority within the next few hours, Miguel's injuries may very well kill him? And that if I could get word out, an spa jet would have him in the nearest hospital ten minutes later?"

"I understand both those things, Dowland," she said. "But I also know that Miguel would not choose to have his life saved at the cost of exposing our plans."

Dowland shrugged. "Very well... . Now, were the things that happened before I got here as you've described them?"

"Yes."

"You know of no way to get into that laboratory at present?"

"Not unless you can find the key to the door."

"That key should be around this immediate area?"

"It should be," she said, "but I haven't been able to find it."

"No further ideas about that?"

"None."

Dowland was silent a moment. "Miss Trelawney," is there anything else that might be of importance here that you still have not told me?"

Her eyes studied him coldly. "Perhaps one thing... ."

"And what's that?"

"If you had been willing to be bribed," Jill Trelawney said, "I should have asked the Troopers to shoot you."

. . .

There was a lady, Dowland was thinking a few minutes later, who was likely to be something of a problem to any man. However, she wouldn't be his problem for a considerable number of hours now. She had swallowed the sleep tablet he had given her without any trouble. After the drug wore off, the tablet would keep her quiet till around dawn.

He stood looking about the wind-swept darkened slopes of the ranch area. Clouds were moving past in the sky, but there would be intermittent moonlight. The conditions weren't too bad for the search he had in mind. There had to be a concealed storeroom about the place somewhere, in which the Trelawneys would keep assorted stuff connected with their secret work which they didn't want to have cluttering up the lab. Including, very likely, any spare keys to the lab. At a guess, neither of the brothers would have wanted Jill at Lion Mesa during this crucial and dangerous stage of the project. But they probably were used to letting their beautiful and headstrong niece do as she wanted. But they needn't have mentioned things like the storeroom to her. If he could keep his mind slightly off the fact that within a hundred yards or so of him there were sixty-eight kilograms

of Ym-400--with an unspecified amount of it at present in its horrendous radioactive state--he should stand a fairly good chance of finding the storeroom.

And in that case, the half-inch atomic key Jill Trelawney had showed him, and which was at the moment weighing down his coat pocket, probably would turn out to be exactly what he needed to get into it.

He located the place just under an hour later. It was a matter partly of observation, partly of remembering a remark Jill had made. The building which housed the giant hogs adjoined a corral three times its size. Corral and building were divided into two sections, the larger one harboring six sows. The single boar was in the other. A spider web of gangways led about above the huge stalls. It was the wall between building and corral which had drawn Dowland's attention by the fact that a little calculating indicated it was something like a yard thicker than was necessary.

He brought a dozen campfire sticks over from the grid-car and spaced them down the central gangway of the building, then deferred further inspection long enough to locate and trip the automatic feeding mechanisms. The hungry animal thunder which had greeted him at his entry ebbed away as they ate furiously and he studied them. They weren't the grotesque monstrosities he had expected but massive, sculptured giants with the quick, freewheeling agility of a rhinoceros, sand-colored, with wickedly intelligent eyes. There wasn't much question they'd make exciting game for anyone who enjoyed a touch of personal danger in the hunt.

The danger was more obviously there in the boar. The brute's eight hundred or so pounds of weight above that of the average of his prospective harem would not be significant when pitted against an opponent as physically inferior as a human being. His attitude might. The sows filed out into the corral after they had eaten what the feeding machine had thrown into them. The boar remained, watching Dowland on the gangway above him from the corner of one eye. The eye reflected no gratitude for the feeding. It was red-rimmed and angry. The jaw worked with a continuous chewing motion. There was a fringe of foam along the mouth.

Jill Trelawney had mentioned that no one but Miguel could come near the boar.

Dowland could believe it. A small steel ladder led down from the gangway into the brute's stall. Dowland reached into his pocket and brought out the ipa gun. No sportsman would have considered using it against an animal. But this wasn't sport. He started down the ladder.

• • •

The boar stood motionless, watching him. Dowland stopped at the foot of the ladder. After a moment, he took a step forward. The boar pivoted and came thundering across the floor of the stall, head low. The gun made its soft, heavy sound, and Dowland leaped aside. The huge body that slammed into the far wall behind him was dead before it struck, nearly headless. He went on to the thick dividing wall between stall and yard.

The lock to the storeroom door was on the inner side of the wall, concealed by the planking but not too difficult to find. Dowland inserted the key, twisted it into position, felt a slight click, and stepped back as the door began to swing out toward him.

The storeroom contained the general kind of paraphernalia he had expected to find, including three antiradiation suits. It took Dowland twenty minutes to convince himself that the one thing it definitely did not contain in any obvious manner was a key to the laboratory. Appropriate detection instruments might have disclosed it somewhere, but he didn't have them.

The fact was dismaying because it ended his hopes of finding the key. It would take most of the night to make a thorough search of the various ranch buildings, and at best there would be an even chance of discovering the key in the process. Wherever it was, it must be carefully concealed. If Miguel regained consciousness, the information could be forced from him, but it wasn't too likely that the

older Trelawney ever would wake up again.

Dowland picked up two of the three ar suits, folded them over his arm, stood, still hesitant, glancing up and down the long, narrow space of the storeroom, half aware that he was hoping now some magical intuition might point out the location of the key to him at the last second. If he could get into the laboratory, he was reasonably sure he could puzzle out the mechanisms that directed the shift of Ym into radioactivity, and shut them down. A machine was a machine, after all. Then, with the Ym interference eliminated, grid power should be available again, and... .

Dowland glanced at his watch again, shook his head. No point in considering it—he couldn't get into the laboratory. An hour and a half had gone to no purpose. Hunting for the key had looked like a good gamble, the quickest and therefore least dangerous method of solving the whole awesome problem. But it hadn't worked out; and what was left was to work down the side of Lion Mesa, and start hiking out across the desert. With luck, he'd find the communicator start picking up grid power again around dawn—if the Ym didn't cut loose with further unpredictable and much more disastrous "phenomena" before then. Unsatisfactorily vague as the available information had been, it implied that what had happened around here was still, so far, on a very mild level. The Trelawneys, in spite of their confidence that the Overgovernment was bluffing, that Ym was harmless if properly handled, might have had the good sense to work with only the most minute quantities to begin with.

. . .

He left the storeroom door open, turned off the whiter glowing campfire sticks, and took them, with the ar suits, back to the house with him. The living room had become almost completely dark. Uncle and niece were where he had left them. Dowland worked for a minute or two to release the automatic shutters over the single wide window; they came down into position then with a sudden thud which shook the room but failed to arouse the Trelawneys. Dowland relit

one of the sticks and dropped it into the fireplace. The room filled with clear light.

He stacked the other stick against the wall, laid the ar suits over the back of a chair. He had considered getting the Trelawneys into them as a safety measure against whatever might happen before the matter was over, but had dropped the idea again. It would be questionable protection. The antiradiation field was maintained automatically while a suit was worn, and it impeded breathing just enough to have occasionally suffocated an unconscious wearer. Jill would discover the suits when she woke up and could use her own judgment about them.

Dowland was coming back from the grid-car with his mountaineering harness and portable communicator when the hogs began to scream again. He stopped, startled. There was an odd and disturbing quality to the racket this time—even more piercing than before—and, unless he was mistaken, the huge animals were in a sudden panic about something. Next, he heard them slamming against the sides of the corral, apparently trying to break out of it. His heart started to pound with instinctive alarms. Should he go down and investigate? Then, before he could decide, he heard through the din of the hogs, swelling gradually to almost match those incredible shrieks in volume, another sound. For a moment, something seemed to shut off Dowland's listening to the rumble and roar of a rushing, turbulent mass of water—and his ears told him it was passing by beneath him.

. . .

It might have been almost two minutes later before Dowland began to think clearly again. He had reached the house at a dead run—a senseless flight reaction under the circumstances, not far from complete panic. In the darkness outside, the mesa had seemed to sway and tilt, treacherous footing over the eerie booming of a river which had rolled through a long-dead past. In those seconds Dowland hadn't thought to question Jill Trelawney's story about a machine that brought about shifts in time. His senses seemed to

have as much evidence to support it as anyone could demand.

Back in the house, though the thundering disturbance continued, that conviction rapidly faded. He could close his eyes and immediately have the feeling of being on an unstable bridge above the swirls of some giant current. He could open them again and tell himself that Ym-400 had a reputation for freakish effects--and that this specific effect, at any rate, should not be very harmful since Jill had reported it as having occurred on three separate occasions during the preceding day. To speak of such a commotion as being only the sound of a "river flowing under the house" seemed to approach the outrageous in understatement; but Jill Trelawney had turned out to be an unusual young person all around.

She and her uncle hadn't stirred, but Dowland knew that their presence in the room steadied him. He knew, too, that, whatever happened next, he couldn't allow himself to be rattled into blind fright again. The situation was dangerous enough. If he let his nerves stampede him, he would find himself unable to take any effective action.

He went over deliberately to the mountaineering harness he had dropped when he entered the lighted room, and began to check through the equipment. He intended to carry, in addition, only the communicator, the ipa gun, a canteen of water, and a small flashlight; and he would abandon the harness and its items at the foot of the mesa. There were two hunting rifles in the car, with a vastly better range than the handgun; but a rifle would slow him down and would make very little real difference if he had the bad luck to run into Carter's Troopers in the desert.

Somewhat to his surprise, the underground tumult appeared to be growing fainter before he had concluded his inspection. Dowland paused to listen, and within a few seconds there was no more doubt about it. Jill had said it had gone on for half an hour on each of the previous occasions; but Dowland's watch confirmed that the present disturbance was subsiding rapidly after less than ten minutes. By the time he stood up, snapped on the harness and shrugged it into position, it had become almost inaudible.

Which might be a good sign, or a bad one, or without particular significance of any kind. He couldn't know, and he'd probably be better off if he didn't start thinking too much about it. He turned for a last survey of the room before setting out, and discovered that Miguel Trelawney had opened his eyes and was looking at him.

• • •

Dowland stood stockstill for a moment, hardly daring to believe it. Then, quietly, he unbuckled the harness again, and let it down to the floor. The eyes of the big man on the couch seemed to follow the motion, then shifted slowly up toward the ceiling of the room, and closed again.

"Trelawney," Dowland said softly, without moving.

Miguel Trelawney made a deep, sighing sound, turned on his side and lay quiet, his back now to Dowland. A few seconds later, Dowland was looking down at him from the other side of the couch.

It might have been only a momentary thing, a brief advantage medic had gained in its invisible struggle with a process which would still end in death. But he couldn't be sure. The eyes remained closed, the pulse was weak and unsteady. Dowland thought of injecting a stimulant into Trelawney, and discarded the idea immediately. Medic manufactured its own stimulants as required, counteracted any others. Even the effects of the quiz-drug would be reduced by it, but not enough to keep Dowland from getting any answer he wanted--provided Trelawney's mind cleared for only three or four minutes of lucidity.

There was no way of knowing when such a period of lucidity might develop. But now that the man had appeared to awaken, the possibility that it would happen within the next hour or two became a very definite one.

Dowland stood briefly in scowling indecision. The next hour or two

could also see him nearly down the side of the mesa, depending on the difficulties of the descent ... but there was no real choice. It was a gamble either way again; if Trelawney didn't awaken, the other gamble remained... . How long, at most, could he afford to delay?

Leaving Ym out of the calculation, since it couldn't be calculated, he had only the arrival of the Freeholder Troopers to consider. There was no apparent possibility that any sizable party could appear before daybreak, but there was an even chance they would be there around that time. When they came, he must either be in communication with the Solar Police Authority or far enough away from Lion Mesa to be able to avoid detection... .

Four hours should be enough to give him a reasonable safety margin. He had till midnight, or a little later.

Dowland pulled a chair up to the side of the couch and sat down. The night wasn't quiet.

The hogs squalled occasionally, and the wind still seemed to be rising. In spite of his efforts to avoid unsettling lines of thought, the nightmarish quality of the situation on the mesa kept returning to his mind and wasn't easily dismissed. The past--the past of over half a million years ago--had moved close to the present tonight... . That was the stubborn, illogical feeling--and fear--which he couldn't entirely shake off.

. . .

Half an hour later, Miguel Trelawney began breathing uneasily, then stirred about, but lapsed again within seconds into immobile unconsciousness.

Dowland resumed his waiting.

His watch had just told him it was shortly before eleven-thirty when he heard the shots. They were three shots--clear, closely spaced cracks of sound, coming from a considerable distance away. Dowland was

out of his chair with the second one, halfway down the dark entry hall as he heard the third. He opened the door at the end of the hall just wide enough to slip through, moved out quickly, and closed the door behind him to keep the glow of light from the living room from showing outside.

As the door snapped shut, there were three more shots. A hunting rifle. Perhaps two miles to the north... .

. . .

Dowland stood staring up toward the wind-tossed line of the forest above the ranch area. Who was up there on the mesa--and why the shooting? Had the Troopers managed to get some men in by air? What would they be firing at?

Signal shots, he thought then. And a signal to the ranch, in that case... . Signaling what?

With that, another thought came, so abruptly and convincingly that it sent a chill through him.

Doctor Paul Trelawney... .

Paul Trelawney, not in the laboratory building--as Jill had surmised. Gone elsewhere, now returned. And, like his brother, returned to a point other than the one from which he had left.

A man exhausted and not sure of where he was on the big tableland, an injured man--or perhaps one weakened by radiation sickness--such a man would fire a gun in the night to draw attention to himself. To get help.

Minutes later, Dowland was headed in the direction from which the shots had come, carrying one of his own rifles, along with the police gun. It was very unlikely he could get close enough to Trelawney--if it was Trelawney--to be heard approaching; but once he reached the general area of the shots, he would fire the rifle, and wait for a

response. In the forest, the wind was wild and noisy, and the going was as rough as he had suspected it would be. Moonlight flowed into the open rocky stretches occasionally, and faded again as clouds moved on overhead. Among the trees he could barely see his way and had to advance more slowly.

He came presently to a wide, smooth hump of rock shouldering up through the timber, and stopped to check the time. Twenty-five minutes had passed since he left the area of the house. If he had calculated correctly, the shots should have come from approximately this point. He moved somewhat cautiously into the open—a man waiting for help would think of selecting a place where he could be easily seen; and this could be the spot Paul Trelawney had chosen. And Trelawney, armed with a gun, might react rather abruptly if he saw a stranger approach.

But the ridge lay empty under the moon, stretching out for over a hundred yards to right and left. Dowland reached its top, moved on among the trees on the north side, and there paused again.

A feeling came, gradually and uneasily, of something wrong around here. He stood listening, unable to define exactly what was disturbing him; then a fresh gust of wind whipped through the branches about him, and the wrongness was on the wind—a mingled odor, not an unfamiliar one, but out of place in the evergreen forest, on this rocky shelf. A breath of warm darkness, of rotting, soft vegetation—of swamp or river-bed. Dowland found his breathing quickening.

Then the scent faded from the air again. It might, he was thinking seconds later, have been a personal hallucination, a false message from nerves overexcited by the events of the night. But if Paul Trelawney had returned to this point from a distant time, the route by which he had come might still be open. And the opening not far from here. It was a very unpleasant notion. Dowland began to move on again, but in a slow and hesitant manner now.

Another five minutes, he thought. At the end of that time, he certainly must have covered the distance over which the wind had carried the bark of a rifle—and should, in fact, be a little to the north of Trelawney

on the mesa. If there were no further developments by then, he would fire a shot himself.

The five minutes took him to another section of open ground, more limited than the previous one. Again an outcropping of weathered rock had thrust back the trees, and Dowland worked his way up the steep side to the top, and stood looking about. After some seconds, the understanding came suddenly that he was delaying firing the rifle because of a reluctance to reveal his presence in these woods. With an abrupt, angry motion he brought up the barrel pointing it across the trees to the north, and pulled the trigger.

. . .



The familiar whiplash of sound seemed startling loud. An instant later, there was a series of unnerving crashing noises in the forest ahead. Apparently some large animal had been alarmed by the shot. He heard it blundering off for a few hundred yards; then there was silence, as if it had stopped to listen. And then there was another sound, a deep, long cry that sent a shiver through his flesh. It ended; and the next thing that caught his attention was a glimpse of

something moving near the edge of his vision to the left, just above the forest. His head and eyes shifted quickly toward it, and he found himself staring after a great shadowy thing flapping and gliding away over the tops of the trees. It disappeared almost immediately behind the next rise of ground.

Dowland still stared after it, his mind seeming to move sluggishly as if unwilling to admit what he had seen was no creature he had ever heard about. Then it occurred to him suddenly that Trelawney had not yet responded to the signal shot; and almost with the thought, he grew aware of a renewed disturbance in the forest before him.

This one was much less loud than the other had been. For a moment, Dowland thought it was being caused by the wind. But the noises continued; and in a few more seconds it became obvious that something—something that seemed to be very large indeed—was moving among the trees and approaching the open area. By that time, it wasn't very far away.

Dowland turned, his mouth working silently, and slipped down the south side of the big rock hump, making no more noise than he could help. Already the trees were shaking on the other side of the rock. He ducked, crouched, into a thick mass of juniper branches, pushed through them, and made his way quickly and quietly deeper among the trees. This new thing, whatever it was, must also have heard the shot. It might check when it reached the open area and, when it discovered nothing to arouse its further curiosity, move off again.

But it didn't. Glancing back through the trees, Dowland had an indistinct glimpse of something very tall coming swiftly around the shoulder of rock. He turned, scuttled on under the branches, and a moment later, there was a tremendous crashing at the point where he had left the open ground. The thing was following him down into the woods.

Dowland turned again, gasping, dropped the rifle, and pulled the ipa gun from his pocket. The thickets splintered; a towering shape came through them. He drove three shots at it, had the approximate sensation of being struck across the head with an iron bar, and felt

himself fall forward. He lost consciousness before he hit the earth.

. . .

When he opened his eyes, his first thought was that he should be feeling a king-sized headache. He wasn't. He was lying face down on moist forest mold. There was a very dim predawn light about. So several hours must have gone by since... .

Dowland stiffened a moment, then turned his head very slowly, peering about. After a moment, he pushed himself quietly up on hands and knees. The trees before him shifted uneasily in the wind. Farther on, he could make out part of the hump of rock on which he had stood and fired a shot to draw Trelawney's attention. Between, the ground looked as if a tank had come plowing into the forest. But there was no giant shape lying there.

So his three shots hadn't brought it down. But it had gone away--after doing what to him?

Dowland saw the ipa gun lying beside him, picked it up, and got slowly to his feet. He ran a hand experimentally over his head. No lumps, not even a feeling of tenderness... . He would have sworn that the crack he'd felt had opened his skull. He looked about for the rifle, saw it, picked it up, and went over to the area where the trees had been tossed about.

There was a trail there--a very improbable trail. He studied it, puzzled and frowning. Not the tracks of an animal. If it had been more regular, such a track conceivably might have been laid by a machine moving along on a very wide smooth roller. There were no indications of any kind of a tread. As it was, about all he could say now was that something very ponderous had crushed a path--a path varying between approximately eight and fourteen feet in width--through the woods to this point, and had then withdrawn again along a line roughly parallel to its approach... . And he could say one other thing about it, Dowland added mentally. The same ponderous entity could

knock out a man for hours, without apparently injuring him, or leaving any sign of how he had been struck down.

The last sounded more like a machine again; a machine which was armed in some mysterious manner. When his shot had flushed up the big flying creature during the night, he'd almost been convinced that some monster out of Terra's distant past was there on the mesa. Those two things just didn't jibe.

Dowland shook his head. He could think about that when he had more time. He'd lost—he looked at his watch—a little less than four hours. In four hours, a large number of things might have happened in the ranch area, with only the one partly attractive possibility among them that somebody had managed to get into the laboratory and shut off the Ym flow.

• • •

He started back at a cautious trot. Downhill and with the light strengthening gradually, covering ground was considerably less of a problem than it had been during the night. The wind hadn't let up; it still came in wild, intermittent gusts that bent the trees. Now and then a cloud of dust whipped past, suggesting that the air over the desert was also violently disturbed. And it might very well be, Dowland thought, that Ym could upset atmospheric conditions in an area where it was active. Otherwise, if there was anything abnormal going on in the forest about him, there were no detectable indications of it.

He came out presently on a ridge from where the ranch area was in view. It lay now approximately a third of a mile ahead. In the dim light, everything seemed quiet. Dowland slowed to a walk.

He might be heading into an ambush down there. Jill Trelawney could, at most, be beginning to wake up from her drugged sleep and for another hour or so she would be too confused and groggy to present a problem. But others might be at the ranch by now; Paul Trelawney or a group of Carter's Troopers. And whether Jill was able

to give them a coherent report or not, any of the Freeholder conspirators would discover very quickly that somebody who was not a member of their group had been there before them; they would anticipate his return, be on the watch for it. Dowland left the direct line he had been following, and headed east, moving with constantly increasing caution. On that side, the forest grew closest to the ranch buildings, and he remembered noticing a hedge-like thicket of evergreens just north of the cleared land. He could make a preliminary check of the area from there.

He was within a hundred and fifty feet of the point when he discovered just how healthy the notion of a preliminary check had been. A man was lying in the cover of the evergreens Dowland had been thinking about, head up, studying the ranch grounds. He wore an antiradiation suit of the type Dowland had found in the storeroom; a heavy rifle lay beside him. His face was in profile. It was smeared now with the sweat and dirt the air field had held in, but Dowland recognized the bold, bony features instantly.

He had finally found Doctor Paul Trelawney.

• • •

It took Dowland over eight minutes to cover the remaining distance between them. But the stalk had eminently satisfactory results. He was within a yard of Trelawney before the Freeholder became aware of his presence. The ipa gun prodded the man's spine an instant later.

"No noise, please," Dowland said softly. "I'd sooner not kill you. I might have to."

Paul Trelawney was silent for a moment. When he spoke, his voice was raw with shock. "Who the devil are you?"

"Solar Police Authority," Dowland said. "You know why I'm here."

Trelawney grunted. Dowland went on, "Why are you hiding out?"

"Why do you think?" Trelawney asked irritably. "Before showing myself, I was trying to determine the whereabouts of the man who fired a rifle within half a mile of me during the night."

So they had been stalking each other. Dowland said, "Why couldn't that person have been your brother or niece?"

"Because I know the sound of our rifles."

"My mistake... . Do you have a gun or other weapon on you?"

"A knife."

"Let's have it."

Trelawney reached under his chest, brought out a sheathed knife and handed it back to Dowland. Dowland lobbed it into the bushes a few yards away, moved back a little.

"Get up on your hands and knees now," he said, "and we'll make sure that's all."

He was careful about the search. Trelawney appeared passive enough at the moment, but he was not a man too take chances with. The ar suit turned out to be concealing a tailored-in two-way communicator along with as many testing and checking devices as an asteroid miner's outfit, but no weapons. In a sealed pocket, obviously designed for it, was a five-inch atomic key. Dowland skid the heavy disk out with fingers that suddenly were shaking a little.

"Does this open your laboratory here?"

"Yes."

Dowland detached the communicator's transmission unit, and dropped it with the laboratory key into his pocket. "All right," he said, "turn around and sit down." He waited until Trelawney was facing him, then went on. "How long have you been watching the ranch?"

About an hour."

"Seen anyone--or anything?"

Trelawney regarded him quizzically, shook his head. "Not a thing."

"I won't waste time with too many questions just now," Dowland said. "The laboratory is locked, and the machine you started in there apparently is still in operation. Your brother was found outside the laboratory yesterday morning, and may be dead or dying of internal radiation burns. He was alive and didn't seem to be doing too badly when I left him and Miss Trelawney in the house last night to go looking for you. I had to drug Miss Trelawney--she isn't a very cooperative person. She should still be asleep."

"Now, if I hadn't showed up here just now, what did you intend to do?"

"I intended to stop the machine, of course," Trelawney said. His expression hadn't changed while Dowland was talking. "Preferably without involving the Solar Police Authority in our activities. But since you've now involved yourself, I urgently suggest that we go to the laboratory immediately and take care of the matter together."

Dowland nodded. "That's what I had in mind, Trelawney. Technically you're under arrest, of course, and you'll do whatever has to be done in there at gun point. Are we likely to run into any difficulties in the operation?"

"We very probably will," Trelawney said thoughtfully, "and it's just as probable that we won't know what they are before we encounter them."

Dowland stood up. "All right," he said, "let's go. We'll stop off at the house on the way. I want to be sure that Miss Trelawney isn't in a position to do something thoughtless."

He emptied the magazine of Trelawney's rifle before giving it to him. They started down to the house, Trelawney in the lead, the ipa gun in Dowland's hand.

The house door was closed. Trelawney glanced back questioningly. Dowland said in a low voice, "It isn't locked. Open it, go on in, and stop two steps inside the hallway. I'll be behind you. They're both in the living room."

He followed Trelawney in, reaching back to draw the door shut again. There was a whisper of sound. Dowland half turned, incredulously felt something hard jab painfully against his backbone. He stood still.

"Drop your gun, Dowland."

Jill Trelawney stood behind him. Her voice was as clear and un-slurred as if she had been awake for hours. Dowland cursed himself silently. She must have come around the corner of the house the instant they went in.

"My gun's pointing at your uncle's back," he said. "Don't do anything that might make me nervous, Miss Trelawney."

"Don't try to bluff Jill, friend," Paul Trelawney advised him without turning his head. There was dry amusement in the man's voice. "No one's ever been able to do it. And she's quite capable of concluding that trading an uncle for an spy would still leave Terra ahead at this stage. But that shouldn't be necessary. Jill?"

"Yes, Paul?"

"Give our policeman a moment to collect his wits... . This does put him in a very embarrassing position, after all. And I can use his help in the lab."

"I'll give you exactly three seconds, Dowland," Jill said. "And you'd better believe that is *not* a bluff. One... ."

Dowland dropped his gun.

. . .

The two Trelawneys held a brief, whispered conversation in the living room. Dowland, across the room from them, and under cover of two guns now, couldn't catch much of it. Jill was in one of the radiation suits he'd brought in from the storeroom. Miguel was dead. He had still been unconscious when she woke up, and had stopped breathing minutes afterwards. Medic had done what it could; in this case it simply hadn't been enough. Jill, however, had found another use for it. Dowland thought the possibility mightn't have occurred to anyone else in similar circumstances; but he still should have thought of it when he left the house. As she began to struggle up from sleep, she remembered what Dowland had told her about medic, and somehow she had managed to inject a full ampule of it into her arm. It had brought her completely awake within minutes.

The murmured talk ended. The girl looked rather white and frightened now. Paul Trelawney's face was expressionless as he came over to Dowland. Jill shoved the gun she had put on Dowland into her belt, picked up Paul's hunting rifle, held it in her hands, and stood waiting.

"Here's the procedure, Dowland," Trelawney said. "Jill will go over to the lab with us, but stay outside on guard. She'll watch... ."

"Did you tell her," Dowland interrupted; "to keep an eye out for something that stands twice as high as this house?"

Trelawney looked at him a moment. "So you ran into it," he said. "I was wondering. It's very curious that ... well, one thing at a time. I cautioned her about it, as it happens. Now come over to the table."

Dowland remained standing beside the table, while across from him Trelawney rapidly sketched out two diagrams on a piece of paper. The ipa gun lay on the table near Trelawney's right hand. There might have been an outside chance of reaching it if one could have discounted Jill's watchfulness. Which, Dowland decided, one couldn't. And he'd seen her reload the rifle she was holding. He stayed where he was.

Trelawney shoved the paper across to him.

"Both diagrams represent our machine," he said, "and they should give you a general idea of what you'll see. This wheel here is at the far side of the console when we come in the door. The wheel is the flow regulator--the thing you have to keep in mind. There are scale markings on it. The major markings have the numbers one to five. Yesterday morning the regulator was set at five--full flow. Spin the wheel back to one, and the Ym-400 that's been producing the flow goes inert. Is that clear?"

Dowland nodded. "Clear enough."

"After that," Trelawney remarked, "we may be able to take things a little easier."

"What's the quantity you're using in there?"

"No real reason I should tell you that, is there? But I will. The sixty-eight kilograms the Overgovernment's been grieving about are under the machine platform. We're using all of it." He grinned briefly, perhaps at Dowland's expression. "The type of job we had in mind required quantities in that class. Now, about yourself. We're not murderers. Jill tells me you can't be bribed--all right. What will happen, when this thing's settled, is that you'll have an attack of amnesia. Several months of your life will be permanently lost from your memory, including, of course, everything connected with this operation. Otherwise you won't be harmed. Understand?"

"I've heard of such things," Dowland said drily.

It wouldn't, however, be done that way. It was the kind of thing told a man already as good as dead, to keep him from making a desperate attempt to save himself. The Freeholders really wouldn't have much choice. Something had loused up their plans here, and if Dowland either disappeared or was found suffering from a sudden bout of amnesia, the ipa would turn its full attention on Terra at once. If he died, his death could be plausibly arranged to look like an accident or a killing for personal motives. These people were quite capable of sacrificing one of their group to back such a story up. And it would pass. Terra was under no more immediate suspicion than

any other world. Dowland had been on a routine assignment.

. . .

There were a few brief preparations. Paul Trelawney checked the batteries in the radiation suits he and Jill were wearing, then exchanged his set for that of the spare suit. Dowland left his own ar field off for the moment. It was at least as adequate as the one developed by the Trelawneys' suits, and in some respects a much more practical device. But the suit batteries had an effective life of twenty-four hours, expending them automatically while the suits were worn. His field would maintain itself for a minimum of an hour and a half, a maximum of two hours. In this situation, Dowland wasn't sure how long he would have to depend on the field. A few more minutes of assured protection might make a difference.

He saw Trelawney studying the mountaineering rig on the floor; then he picked up the harness and brought it over to him.

"Here, put it on," he said.

"What for?" Dowland asked, surprised.

Trelawney grinned. "We may have a use for it. You'll find out in a minute or two."

They left the house by a back entrance. Clouds were banked low on the eastern horizon now; the first sunlight gleamed pale gold beneath them. In the west the sky was brown with swirling dust. Jill stopped twenty yards from the laboratory building and stood on the slope, rifle in hand, watching the men go on. At the door, Dowland switched on his ar field. Trelawney tossed the disk-shaped key over to him.

"Know how to use it?"

Dowland nodded.

"All right. After you've snapped it in and it releases again, throw it

back to me. It may be the last one around, and we're not taking it into the laboratory this time. When the door starts moving down, step back to the right of it. We'll see what the lab is like before we go in." Trelawney indicated a thimble-sized instrument on his suit. "This'll tell whether the place is hot at the moment, and approximately how hot." He waved the ipa gun in Dowland's direction. "All right, go ahead."

Dowland fitted the key into the central depression in the door, pressed down, felt the key snap into position with a sharp twisting motion of its own, released his pressure on it. An instant later, the key popped back out into his hand. He tossed it back to Trelawney, who caught it left-handed and threw it over his head in Jill's direction. The disk thudded heavily into the grass ten feet from her. The girl walked over, picked it up, and slid it into one of her suit pockets.

The slab of metasteel which made up the laboratory door began moving vertically downward. The motion stopped when the door's top rim was still several inches above the level of the sill.

A low droning came from the little instrument on Trelawney's suit. It rose and fell irregularly like the buzz of a circling wasp. Mingled with it was something that might have been the hiss of escaping steam. That was Dowland's detector confirming. The lab reeked with radiation.

He glanced over at Trelawney.

"Hot enough," the Freeholder said. "We'll go inside. But stay near the door for a moment. There's something else I want to find out about... .

. . .

Inside, the laboratory was unpartitioned and largely empty, a great shell of a building. Only the section to the left of the entrance appeared to have been used. That section was lighted. The light arose evenly from the surfaces of the raised machine platform halfway over to the opposite wall. The platform was square, perhaps

twenty feet along its sides. Dowland recognized the apparatus on it from Trelawney's diagrams. The central piece was an egg-shaped casing which appeared to be metasteel. Near its blunt end, partly concealed, stood the long, narrow instrument console. Behind the other end of the casing, an extension ramp jutted out above the platform. At the end of the ramp was a six-foot disk that might have been quartz, rimless, brightly iridescent. It was tilted to the left, facing the bank of instruments.

"A rather expensive bit of equipment over there, Dowland," Trelawney said. "My brother developed the concept, very nearly in complete detail, almost twenty-five years ago. But a great deal of time and thought and work came then before the concept turned into the operating reality on that platform."

He nodded to the left. "That's Miguel's coat on the floor. I wasn't sure it would still be here. The atomic key you were searching for so industriously last night is in one of its pockets. Miguel was standing just there, with the coat folded over his arm, when I saw him last--perhaps two or three seconds before I was surprised to discover I was no longer looking at the instrument controls in our laboratory."

"Where were you?" Dowland asked. "Six hundred thousand years in the past?"

"The instruments showed a fix on that point in time," Trelawney said. "But this was, you understand, a preliminary operation. We intended to make a number of observations. We had not planned a personal transfer for several more weeks. But in case the test turned out to be successful beyond our expectations, I was equipped to make the transfer. That bit of optimistic foresight is why I'm still alive."

What was the man waiting for? Dowland asked, "What actually happened?"

"A good question, I'd like to know the whole answer myself. What happened in part was that I suddenly found myself in the air, falling toward a river. It was night and cloudy, but there was light enough to show it was a thoroughly inhospitable river... . And now I believe"--his

voice slowed thoughtfully--"I believe I understand why my brother was found outside the closed door of this building. Over there, Dowland. What does that look like to you?"

Near the far left of the building, beyond the immediate range of the light that streamed from the machine stand, a big packing crate appeared to have been violently--and rather oddly--torn apart. The larger section of the crate lay near the wall, the smaller one approximately twenty feet closer to the machine platform. Assorted items with which it had been packed had spilled out from either section. But the floor between the two points of wreckage was bare and unlittered. Except for that, one might have thought the crate had exploded.

. . .

"It wasn't an explosion," Trelawney agreed when Dowland said as much. He was silent a moment, went on, "In this immediate area, two space-time frames have become very nearly superimposed. There is a constant play of stresses now as the two frames attempt to adjust their dissimilarities. Surrounding our machine we have a spherical concentration of those stresses, and there are moments when space here is literally wrenched apart. If one were caught at such an instant--ah!"

To Dowland it seemed that a crack of bright color had showed briefly in the floor of the building, between the door and the machine platform. It flickered, vanished, reappeared at another angle before his ears had fully registered the fact that it was accompanied by a curiously chopped-off roar of sound. Like a play of lightning. But this was... .

The air opened out before him, raggedly framing a bright-lit three-dimensional picture. He was staring down across a foaming river to the rim of a towering green and yellow forest. The crash of the river filled the building. Something bulky and black at the far left ... but the scene was gone--

The interior of the laboratory building lay quiet and unchanged before them again. Dowland said hoarsely, "How did you know what was going to happen?"

"I was in a position to spend several hours observing it," Trelawney said, "from the other side. You see now, I think, that we can put your mountaineer's kit to some very practical use here."

Dowland glanced across the building. "The walls... ."

"Metasteel," Trelawney said, "and thank God for that. The building's sound; the stresses haven't affected it. We'll have some anchor points. A clamp piton against that wall, six feet above the console walk and in line with it, another one against the doorframe here, and we can rope across."

Dowland saw it, unsnapped his harness, fed the end of the magnerope through the eye of a piton, and twisted it tight. "Are we going together?" he asked.

Trelawney shook his head. "You're going, Dowland. Sorry about that, but this is no time for sporting gestures. The rope doesn't eliminate the danger. But if you find your feet suddenly dangling over the air of a very old time, you'll still stay here--I hope. If you don't make it across, I'll follow. We get two chances to shut Ymir down instead of one. All right?"

"Since you have the gun, yes," Dowland said. "If I had it, it would be the other way around."

"Of course," Trelawney agreed. He watched in silence then as Dowland rammed the threaded piton down the muzzle of the gun, locked it in position, took aim across the machine platform, and fired. The piton clamp made a slapping sound against the far wall, froze against it. Dowland gave the loose end of the rope a few tugs, said, "Solid," cut the rope, and handed the end to Trelawney.

The Freeholder reached up to set a second piton against the doorframe, fed a loop of the rope through it, and twisted it tight.

Dowland slipped a set of grappling gloves out of the harness, pulled one over his right hand, tossed the other to Trelawney. "In case," he said, "you have to follow. Magnerope gets to be wearing on bare hands."

Trelawney looked briefly surprised, then grinned. "Thanks," he said. "Can you do it with one glove?"

"No strain at that distance."

"Too bad you're not a Terran, Dowland. We could have used you."

"I'm satisfied," Dowland said. "Any point in waiting now for another run of those cracks in space before making the trip?"

Trelawney shook his head. "None at all, I'm afraid. From what I saw, there's no more regularity in those stress patterns than there is in a riptide. You see how the rope is jerking right now--you'll get pulled around pretty savagely, I'd say, even if you don't run into open splits on the way across."

. . .

Dowland was fifteen feet from the door, half running with both hands on the rope, when something plucked at him. He strained awkwardly sideways, feet almost lifting from the floor. Abruptly he was released, went stumbling forward a few steps before the next invisible current tugged at him, pulling him downward now. It was a very much stronger pull, and for endless seconds it continued to build up. His shoulders seemed ready to snap before he suddenly came free again.

The rest of the way to the platform remained almost undisturbed, but Dowland was trembling with tensions before he reached it; he could feel the drag of the ar field on his breathing. The steps to the platform were a dozen feet to his right--too far from the rope. Dowland put his weight on the rope, swung forward and up, let the rope go and came down on the narrow walk between instrument board and machine

section. The panels shone with their own light; at the far end he saw the flow-control wheel Trelawney had indicated, a red pointer opposite the numeral "5." Dowland took two steps toward it, grasped the wheel, and spun it down.

The pointer stopped at "1." He heard it click into position there.

Instantly, something slammed him sideways against the console, sent him staggering along it, and over the low railing at the end of the platform. The floor seemed to be shuddering as he struck it, and then to tilt slowly. Dowland rolled over, came up on hands and knees, facing back toward the platform. Daylight blazed again in the building behind him, and the roar of a river that rolled through another time filled his ears. He got to his feet, plunged back toward the whipping rope above the platform. The light and the roaring cut off as he grasped the rope, flashed back into the building, cut off again. Somewhere somebody had screamed... .

Dowland swung about on the rope, went hanging himself along it, back toward the door. His feet flopped about over the floor, unable to get a stand there for more than an instant. It was a struggle now to get enough air through the antiradiation field into his lungs. He saw dust whip past the open door, momentarily obscuring it. The building bucked with earthquake fury. And where was Trelawney?

He saw the red, wet thing then, lying by the wall just inside the door; and sickness seized him because Trelawney's body was stretched out too far to make it seem possible it had ever been that of a man. Dust blasted in through the door as he reached it, and subsided, leaving a choking residue trapped within the radiation screen. If he could only cut off the field... .

. . .

His gun lay too close to the sodden mess along the wall. Dowland picked it up, was bending to snatch the climbing harness from the floor when light flared behind him again. Automatically, he looked

back.

Once more the interior of the building seemed to have split apart. Wider now. He saw the rushing white current below. To the right, above the forest on the bank, the sun was a swollen red ball glaring through layers of mist. And to the left, moving slowly over the river in the blaze of long-dead daylight, was something both unmistakable and not to be believed. But, staring at it in the instant before the scene shivered and vanished again, Dowland suddenly thought he knew what had happened here.

What he had seen was a spaceship.

He turned, went stumbling hurriedly out the door into the whistling wind, saw Jill Trelawney standing there, white-faced, eyes huge, hands to her mouth.

He caught her shoulder. "Come on! We've got to get away from here."

She gasped, "It--*tore* him apart!"

"We can't help him."

Dust clouds were spinning over the back of the mesa, concealing the upper slopes. Dowland glanced to the west, winced at the towering mountain of darkness sweeping toward them through the sky. He plunged up the slope, hauling her along behind him. Jill cried out incoherently once, in a choking voice, but he didn't stop to hear what she was trying to say. He shoved her into the house, slammed the door shut behind them, hurried her on down the hall and into the living room. As they came in, he switched off his ar field and felt air fill his lungs easily again. It was like surfacing out of deep water. The detector still hissed its thin warning, but it was almost inaudible. They would have to risk radiation now.

"Out of your suit, quick! Whatever's happening in the lab has whistled up a dust storm here. When it hits, that radiation field will strangle you in a minute outdoors."

She stared at him dumbly.

"Get out of your suit!" Dowland shouted, his nerves snapping. "We're going down the eastern wall. It's our only chance. But we can't get down alive if we can't breathe... ." Then, as she began unbuckling the suit hurriedly with shaking fingers, he turned to the pile of camping equipment beside the fireplace and pawed through it.

He found the communicator and was snapping it to the mountaineering harness when the front door slammed. He wheeled about, startled. Jill's radiation suit lay on the floor near the entry hall. She was gone.

He was tearing the door open three seconds later, shouted, and saw her through the dust forty feet away, running up toward the forest.

He mightn't have caught her if she hadn't stumbled and gone headlong. Dowland was on top of her before she could get up. She fought him in savage silence like an animal, tearing and biting, her eyes bloodshot slits. There was a mechanical fury about it that appalled him. But at last he got his right arm free, and brought his fist up solidly to the side of her jaw. Jill's head flew back, and her eyes closed.

. . .

He came padding up to the eastern side of the mesa with her minutes later. Here, beyond the ranch area, the ground was bare rock, with occasional clusters of stunted bushes. The dust had become blinding, though the main storm was still miles away. There was no time to stop off at the house to look for the quiz-gun, though it would have been better to try the descent with a dazed and half-paralyzed young woman than with the twisting lunatic Jill might turn into again when she recovered from his punch. At least, he'd have her tied up. Underfoot were grinding and grumbling noises now, the ground shaking constantly. At moments he had the feeling of plodding through something yielding, like quicksand. Only the feeling,

he told himself; the rock was solid enough. But... .

Abruptly, he was at the mesa's edge. Dowland slid the girl to the ground, straightened up, panting, to dab at his smarting eyes. The mesa behind them had almost vanished in swirling dust.

And through the dust Dowland saw something coming over the open ground he had just traversed.

He stared at it, mouth open, stunned with a sense of unfairness. The gigantic shape was still only partly visible, but it was obvious that it was following them. It approached swiftly over the shaking ground. Dowland took out his gun, with the oddly calm conviction that it would be entirely useless against their pursuer. But he brought it up slowly and leveled it, squinting with streaming eyes through the dust.

And then it happened. The pursuer appeared to falter. It moved again in some manner; something thundered into the ground beside Dowland. Then, writhing and twisting--slowly at first, then faster--the dust-veiled shape seemed to be sinking downward through the rock surface of the mesa.

In another instant, it was gone.

Seconds passed before Dowland gradually lowered the gun again. Dazedly, he grew aware of something else that was different now. A miniature human voice appeared to be jabbering irritably at him from some point not far away. His eyes dropped to the little communicator attached to his harness.

The voice came from there.

Terra's grid power had returned to Lion Mesa.

. . .

A week later, Lieutenant Frank Dowland was shown into the office of the chief of the Solar Police Authority. The chief introduced him to the

two other men there, who were left unidentified, and told him to be seated.

"Lieutenant," he said, "these gentlemen have a few questions to ask you. You can speak as openly to them as you would to me."

Dowland nodded. He had recognized one of the gentlemen immediately--Howard Camhorn, the Coordinator of Research. Reputedly one of the sharpest minds in the Overgovernment's top echelons. The other one was unfamiliar. He was a few years younger than Camhorn, around six inches shorter, chunky, with black hair, brown eyes, an expression of owlish reflectiveness. Probably, Dowland thought, wearing contact lenses. "Yes, sir," he said to the chief, and looked back at the visitors."

"We've seen your report on your recent visit to Terra, Lieutenant Dowland," Camhorn began pleasantly. "An excellent report, incidentally--factual, detailed. What we should like to hear now are the things that you, quite properly, omitted from it. That is, your personal impressions and conclusions."

"For example," the other man took up, as Dowland hesitated, "Miss Trelawney has informed us her uncles were attempting to employ the Ym-400 they had acquired to carry out a time-shift to an earlier Earth period--to the period known as the Pleistocene, to be somewhat more exact. From what you saw, would you say they had succeeded in doing it?"

"I don't know, sir," Dowland said. "I've been shown pictures representing that period during the past few days. The scene I described in the report probably might have existed at that time." He smiled briefly. "However, I have the impression that the very large flying creature I reported encountering that night is regarded as being, ... well, er ... ah... ."

"A product of excited nerves?" the short man said, nodding. "Under such extraordinary circumstances, that would be quite possible, you know."

"Yes, sir, I know."

The short man smiled. "But you don't think it was that?"

"No, sir," Dowland said. "I think that I have described exactly what I did hear and see."

"And you feel the Trelawneys established contact with some previous Earth period--not necessarily the Pleistocene?"

"Yes, I do."

"And you report having seen a spaceship in that prehistorical period... ."

Dowland shook his head. "No, sir. At the moment I was observing it, I thought it was that. What I reported was having seen something that looked like a spaceship."

"What do you think it was?"

"A timeship--if there is such a word."

"There is such a word," Camhorn interrupted lazily. "I'm curious to hear, lieutenant, what brought you to that conclusion."

"It's a guess, sir. But the thing has to fit together somehow. A timeship would make it fit."

"In what way?"

"I've been informed," Dowland said, "that the Overgovernment's scientists have been unable to make a practical use of Ym because something has invariably gone wrong when they did try to use it. I also heard that there was no way of knowing in advance what would happen to make an experiment fail. But something always would happen, and frequently a number of people would get killed."

Camhorn nodded. "That is quite true."

"Well, then," Dowland said, "I think there is a race of beings who

aren't quite in our time and space. They have Ym and use it, and don't want anyone else to use it. They can tell when it's activated here, and use their own Ym to interfere with it. Then another experiment suddenly turns into a failure.

"But they don't know yet who's using it. When the Trelawneys turned on their machine, these beings spotted the Ym stress pattern back there in time. They went to that point and reinforced the time-blending effect with their own Ym. The Trelawneys hadn't intended a complete contact with that first test. The aliens almost succeeded in blending the two periods completely in the area near the laboratory."

"For what purpose?" Camhorn asked.

"I think they're very anxious to get us located."

"With unfriendly intentions?"

"The ones we ran into didn't behave in a friendly manner. May I ask a question, sir?"

"Of course," Camhorn said.

"When the Trelawneys' machine was examined, was the supply of Ym adequately shielded?"

"Quite adequately," Camhorn said.

"But when I opened the door, the laboratory was hot. And Miguel Trelawney died of radiation burns... ."

Camhorn nodded. "Those are facts that give your theory some substance, lieutenant. No question about it. And there is the additional fact that after you shut off the Ym flow in the laboratory, nearly ten minutes passed before the apparent contact between two time periods was broken. Your report indicates that the phenomena you described actually became more pronounced immediately after the shutoff."

"Yes, sir."

"As if the aliens might have been making every effort to retain contact with our time?"

"Yes, sir," Dowland said. "That was my impression."

"It's quite plausible. Now, the indications are that Paul Trelawney actually spent considerable time--perhaps twelve to fourteen hours, at any rate--in that other period. He gave no hint of what he experienced during those hours?"

"No, sir, except to say that it was night when he appeared there. He may have told Miss Trelawney more."

"Apparently, he didn't," Camhorn said. "Before you and he went into the laboratory, he warned her to watch for the approach of a creature which answers the description of the gigantic things you encountered twice. But that was all. Now, here again you've given us your objective observations. What can you add to them--on a perhaps more speculative basis?"

"Well, sir," Dowland said, "my opinions on that are, as a matter of fact, highly speculative. But I think that Paul Trelawney was captured by the aliens as soon as he appeared in the other time period, and was able to escape from them a number of hours later. Two of the aliens who were attempting to recapture him eventually followed him out on Lion Mesa through another opening the Ym stresses had produced between the time periods, not too far away from the first."

Camhorn's stout companion said thoughtfully, "You believe the birdlike creature you saw arrived by the same route?"

"Yes, sir," Dowland said, turning to him. "I think that was simply an accident. It may have been some kind of wild animal that blundered into the contact area and found itself here without knowing what had occurred."

"And you feel," the other man went on, "that you yourself were passing near that contact point in the night at the time you seemed to be smelling a swamp?" Dowland nodded.

"Yes, sir, I do. Those smells might have been an illusion, but they seemed to be very distinct. And, of course, there are no swamps on the mesa itself."

Camhorn said, "We'll assume it was no illusion. It seems to fit into the general picture. But, lieutenant, on what are you basing your opinion that Paul Trelawney was a captive of these beings for some time?"

"There were several things, sir," Dowland said. "One of them is that when Miss Trelawney regained consciousness in the hospital she didn't remember having made an attempt to get away from me."

Camhorn nodded. "That was reported."

"She made the attempt," Dowland went on, "immediately after she had taken off her radiation suit to avoid being choked in the dust storm on the way down from the mesa. That is one point."

"Go ahead," Camhorn said.

"Another is that when I discovered Paul Trelawney early in the morning, he was wearing his radiation suit. Judging by his appearance, he had been in it for hours--and a radiation suit, of course, is a very inconvenient thing to be in when you're hiking around in rough country."

"He might," the stout man suggested, "have been afraid of running into a radioactive area."

Dowland shook his head. "No, sir. He had an instrument which would have warned him if he was approaching one. It would have made much more sense to carry the suit, and slip into it again if it became necessary. I didn't give the matter much thought at the time. But then the third thing happened. I did not put that in the report because it was a completely subjective impression. I couldn't prove now that it actually occurred."

Camhorn leaned forward. "Go ahead."

It was just before the time periods separated and the creature that was approaching Miss Trelawney and myself seemed to drop through the top of the mesa—I suppose it fell back into the other period. I've described it. It was like a fifty-foot gray slug moving along on its tail and there were those two rows of something like short arms. It wasn't at all an attractive creature. I was frightened to death. But I was holding a gun—the same gun with which I had stopped another of those things when it chased me during the night. And the trouble was that this time I wasn't going to shoot."

"You weren't going to shoot?" Camhorn repeated.

"No, sir. I had every reason to try to blow it to pieces as soon as I saw it. The other one didn't follow up its attack on me, so it probably was pretty badly injured. But while I knew that, I was also simply convinced that it would be useless to pull the trigger. That's as well as I can explain what happened... .

"I think these aliens can control the minds of other beings, but can't control them through the interference set up by something like our ar fields. Paul Trelawney appeared in the other time period almost in their laps. He had a rifle strapped over his back, but presumably they caught him before he had a chance to use it. They would have examined him and the equipment he was carrying, and when they took off his radiation suit, they would have discovered he belonged to a race which they could control mentally. After that, there would have been no reason for them to guard him too closely. He was helpless.

"I think Trelawney realized this, and used a moment when his actions were not being controlled to slip back into the suit. Then he was free to act again. When they discovered he had escaped, some of them were detailed to search for him, and two of those pursuers came out here in our time on the mesa.

"As for Miss Trelawney--well, obviously she wasn't trying to get away from me. Apparently, she wasn't even aware of what she was doing. She was simply obeying physically the orders her mind began to receive as soon as she stepped out of the radiation suit. They would

have been to come to the thing, wherever it was at the moment--somewhere up to the north of the ranch area, judging from the direction in which she headed."

There was silence for some seconds. Then Camhorn's companion observed, "There's one thing that doesn't quite fit in with your theory, lieutenant."

"What's that, sir?"

"Your report states that you switched off your ar field at the same time you advised Miss Trelawney to get out of her suit. You should have been equally subject to the alien's mental instructions."

"Well," Dowland said, "I can attempt to explain that, sir, though again there is no way to prove what I think. But it might be that these creatures can control only one mind at a time. The alien may not have realized that I had ... well ... knocked Miss Trelawney unconscious and that she was unable to obey its orders, until it came to the spot and saw us. My assumption is that it wasn't till that moment that it switched its mental attack to me."

. . .

The stout man--his name was Laillard White, and he was one of Research's ace trouble-shooters in areas more or less loosely related to psychology--appeared morosely reflective as he and Camhorn left Solar Police Authority Headquarters, and turned toward the adjoining Overgovernment Bureau.

"I gather from your expression," Camhorn remarked, "that our lieutenant was telling the truth."

White grunted. "Of course, he was--as he saw it."

"And he's sane?"

"Quite sane," White agreed absently.

Camhorn grinned. "Then what's the matter, Lolly? Don't you like the idea of time-travel?"

"Naturally not. It's an absurdity."

"You're blunt, Lolly. And rash. A number of great minds differ with you about that."

Laillard White said something rude about great minds in general. He went on, "Was the machine these Trelawneys built found intact?"

Camhorn nodded. "In perfect condition. I found an opportunity to look it over when it and the others the Freeholders had concealed on Terra were brought in."

"And these machines are designed to make it possible to move through time?"

"No question about that. They function in Riemann space, and are very soundly constructed. A most creditable piece of work, in fact. It's only regrettable that the Trelawney brothers were wasted on it. We might have put their talents to better use. Though as it turned out... ." He shrugged.

White glanced over at him. "What are you talking about?" he asked suspiciously.

"They didn't accomplish time-travel," Camhorn said, "though in theory they should have. I know it because we have several machines based on the same principles. The earliest was built almost eighty years ago. Two are now designed to utilize the Ym thrust. The Trelawney machine is considerably more advanced in a number of details than its Overgovernment counterparts, but it still doesn't make it possible to move in time."

"Why not?"

"I'd like to know," Camhorn said. "The appearance of it is that the reality we live in takes the same dim view of time-travel that you do."

Time-travel remains a theoretical possibility. But in practice--when, for example, the Ym thrust is applied for that purpose--the thrust is diverted."

White looked bewildered. "But if Paul Trelawney didn't move through time, what *did* he do?"

"What's left?" Camhorn asked. "He moved through space, of course."

"Where?"

Camhorn shrugged. "They penetrated Riemann space," he said, "after harnessing their machine to roughly nineteen thousand times the power that was available to us before the Ymir series of elements dropped into our hands. In theory, Lolly, they might have gone anywhere in the universe. If we'd had the unreasonable nerve to play around with multi-kilograms of Ym--knowing what happened when fractional quantities of a gram were employed--we might have had a very similar experience."

"I'm still just a little in the dark, you know," Laillard White observed drily, "as to what the experience consisted of."

"Oh, Lieutenant Dowland's theory wasn't at all far off in that respect. It's an ironic fact that we have much to thank the Trelawneys for. There's almost no question at all now that the race of beings they encountered were responsible for the troubles that have plagued us in the use of Ym. They're not the best of neighbors--neighbors in Riemann space terms, that is. If they'd known where to look for us, things might have become rather hot. They had a chance to win the first round when the Trelawneys lit that sixty-eight kilogram beacon for them. But they made a few mistakes, and lost us again. It's a draw so far. Except that we now know about as much about them as they've ever learned about us. I expect we'll take the second round handily a few years from now."

White still looked doubtful. "Was it one of their planets the Trelawneys contacted?"

"Oh, no. At least, it would have been an extremely improbable coincidence. No, the machine was searching for Terra as Terra is known to have been in the latter part of the Pleistocene period. The Trelawneys had provided something like a thousand very specific factors to direct and confine that search. Time is impenetrable, so the machine had to find that particular pattern of factors in space, and did. The aliens--again as Lieutenant Dowland theorized--then moved through Riemann space to the planet where the Ym thrust was manifesting itself so violently. But once there, they still had no way of determining where in the universe the thrust had originated--even though they were, in one sense, within shouting distance of Terra, and two of them were actually on its surface for a time. It must have been an extremely frustrating experience all around for our friends."

Laillard White said, "Hm-m," and frowned.

Camhorn laughed. "Let it go, Lolly," he said. "That isn't your field, after all. Let's turn to what is. What do you make of the fact that Dowland appears to have been temporarily immune to the mental commands these creatures can put out?"

"Eh?" White said. His expression turned to one of surprise. "But that's obvious!"

"Glad to hear it," Camhorn said drily.

"Well, it is. Dowland's attitude showed clearly that he suspected the truth himself on that point. Naturally, he was somewhat reluctant to put it into words."

"Naturally. So what did he suspect?"

White shook his head. "It's so simple. The first specimen of humanity the aliens encountered alive was Paul Trelawney. High genius level, man! It would take that level to nullify our i.q. tests in the manner he and his half-brother did. When those creatures were prowling around on the mesa, they were looking for that kind of mentality. Dowland's above average, far from stupid. As you say, you like his theories. But

he's no Trelawney. Unquestionably, the aliens in each case regarded him as some kind of clever domestic animal. The only reason he's alive is that they weren't taking him seriously."

"That," Camhorn said thoughtfully, "may have changed a number of things."

"It may, indeed."

"Do we have anything on hand that would block their specific psi abilities?"

"Oh, surely. If an ar field can stop them, there's nothing to worry about in that respect. Our human telepaths wouldn't be seriously hampered by that degree of interference."

"Very good," Camhorn said. "Do you have any theory about the partial sensory interpretation of the two areas which both Dowland and Miss Trelawney reported? The matter of being able to hear the river on the other planet from time to time."

White nodded. "There are several possible explanations for that. For one thing... ."

"Better save it for lunch, Lolly," Camhorn interrupted, glancing at his watch. "I see I have two minutes left to make the meeting. Anything else you feel should be brought up at the moment?"

"Just one thing," White said. "If the Trelawneys' machine is capable of locating a Terra-type planet anywhere in the universe... ."

Camhorn nodded. "It is."

"Then," White said, "we've solved our exploding population problem, haven't we?"

"For the time being, we have," Camhorn agreed. "As a matter of fact, Lolly, that's precisely what the meeting I'm headed for is about."

"Then the Terran Freeholders can stop worrying about the political

pressures that have threatened to turn Terra into another hygienically overcrowded slum-world."

"True enough," Camhorn said. "In another few years, if things go right, every man, woman and child can become a Freeholder--somewhere."

"So the Trelawneys got what they wanted, after all... ."

"They did, in a way. If the brothers knew the whole score, I think they'd be satisfied. The situation has been explained to their niece. She is."