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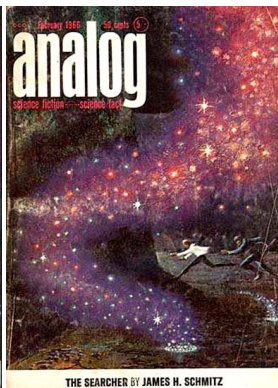
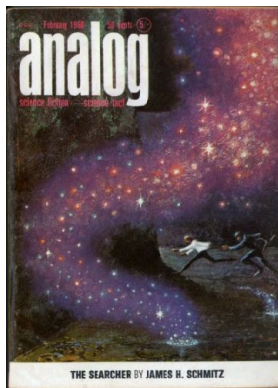
## The Searcher

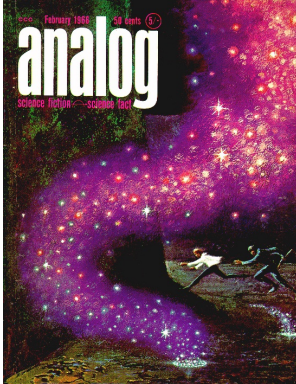


# "The Searcher"

# James Schmitz

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Three slightly different versions, just for comparison.

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It was night in that part of the world of Mezmiali--deep night, for much of the sky was obscured by the dense cosmic cloud called the Pit, little more than two light-years away. Overhead, only a scattering of nearby stars twinkled against the sullen gloom of the cloud. Far to the east, its curving edges were limned in brilliance, for beyond it, still just below the horizon, blazed the central sun clusters of the Hub.

The landscaped private spaceport was well lit but almost deserted. A number of small ships stood about in their individual stations, and two watchmen on a pair of float scooters were making a tour of the grounds, moving along unhurriedly twenty feet up in the air. They

weren't too concerned about intruders--the ships were locked and there was little else of value around to steal. But their duties included inspecting the area every two hours, and they were doing it.

One of them checked his scooter suddenly, said through his mike, "Take a look at Twenty-two, will you!"

His companion turned his head in the indicated direction. The ship at Station Twenty-two was the largest one here at present, an interstellar yacht which had berthed late in the afternoon, following an extensive pleasure cruise. He stared in surprise, asked, "Nobody on board, is there?"

The first watchman was checking his list. "Not supposed to be until tomorrow. She's getting a standard overhaul then. What do you suppose that stuff is?"

The stuff he referred to looked like a stream of pale, purple fire welling silently out of the solid hull of the yacht, about halfway up its side. It flowed down along the side of the ship, vanishing as it touched the ground--appeared actually to be pouring on unchecked through the base of Station Twenty-two into the earth. Both men had glanced automatically at the radiation indicators on the scooters and found them reassuringly inactive. But it was a puzzling, eerie sight.

"It's new to me!" the other man said uneasily. "Better report it right away! There might be somebody on board, maybe messing around with the engines. Wait a moment. It's stopping!"

They looked on in silence as the last of the fiery flow slid down the yacht, disappeared soundlessly into the station's foundation.

The first watchman shook his head.

"I'll call the super," he said. "He'll--"

A sharp whistling rose simultaneously from the two radiation indicators. Pale fire surged out of the ground beneath the scooters, curved over them, enclosing the men and their vehicles. For a moment, the figures of the watchmen moved convulsively in a shifting purple glow; then they appeared to melt, and vanished. The fire sank back to the ground, flowed down into it. The piercing clamor of the radiation indicators faded quickly to a whisper and ended.

The scooters hung in the air, motionless, apparently undamaged. But the watchmen were gone.

Eighty yards underground, the goyal lay quiet while the section it had detached to assimilate the two humans who had observed it as it left the ship returned and again became a part of it. It was a composite of billions of units, an entity now energy, now matter, vastly extensible and mobile in space, comparatively limited in the heavy mediums of a planet. At the moment, it was close to its densest material form, a sheet of unseen luminescence in the ground, sensor groups probing the spaceport area to make sure there had been no other witnesses to its arrival on Mezmiali.

There appeared to have been none. The goyal began to drift underground toward a point on the surface of the planet about a thousand miles away from the spaceport... .

And, about a thousand miles away, in the direction the goyal was heading, Danestar Gems raked dark-green fingernails through her matching dark-green hair, and swore nervously at the little spy-screen she'd been manipulating.

Danestar was alone at the moment, in a small room of the University League's Unclassified Specimens Depot on Mezmiali. The Depot was composed of a group of large, heavily structured, rather ugly buildings, covering about the area of an average village, which stood in the countryside far from any major residential sections. The buildings were over three centuries old and enclosed as a unit by a permanent energy barrier, presenting to the world outside the appearance of a somewhat flattened black dome which completely concealed the structures.

Originally, there had been a fortress on this site, constructed during a period when Mezmiali was subject to periodic attacks by space raiders, human and alien. The ponderous armament of the fortress, designed to deal with such enemies, had long since been dismantled; but the basic buildings remained, and the old energy barrier was the one still in use--a thing of monstrous power, retained only because it had been simpler and less expensive to leave it in place than to remove it.

Nowadays, the complex was essentially a warehouse area with automatic maintenance facilities, an untidy giant museum of current and extinct galactic life and its artifacts. It stored mineral, soil, and atmosphere samples, almost anything, in fact, that scientific expeditions, government exploration groups, prospectors, colonial workers, or adventuring private parties were likely to pick up in space or on strange worlds and hand over to the University League as being perhaps of sufficient interest to warrant detailed analysis of its nature and properties. For over a century, the League had struggled--and never quite managed--to keep up with the material provided it for study in this manner. Meanwhile, the specimens continued to come in and were routed into special depots for preliminary cataloging and storage. Most of them would turn out to be without interest, or of interest only to the followers of some



esoteric branch of science. A relatively very small number of items, however, eventually might become very valuable, indeed, either because of the new scientific information they would provide or because they could be commercially exploited, or both. Such items had a correspondingly high immediate sales value as soon as their potential qualities were recognized.

Hence the Unclassified Specimens Depots were, in one way or another, well protected areas; none of them more impressively so than the Mezmiالي Depot. The lowering black barrier enclosing it also served to reassure the citizenry of the planet when rumors arose, as they did periodically, that the Depot's Life Bank vaults contained dormant alien monstrosities such as human eyes rarely looked upon.

But mainly the barrier was there because the University League did not want some perhaps priceless specimens to be stolen.



That was also why Danestar Gems was there.

Danestar was a long-waisted, lithe, beautiful girl, dressed severely in a fitted black coverall suit and loose short white jacket, the latter

containing numerous concealed pockets for the tools and snooping devices with which she worked. The wide ornamental belt enclosing the suit under the jacket similarly carried almost undetectable batteries of tiny control switches. Her apparently frivolous penchant for monochrome make-up--dark-green at the moment: green hair and lashes, green eyes, lips, nails, all precisely the same shade--was part of the same professional pattern. The hair was a wig, like a large flowing helmet, designed for Danestar personally, with exquisite artistry, by a stylist of interstellar fame; but beneath its waves was a mass of miniature gadgetry, installed with no less artistry by Danestar herself. On another day, or another job, depending on the purpose she was pursuing, the wig and other items might be sea-blue, scarlet, or a somewhat appalling pale-pink. Her own hair was dark brown, cut short. In most respects, Danestar actually was a rather conservative girl.

For the past ten minutes, she had been trying unsuccessfully to contact her colleague, Corvin Wergard. Wergard's last report, terminated abruptly, had reached her from another section of the Depot. He'd warned her that a number of armed men were trying to close in on him there and that it would be necessary for him to take prompt evasive action.

. . .

Danestar Gems and Corvin Wergard were employees of the Kyth Interstellar Detective Agency, working in the Depot on a secret assignment for University League authorities. Officially, they had been sent here two weeks before as communications technicians who were to modernize the Depot's antiquated systems. Danestar was, as a matter of fact, a communications expert, holding an

advanced degree in the subject. Corvin Wergard had a fair working knowledge of communication systems; but they were not his specialty. He was a picklock in the widest sense. Keeping him out of a place he wanted to get into or look into was a remarkably difficult thing to do.

Their working methods differed considerably. Danestar was an instrument girl. The instruments she favored were cobwebby miniatures; disassembled, all fitted comfortably into a single flat valise which went wherever Danestar did. Most of them she had built herself, painstakingly and with loving care like a fly fisherman creating the gossamer tools of his hobby. Next to them, their finest commercial equivalents looked crude and heavy—not too surprisingly, since Danestar's instruments were designed to be handled only by her own slender, extremely deft fingers. On an operation, she went about, putting out ten, twenty, fifty or a hundred eyes and ears, along with such other sensors, telltales, and recorders of utterly inhuman type as were required by the circumstances, cutting in on established communication lines and setting up her own, masked by anti-antispying devices. In many cases, of course, her touch had to be imperceptible; and it almost always was. She was a confirmed snoop, liked her work, and was very good at it.

Wergard's use of tools, on the other hand, was restricted to half a dozen general-utility items, not particularly superior to what might be expected of the equipment of any enterprising and experienced burglar. He simply knew locks and the methods used to protect them against tampering or to turn them into deadly traps inside and out; and, by what might have been in part an intuitive process of which he was unaware, he knew what to do about them, whether they were of a type with which he was familiar or not, almost in the instant he encountered them. To observers, he sometimes appeared to pass through the ordinary run of locked doors without pausing. Concealed

alarms and the like might delay him a minute or two; but he rarely ran into any contrivance of the sort that could stop him completely.

The two had been on a number of previous assignments together and made a good team. Between them, the Unclassified Specimens Depot became equipped with a satisfactorily comprehensive network of Danestar's espionage devices within twenty-four hours after their arrival.

At that point, a number of complications made themselves evident.

Their principal target here was the director of the Depot, Dr. Hishkan. The University League had reason to believe--though it lacked proof--that several items which should have been in the Depot at present were no longer there. It was possible that the fault lay with the automatic storage, recording, and shipping equipment; in other words, that the apparently missing items were simply not in their proper place and would eventually be found. The probability, however, was that they had been clandestinely removed from the Depot and disposed of for profit.

In spite of the Depot's size, only twenty-eight permanent employees worked there, all of whom were housed in the Depot itself. If any stealing was going on, a number of these people must be involved in it. Among them, Dr. Hishkan alone appeared capable of selecting out of the vast hodgepodge of specimens those which would have a genuine value to interested persons outside the University League. The finger of suspicion was definitely pointed at him.

That made it a difficult and delicate situation. Dr. Hishkan had a considerable reputation as a man of science and friends in high positions within the League. Unquestionable proof of his guilt must be provided before accusations could be made... .

Danestar and Corvin Wergard went at the matter unhurriedly, feeling their way. They would have outside assistance available if needed but had limited means of getting information out of the Depot. Their private transmitter could not drive a message through the energy barrier, hence could be used at most for a short period several times a day when airtrucks or space shuttles passed through the entrance lock. The Depot's communicators were set up to work through the barrier, but they were in the main control station near the entrance lock and under observation around the clock.

Two things became clear almost immediately. The nature of their assignment here was suspected, if not definitely known; and every U-League employee in the Depot, from Dr. Hishkan on down, was involved in the thefts. It was not random pilfering but a well-organized operation with established outside contacts and with connections in the League to tip them off against investigators.

Except for Wergard's uncanny ability to move unnoticed about an area with which he had familiarized himself almost as he chose, and Danestar's detection-proof instrument system, their usefulness in the Depot would have been over before they got started. But within a few days, they were picking up significant scraps of information. Dr. Hishkan did not intend to let their presence interfere with his activities; he had something going on too big to postpone until the supposed communications technicians gave up here and left. In fact, the investigation was forcing him to rush his plans through, since he might now be relieved of his position as head of the Depot at any time, on general suspicions alone.

They continued with the modernization of the communications systems, and made respectable progress there. It was a three months' job, so there was no danger they would get done too quickly with it. During and between work periods, Danestar watched, listened, recorded; and Wergard prowled. The conspirators

remained on guard. Dr. Hishkan left the Depot for several hours three times in two weeks. He was not trailed outside, to avoid the chance of a slip which might sharpen his suspicions. The plan was to let him make his arrangements, then catch him in the act of transferring University League property out of the Depot and into the hands of his contacts. In other respects, he was carrying out his duties as scientific director in an irreproachable manner.

They presently identified the specimen which Dr. Hishkan appeared to be intending to sell this time. It seemed an unpromising choice, by its looks a lump of asteroid material which might weigh around half a ton. But Dr. Hishkan evidently saw something in it, for it had been taken out of storage and was being kept in a special vault near his office in the main Depot building. The vault was left unguarded--presumably so as not to lead to speculations about its contents--but had an impressive series of locks, which Wergard studied reflectively one night for several minutes before opening them in turn in a little less than forty seconds. He planted a number of Danestar's observation devices in the vault, locked it up again and went away.

The devices, in their various ways, presently took note of the fact that Dr. Hishkan, following his third trip outside the Depot, came into the vault and remained occupied for over an hour with the specimen. His activities revealed that the thing was an artifact, that the thick shell of the apparent asteroid chunk could be opened in layers within which nestled a variety of instruments. Hishkan did something with the instruments which created a brief but monstrous blast of static in Danestar's listening recorders.

As the next supplies truck left the Depot, Danestar beamed a shortcode message through the open barrier locks to their confederates outside, alerting them for possibly impending action and describing the object which would be smuggled out. Next day, she received an acknowledgment by the same route, including a

summary of two recent news reports. The static blast she had described apparently had been picked up at the same instant by widely scattered instruments as much as a third of the way through the nearest Hub cluster. There was some speculation about its source, particularly--this was the subject of the earlier report--because a similar disturbance had been noted approximately three weeks before, showing the same mysteriously widespread pattern of simultaneous occurrence.

Wergard, meanwhile, had dug out and copied the Depot record of the item's history. It had been picked up in the fringes of the cosmic dust cloud of the Pit several years earlier by the only surviving ship of a three-vessel U-League expedition, brought back because it was emitting a very faint, irregular trickle of radiation, and stored in the Unclassified Specimens Depot pending further investigation. The possibility that the radiation might be coming from instruments had not occurred to anybody until Dr. Hishkan took a closer look at the asteroid from the Pit.

"Floating in space," Danestar said thoughtfully. "So it's a signaling device. An alien signaling device. Probably belonging to whatever's been knocking off Hub ships in the Pit."

"Apparently," Wergard said. He added, "Our business here, of course, is to nail Hishkan and stop the thieving... ."

"Of course," Danestar said. "But we can't take a chance on this thing's getting lost. The Federation has to have it. It will tell them more about who built it, what they're like, than they've ever found out since they began to suspect there's something actively hostile in the Pit."

Wergard looked at her consideringly. Over two hundred ships, most of them Federation naval vessels, had disappeared during the past

eighty years in attempts to explore the dense cosmic dust cloud near Mezmieli. Navigational conditions in the Pit were among the worst known. Its subspace was a seething turmoil of energies into which no ship could venture. Progress in normal space was a matter of creeping blindly through a murky medium stretching out for twelve light-years ahead where contact with other ships and with stations beyond the cloud was almost instantly lost. A number of expeditions had worked without mishap in the outer fringes of the Pit, but ships attempting penetration in depth simply did not return. A few fragmentary reports indicated the Pit concealed inimical intelligent forces along with natural hazards.

Wergard said, "I remember now ... you had a brother on one of the last Navy ships lost there, didn't you?"

"I did," Danestar said. "Eight years ago. I was wild about him--I thought I'd never get over it. The ship sent out a report that its personnel was being wiped out by what might be a radiation weapon. That's the most definite word they've ever had about what happens there. And that's the last they heard of the ship."

"All right," Wergard said. "That makes it a personal matter. I understand that. And it makes sense to have the thing wind up in the hands of the military scientists. But I don't want to louse up our operation."

"It needn't be loused up," Danestar said. "You've got to get me into the vault, Wergard. Tonight, if possible. I'll need around two hours to study the thing."

"Two hours?" Wergard looked doubtful.

"Yes. I want a look at what it's using for power to cut through standard static shielding, not to mention the Depot's force barrier. And I



probably should make duplos of at least part of the system."

"The section patrol goes past there every hour," Wergard said. "You'll be running a chance of getting caught."

"Well, you see to it that I don't," Danestar told him.

Wergard grunted. "All right," he said. "Can do."

She spent her two hours in Dr. Hishkan's special vault that night, told Wergard afterwards, "It's a temporal distorter, of course. A long-range communicator in the most simple form--downright primitive. At a guess, a route marker for ships. A signaling device... . It picks up impulses, can respond with any one of fourteen signal patterns. Hishkan apparently tripped the lot of them in those blasts. I don't think he really knew what he was doing."

"That should be really big stuff commercially, then," Wergard remarked.

"Decidedly! On the power side, it's forty percent more efficient than the best transmitters I've heard about. Nothing primitive there! Whoever got his hands on the thing should be able to give the ComWeb system the first real competition it's had... ."

She added, "But this is the most interesting part. Wergard, that thing is *old*! It's an antique. At a guess, it hasn't been used or serviced within the past five centuries. Obviously, it's still operational--the central sections are so well shielded they haven't been affected much. Other parts have begun to fall apart or have vanished. That's a little bit sinister, wouldn't you say?"

Wergard looked startled. "Yes, I would. If they had stuff five hundred years ago better in some respects than the most sophisticated

systems we have today... ."

"In some rather important respects, too," Danestar said. "I didn't get any clues to it, but there's obviously a principle embodied designed to punch an impulse through all the disturbances of the Pit. If our ships had that... ."

"All right," Wergard said. "I see it. But let's set it up to play Dr. Hishkan into our hands besides. How about this--you put out a shortcode description at the first opportunity of what you've found and what it seems to indicate. Tell the boys to get the information to Federation agents at once."

Danestar nodded. "Adding that we'll go ahead with our plans as they are, but they're to stand by outside to make sure the gadget doesn't get away if there's a slip-up?"

"That's what I had in mind," Wergard agreed. "The Feds should cooperate--we're handing them the thing on a platter."

He left, and Danestar settled down to prepare the message for transmission. It was fifteen minutes later, just before she'd finished with it, that Wergard's voice informed her over their private intercom that the entry lock in the energy barrier had been opened briefly to let in a space shuttle and closed again.

"I wouldn't bet," he said, "that this one's bringing in specimens or supplies... ." He paused, added suddenly, "Look out for yourself! There're boys with guns sneaking into this section from several sides. I'll have to move. Looks like the word's been given to pick us up!"

Danestar heard his instrument snap off. She swore softly, turned on a screen showing the area of the lock. The shuttle stood there, a

sizable one. Men were coming out of it. It clearly hadn't been bringing in supplies or specimens.

Danestar stared at it, biting her lip. In another few hours, they would have been completely prepared for this! The airtruck which brought supplies from the city every two days would have come and left during that time; and as the lock opened for it, her signal to set up the trap for the specimen smugglers would have been received by the Kyth Agency men waiting within observation range of the Depot. Thirty minutes later, any vehicle leaving the Depot without being given a simultaneous shortcode clearance by her would be promptly intercepted and searched.

But now, suddenly, they had a problem. Not only were the smugglers here, they had come prepared to take care of the two supposed technicians the U-League had planted in the Depot to spy on Dr. Hishkan. She and Corvin Wergard could make themselves very difficult to find; but if they couldn't be located, the instrument from the Pit would be loaded on the shuttle and the thieves would be gone again with it, probably taking Dr. Hishkan and one or two of his principal U-League confederates along. Danestar's warning message would go out as they left, but that was cutting it much too fine! A space shuttle of that type was fast and maneuverable, and this one probably carried effective armament. There was a chance the Kyth operators outside would be able to capture it before it rejoined its mother ship and vanished from the Mezmiiali System--but the chance was not at all a good one.

No, she decided, Dr. Hishkan's visitors had to be persuaded to stay around a while, or the entire operation would go down the drain. Switching on half a dozen other screens, she set recorders to cover them, went quickly about the room making various preparations to meet the emergency, came back to her worktable, completed the message to their confederates and fed it into a small shortcode

transmitter. The transmitter vanished into a deep wall recess it shared with a few other essential devices. Danestar settled down to study the screens, in which various matters of interest could now be observed, while she waited with increasing impatience for Wergard to call in again.

More minutes passed before he did, and she'd started checking over areas in the Depot where he might have gone with the spy-screen. Then his face suddenly appeared in the instrument.

"Clear of them now," he said. "They got rather close for a while. Nobody's tried to bother you yet?"

"No," said Danestar. "But our Depot manager and three men from the shuttle came skulking along the hall a minute or two ago. They're waiting outside the *door*."

"Waiting for what?"

"For you to show up."

"They know you're in the room?" Wergard asked.

"Yes. One of them has a life detector."

"The group that's looking around for me has another of the gadgets," Wergard said. "That's why it took so long to shake them. I'm in a sneaksuit now. You intend to let them take you?"

"That's the indicated move," Danestar said. "Everything's set up for it. Let me brief you... ."

The eight men who had come off the shuttle belonged to a smuggling ring which would act as middleman in the purchase of the signaling device from the Pit. They'd gone directly to Dr. Hishkan's office in the

Depot's main building, and Danestar had a view of the office in one of her wall screens when they arrived. The specimen already had been brought out of the vault, and she'd been following their conversation about it.

Volcheme, the chief of the smugglers, and his assistant, Galester, who appeared to have had scientific training, showed the manner of crack professionals. They were efficient businessmen who operated outside the law as a calculated risk because it paid off. This made dealing with them a less uncertain matter than if they had been men of Dr. Hishkan's caliber--intelligent, amoral, but relatively inexperienced amateurs in crime. Amateurs with a big-money glint in their eyes and guns in their hands were unpredictable, took very careful handling. Volcheme and Galester, on the other hand, while not easy to bluff, could be counted on to think and act logically under pressure.

Danestar was planning to put on considerable pressure.

"They aren't sure about us," she said. "Hishkan thinks we're U-League spies but that we haven't found out anything. Volcheme wants to be certain. That's why he sent in word to have us picked up before he got here. Hishkan is nervous about getting involved in outright murder but will go along with it."

Wergard nodded. "He hasn't much choice at this stage. Well, play it straight then--or nearly straight. I'll listen but won't show unless there's a reason. While I'm at large, you have life insurance. I suppose you're quizproofed... ."

"Right." Danestar checked her watch. "Doped to the eyebrows. I took it twenty minutes ago, so the stuff should be in full effect now. I'll make the contact at once."

Wergard's face vanished from the spy-screen. Danestar turned the sound volume on the wall screen showing the group in Dr. Hishkan's office back up. Two sets of recorders were taking down what went on in there and already had stored away enough evidence to convict Dr. Hishkan on a number of counts. One of the sets was a decoy; it was concealed in the wall, cleverly enough but not so cleverly that the smugglers wouldn't find it when they searched the room. The duplicate set was extremely well concealed. Danestar had made similar arrangements concerning the handful of other instruments she couldn't allow them to discover. When they took stock of the vast array of miniature espionage devices they'd dig up here, it should seem inconceivable to them that anything else might still be hidden.

She sent a final glance around the room. Everything was as ready as she could make it. She licked her lips lightly, twisted a tiny knob on her control belt, shifted her fingers a quarter-inch, turned down a switch. Her eyes went back to the view in Dr. Hishkan's office.

Dr. Hishkan, Volcheme, and Galester were alone in it at the moment. Three of Volcheme's men waited with Tornull, the Depot manager, in the hall outside of Danestar's room; the remaining three had been sent to join the search for Wergard. The craggy lump of the asteroid which wasn't an asteroid stood in one corner. Several of its sections had been opened, and Galester was making a careful examination of a number of instruments he'd removed from them.

Dr. Hishkan, showing signs of nervousness, evidently had protested that this was an unnecessary delay because Galester was now saying to Volcheme, "Perhaps he doesn't understand that when our clients pay for this specimen, they're buying the exclusive privilege of studying it and making use of what they learn."

"Naturally I understand that!" Dr. Hishkan snapped.

"Then," Galester went on, "I think we should have an explanation for the fact that copies have been made of several of these subassemblies."

"Copies?" Dr. Hishkan's eyes went wide with amazed suspicion. "Ridiculous! I--"

"You're certain?" Volcheme interrupted.

"Absolutely," Galester told him. "There's measurable duplo radiation coming from four of the devices I've checked so far. There's no point in denying that, Doctor. We simply want to know why you made the duplicates and what you've done with them."

"Excuse me!" Danestar said crisply as Dr. Hishkan began to splutter an indignant denial. "I can explain the matter. The duplos are here."

In the office, a brief silence followed her announcement. Eyes switched right and left, then, as if obeying a common impulse, swung suddenly around to the wall screen in which Danestar's image had appeared.

Dr. Hishkan gasped, "Why--why that's--"

"Miss Gems, the communications technician, no doubt," Volcheme said dryly.

"Of course, it is," Danestar said. "Volcheme, I've listened to this discussion. You put yourself in a jam by coming here. But, under the circumstances, we can make a deal."

The smuggler studied her. He was a lean, blond man, no longer young, with a hard, wise face. He smiled briefly, said, "A deal I'll like?"

"If you like an out. That's what you're being offered."

Dr. Hishkan's eyes had swiveled with growing incredulity between the screen and Volcheme's face. He said angrily, "What nonsense is this? Have her picked up and brought here at once! We must find out what--"

"I suggest," Volcheme interrupted gently, "you let me handle the matter. Miss Gems, I assume your primary purpose here is to obtain evidence against Dr. Hishkan?"

"Yes," said Danestar.

"You and your associate--Mr. Wergard--are U-League detectives?"

She shook her head.

"No such luck, Volcheme! We're private agency, full-privilege, Federation charter."

"I suspected it." Volcheme's lips pulled back from his teeth in a grimace of hostility. "You show the attributes of the breed. Do I know the agency?"

"Kyth Interstellar."

He was silent a moment, said, "I see... . Is Mr. Wergard available for negotiations?"

"No. You'll talk to me."

"That will be satisfactory. You realize, of course, that I don't propose to buy your deal blind... ."

"You aren't expected to," Danestar said.



"Then let's get the preliminaries out of the way." The smuggler's face was bleak and watchful. "I have men guarding your room. Unlock the door for them."

"Of course." Danestar turned toward the door's lock control in the wall on her left. Volcheme pulled a speaker from his pocket.

They understood each other perfectly. One of the last things a man of Volcheme's sort cared to do was get a major private detective agency on his neck. It was a mistake, frequently a fatal one. As a matter of principle and good business, the agencies didn't get off again.

But if he saw a chance to go free with the loot, leaving no witnesses to point a finger at him, he'd take it. Danestar would remain personally safe so long as Volcheme's men didn't catch up with Wergard. After that, she'd be safe only if she kept the smuggler convinced he was in a trap from which there was no escape. Within a few hours he would be in such a trap, but he wasn't in it at present. Her arrangements were designed to keep him from discovering that.

The door clicked open and four men came quickly and cautiously into the room. Three of them were smugglers; the fourth was Tornull, the U-League depot manager. The one who'd entered first stayed at the door, pointing a gun at Danestar. Volcheme's other two men separated, moved toward her watchfully from right and left. They were competent professionals who had just heard that Danestar was also one. The gun aimed at her from the door wasn't there for display.

"As a start, Decrain," Volcheme's voice said from the screen, "have Miss Gems give you the control belt she's wearing."

Danestar unsnapped the belt, making no unnecessary motions, and

handed it to the big man named Decrain. They were pulling her teeth, or thought they were, which was sensible from their point of view and made no immediate difference from hers; the belt could be of no use at present. Decrain drew out a chair, told her to sit down and keep her hands in sight. She complied, and the man with the gun came up and stood eight feet to her left. Decrain and his companion began a quick, expert search of her living quarters with detectors. Tornull, Dr. Hishkan's accomplice in amateur crime, watched them, now and then giving Danestar and her guard a puzzled look which indicated the girl didn't appear very dangerous to him and that he couldn't understand why they were taking such elaborate precautions with her.

Within six minutes, Decrain discovered as much as Danestar had wanted them to find of her equipment and records. Whenever the detector beams approached the rest of it, other beams reached out gently and blended with them until they'd slid without a quiver past the shielded areas. The collection of gadgetry Decrain laid out on Danestar's worktable was impressive and exotic enough to still suspicions, as she had expected. When he announced yet another discovery, Galester observed thoughtfully from the screen, "That's a dangerously powerful anti-interrogation drug you use, Miss Gems!"

"It is," Danestar acknowledged. "But it's dependable. I'm conditioned to it."

"How much have you taken?"

"My limit. A ten-hour dose ... sixty-five units."

She was telling the truth--her developed ability to absorb massive dosages of quizproof without permanent ill effects had pulled her out of more than one difficult situation. But a third of the amount she'd mentioned was considered potentially lethal. Decrain studied her

dubiously a moment as if pondering the degree of her humanity. Decrain appeared to be a stolid type, but the uncovering of successive batteries of spidery instruments unlike anything he had encountered in his professional career had caused him mental discomfort; and when he brought Danestar's set of gimmicked wigs--to which the green one she'd been wearing was now added--out of a shrinkcase and watched them unfold on the table, he'd seemed shaken.

"You'll be brought over here now, Miss Gems," Volcheme said, his face sour. "We want a relaxed atmosphere for our discussion, so Decrain will search you thoroughly first. As far as possible, he'll be a gentleman about it, of course,"

"I'm sure he will be," Danestar said agreeably. "Because if he isn't, his hide becomes part of the deal."

The muscles along Decrain's jaw tightened, but he continued packaging the sections of Danestar's instruments Galester wanted to examine without comment. Tornull began to laugh, caught sight of the big man's expression, and sobered abruptly, looking startled.

. . .

The semi-material composite body of the goyal flowed below the solid surface of the world of Mezmiali toward the Unclassified Specimens Depot, swerving from its course occasionally to avoid the confusing turbulences of radiation about the larger cities. Its myriad units hummed with coordinating communal impulses of direction and purpose.

Before this, in all its thousand years of existence, the goyal had

known only the planets of the Pit, murkily lit by stars which swam like patches of glowing fog in the dark. Once those worlds had supported the civilization of an inventive race which called itself the Builders.

The Builders developed spaceships capable of sliding unharmed through the cosmic dust at a speed above that of light, and a location system to guide them infallibly through the formless gloom where ordinary communication methods were useless. Eventually they reached the edges of the Pit ... and shrank back. They had assumed the dust cloud stretched on to the end of the universe, were appalled when they realized it was limited, seemed suspended in some awesome, gleaming, impossibly *open* void.

To venture into that terrible alien emptiness themselves was unthinkable. But the urge to explore it by other means grew strong. The means they presently selected was a lowly form of energy life, at home both in the space and on the planets of the Pit. The ingenuity of the Builders produced in it the impulse to combine with its kind into increasingly large, more coherent and more purposeful groups; and the final result of their manipulations was the goyal, a superbeing which thought and acted as an individual, while its essential structure was still that of a gigantic swarm of the minor uncomplicated prototypes of energy life with which the Builders had begun. The goyal was intended to be their galactic explorer, an intelligent, superbly adaptable servant, capable of existing and sustaining itself as readily in space as on the worlds it encountered.

In its way, the goyal was an ultimate achievement of the Builders' skills. But it was to become also the monument to an irredeemable act of stupidity. They had endowed it with great and varied powers and with keen, specialized intelligence, but not with gratitude. When it discovered it was stronger than its creators and swifter than their ships, it turned on the Builders and made war on them, exterminating them on planet after planet until, within not much more than a century,

it became sole master of the Pit.

For a long time, it remained unchallenged there. It shifted about the great dust cloud at will, guided by the Builders' locator system, feeding on the life of the dim worlds. During that period, it had no concept of intelligence other than its own and that of the Builders. Then a signal which had not come into use since the last of the Builders vanished alerted the locator system. A ship again had appeared within its range.

The goyal flashed through the cloud on the locator impulses like a great spider darting along the strands of its web. At the point of disturbance, it found an alien ship groping slowly and blindly through the gloom. Without hesitation, it flowed aboard and swept through the ship, destroying all life inside.

It had been given an understanding of instruments, and it studied the ship in detail, then studied the dead beings. They were not Builders though they showed some resemblance to them. Their ship was not designed to respond to the locator system; it had come probing into the Pit from the surrounding void.

Other ships presently followed it, singly and in groups. They came cautiously, scanning the smothering haze for peril, minds and instruments alert behind a variety of protective devices which seemed adequate until the moment the goyal struck. The enveloping protective screens simply were too light to hamper it seriously; and once it was through the screens, the alien crew was at its mercy. But the persistence these beings showed in intruding on its domain was disturbing to it. It let some of them live for a time on the ships it captured while it watched and studied them, manipulated them, experimented with them. Gradually, it formed a picture of an enemy race in the void which must be destroyed as it had destroyed the Builders if its supremacy was to be maintained.

It did not intend to venture into the void alone. It had planted sections of its body on a number of the worlds of the Pit. The sections were as yet immature. They could not move about in space as the parent body did, possessed barely enough communal mind to know how to nourish themselves from the planetary life about them. But they were growing and developing. In time the goyal would have others of its kind to support it. Until then, it planned to hold the Pit against the blind intruders from the void without letting the enemy race become aware of its existence.

Then the unforeseeable happened. An entire section of the locator system suddenly went dead, leaving the remainder functioning erratically. For the first time in its long existence, the goyal was made aware of the extent of its dependence on the work of the Builders. After a long difficult search, it discovered the source of the trouble. A key locator near the edge of the dust cloud had disappeared. Its loss threatened to make the entire system unusable.

There was no way of replacing it. The goyal's mind was not that of a Builder. It had learned readily to use instruments, but it could not construct them. Now it realized its mistake in exterminating the only civilized race in the Pit. It should have kept the Builders in subservience to itself so that their skills would always be at its disposal. It could no longer be certain even of detecting the intruding aliens when they came again and preventing them from discovering the secrets of the cloud. Suddenly, the end of its reign seemed near.

Unable to develop a solution to the problem, the goyal settled into a kind of apathy, drifted with dimming energies aimlessly about the Pit ... until, unmistakably, the lost locator called it! Alert at once, the goyal sped to other units of the system, found they had recorded and pinpointed the distant blast. It had come from beyond the cloud, out of the void! Raging, the goyal set off in the indicated direction. It had

no doubt of what had happened—one of the alien ships had discovered the locator and carried it away. But now it could be and would be recovered.

Extended into a needle of attenuated energy over a million miles in length, the goyal flashed out into the starlit void, its sensor units straining. There was a sun dead ahead; the stolen instrument must be within that system. The goyal discovered a spaceship of the aliens moving in the same direction, closed with it and drew itself on board. For a time, its presence unsuspected, it remained there, forming its plans. It could use the ship's energies to build up its reserves, but while the ship continued toward Mezmiali, it made no move.

Presently it noted a course shift which would take the ship past the Mezmiali system but close enough to it to make the transfer to any of the sun's four planets an almost effortless step. The goyal remained quiet. Not long afterwards, its sensors recorded a second blast from the lost locator. Now it knew not only to which planet it should go but, within a few hundred miles, at what point of that planet the instrument was to be found.

Purple fire lashed out from the ship's bulkheads to engulf every human being on board simultaneously. Within moments, the crew was absorbed. The goyal drank energy from the drive generators to the point of surfeit, left the ship and vanished in the direction of Mezmiali. Within the system, it again closed in on a ship and rode down with it to the planet.

It had reached its destination undetected and at the peak of power, its reserves intact. But this was unknown enemy territory, and it remained cautious. For hours, its sensors had known precisely where the locator was to be found. The goyal waited until the humans had disembarked from the ship, until the engines were quiet and it

could detect no significant activity in the area immediately about it. Then it flowed out of the ship and into the ground. The two humans who saw it emerge were absorbed before they could make a report.

There was no reason to hesitate longer. Moving through the dense solid matter of the planet was a tedious process by the goyal's standards; but, in fact, only a short time passed before it reached the University League's isolated Depot.

There it was brought to a very abrupt stop.

It had flowed up to the energy barrier surrounding the old fortress site and partly into it. Hostile forces crashed through it instantly with hideous, destructive power. A quarter of its units died in that moment. The remaining units whipped back out of the boiling fury of the field, reassembled painfully underground near the Depot. The body was reduced and its energy depleted, but it had suffered no lasting damage.

The communal mind remained badly shocked for minutes; then it, too, began to function again. There was not the slightest possibility of breaking through that terrible barrier! In all its experience, the goyal had never encountered anything similar to it. The defensive ship screens it had driven through in its secretive murders in the Pit had been fragile webs by comparison, and the Builders' stoutest planetary energy shields had been hardly more effective. It began searching cautiously along the perimeter of the barrier. Presently it discovered the entrance lock.

It was closed, but the goyal knew about locks and their uses. The missing locator was so close that the sensors' reports on it were blurred, but it was somewhere within this monstrously guarded structure. The goyal decided it needed only to wait. In time, the lock would open and it would enter. It would destroy the humans inside,



and be back on its way to the Pit with the locator before the alien world realized that anything was amiss... .

Approximately an hour later, a slow bulky vehicle came gliding down from the sky toward the Depot. Messages were exchanged between it and a small building on the outside of the barrier in the language employed on the ships which had come into the Pit. A section of the communal mind interpreted the exchange without difficulty, reported:

The vehicle was bringing supplies, was expected, and would be passed through the barrier lock.

At the lock, just below the surface of the ground, the goyal waited, its form compressed to near-solidity, to accompany the vehicle inside.

. . .

In Dr. Hishkan's office in the central building of the Depot, the arrival of the supplies truck was being awaited with a similar degree of interest by the group assembled there. Their feelings about it varied. Danestar's feeling--in part--was vast relief. Volcheme was a very tough character, and there was a streak of gambler's recklessness in him which might have ruined her plan.

"Any time anything big enough to have that apparatus on board leaves the Depot now, we clear it by shortcode before the lock closes," she'd said. "You don't know what message to send. You can't get it from me, and you can't get it from Wergard. The next truck or shuttle that leaves won't get cleared. And it will get stopped almost as soon as it's outside."

That was it--the basic lie! If they'd been willing to take the chance,

they could have established in five minutes that it was a lie.

"You're bluffing," Volcheme had said, icily hating her. "The bluff won't stop us from leaving when we're ready to go. We won't have to run any risks. We'll simply go out with the shuttle to check your story before we load the thing on."

"Then why don't you do it? Why wait?" She'd laughed, a little high, a little feverish, with the drugs cooking in her--her own and the stuff Galester had given her in an attempt to counteract the quizproof effect. She'd told them it wasn't going to work; and now, almost two hours later, they knew it wasn't going to work.

They couldn't make her feel physical pain, they couldn't intimidate her, they couldn't touch her mind. They'd tried all that in the first fifteen minutes when she came into the office, escorted by Decrain and Tornull, and told Volcheme bluntly what the situation was, what he had to do. They could, of course, as they suggested, kill her, maim her, disfigure her. Danestar shrugged it off. They could, but she didn't have to mention the price tag it would saddle them with. Volcheme was all too aware of it.

The threats soon stopped. Volcheme either was in a trap, or he wasn't. If the Kyth Agency had him boxed in here, he would have to accept Danestar's offer, leave with his group and without the specimen. He could see her point--they had an airtight case against Dr. Hishkan and his accomplices now. The specimen, whatever its nature, was a very valuable one; if it had to be recaptured in a running fight with the shuttle, it might be damaged or destroyed. That was the extent of the agency's responsibility to the U-League. They had no interest in Volcheme.

The smuggler was being given an out, as Danestar had indicated. But he'd had the biggest, most profitable transaction of his career

set up, and he was being told he couldn't go through with it. He didn't know whether Danestar was lying or not, and he was savage with indecision. If the Depot was being watched--Volcheme didn't much doubt that part of the story--sending the shuttle out to check around and come back could arouse the suspicions of the observers enough to make them halt it when it emerged the second time. That, in fact, might be precisely what Danestar wanted him to do.

He was forced to conclude he couldn't take the chance. To wait for the scheduled arrival of the supplies truck was the smaller risk. Volcheme didn't like waiting, either. Wergard hadn't been found; and he didn't know what other tricks the Kyth agents could have prepared. But, at any rate, the truck was the answer to part of his problem. It would be let in, unloaded routinely, allowed to depart, its men unaware that anything out of the ordinary was going on in the Depot. They would watch then to see if the truck was stopped outside and searched. If that happened, Volcheme would be obliged to agree to Danestar's proposal.

If it didn't happen, he would know she'd been lying on one point; but that would not be the end of his difficulties. Until Wergard was captured or killed, he still couldn't leave with the specimen. The Kyth agents knew enough about him to make the success of the enterprise depend on whether he could silence both of them permanently. If it was possible, he would do it. With stakes as high as they were, Volcheme was not inclined to be squeamish. But that would put an interstellar organization of experienced man-hunters on an unrelenting search for the murderers of two of its members... .

Whatever the outcome, Volcheme wasn't going to be happy. What had looked like the haul of a lifetime, sweetly clean and simple, would wind up either in failure or as a dangerously messy partial success. Galester and Decrain, seeing the same prospects, shared their chief's feelings. And while nobody mentioned that the situation

looked even less promising for Dr. Hishkan and Tornull, those two had at least begun to suspect that if the smugglers succeeded in escaping with the specimen, they would not want to leave informed witnesses behind.

When the voice of an attendant in the control building near the lock entry finally announced from the wall screen communicator that the supplies truck had arrived and was about to be let into the Depot, Danestar therefore was the most composed of the group. Even Decrain, who had been detailed to keep his attention on her at all times, stood staring with the others at the screen where Dr. Hishkan was switching on a view of the interior lock area.

Danestar made a mental note of Decrain's momentary lapse of alertness, though it could make no difference to her at present. The only thing she needed to do, or could do, now was wait. Her gaze shifted to the table where assorted instruments Galester had taken out of the alien signaling device still stood. At the other side of the table was the gadgetry Decrain had brought here from her room, a toy-sized shortcode transmitter among it. Volcheme had wanted to be sure nobody would send out messages while the lock was open.

And neither she nor Wergard would be sending any messages. But automatically, as the lock switches were thrown, the duplicate transmitter concealed in the wall of her room would start flicking its coded alert out of the Depot, repeating it over and over until the lock closed.

And twenty or thirty minutes later, when the supplies truck slid back out through the lock and lifted into the air, it would be challenged and stopped.

Then Volcheme would give up, buy his pass to liberty on her terms. There was nothing else he could do.

It wasn't the kind of stunt she'd care to repeat too often--her nerves were still quivering with unresolved tensions. But she'd carried it off without letting matters get to a point where Wergard might have had to help her out with some of his fast-action gunplay. Danestar told herself to relax, that nothing at all was likely to go wrong now.

Her gaze slipped over to Volcheme and the others, silently watching the wall screen, which was filled with the dead, light-drinking black of the energy barrier, except at the far left where the edge of the control building blocked the barrier from view. A great glowing circle, marking the opened lock in the barrier, was centered on the screen. As Danestar looked at it, it was turning a brilliant white.

Some seconds passed. Then a big airtruck glided out of the whiteness and settled to the ground. The lock faded behind it, became reabsorbed by the dull black of the barrier. Several men climbed unhurriedly out of the truck, began walking over to the control building.

Danestar started upright in her chair, went rigid.

A wave of ghostly purple fire had lifted suddenly out of the ground about the truck, about the walking men, enclosing them.

There was a general gasp from the watching group in Hishkan's office. Then, before anyone moved or spoke, a voice roared from the communicator:

"Control office, attention! Radiation attack! Close internal barrier fields at once! *Close all internal Depot barrier fields at once!*"

Volcheme, whatever else might be said of him, was a man of action. Perhaps, after two hours of growing frustration, he was ready to welcome action. Apparently, a radiation weapon of unidentified type had been used inside the Depot. Why it had been turned on the men who had got off the supplies truck was unexplained. But it had consumed them completely in an instant, though the truck itself appeared undamaged.

Coming on top of the tensions already seething in the office, the shock of such an attack might have brought on complete confusion. But Volcheme immediately was snapping out very practical orders. The four smugglers detailed to help find Corvin Wergard were working through the Depot's underground passage system within a few hundred yards of the main building. They joined the group in the office minutes later. The last of Volcheme's men was stationed in the control section. He confirmed that the defensive force fields enclosing the individual sections of the Depot inside the main barrier had been activated. Something occurred to Volcheme then. "Who gave that order?"

"Wergard did," said Danestar.

They stared at her. "That ~~was~~ Wergard," Tornull agreed. "I didn't realize it, but that was his voice."

Volcheme asked Danestar. "Do you know where he is?"

She shook her head. She didn't know, as a matter of fact. Wergard might have been watching the lock from any one of half a hundred screens in the Depot. He could have been in one of the structures adjacent to the control building ... too close to that weird fiery phenomenon for comfort. Radiation attack? What had he really made of it? Probably, Danestar thought, the same fantastic thing

she'd made of it. His reaction, the general warning shouted into the communications system, implied that; very likely had been intended to imply it to her. She was badly frightened, very much aware of it, trying to decide how to handle the incredibly bad turn the situation might have taken.

Volcheme, having hurried Tornull off to make sure the space shuttle, which had been left beside the building's landing dock, was within the section's barrier field, was asking Galester and Dr. Hishkan, "Have you decided what happened out there?"

Galester shrugged. "It appears to be a selective antipersonnel weapon. The truck presumably was enclosed by the charge because there was somebody still on it. But it shows no sign of damage, while the clothing the men outside were wearing disappeared with them. It's possible the weapon is stationed outside the Depot and fired the charge through the open lock. But my opinion is that it's being operated from some concealed point within the Depot."

Volcheme looked at Hishkan. "Well? Could it have been something that was among your specimens here? Something Miss Gems and Wergard discovered and that Wergard put to use just now?"

The scientist gave Danestar a startled glance.

Danestar said evenly, "Forget that notion, Volcheme. It doesn't make sense."

"Doesn't it? What else makes sense?" the smuggler demanded. "You've been here two weeks. You're clever people, as you've demonstrated. Clever enough to recognize a really big deal when Hishkan shoved it under your noses. Clever enough to try to frighten competitors away. You know what I think, Miss Gems? I think that when I showed up here today, it loused up the private plans you and

Wergard had for Hishkan's specimen."

"We do have plans for it," said Danestar. "It goes to the Federation. And now you'd better help us see it gets there."

Volcheme almost laughed. "I should?"

Danestar said, "You asked what else makes sense. There's one thing that does. You might have thought of it. That U-League specimen didn't just happen to be drifting around in the Pit where it was found. *Somebody made it and put it there!*"

She had the full attention of everyone in the office now, went on quickly. It was a space-signaling device which could tell human scientists a nearly complete story of how its unknown designers were able to move about freely in the dust cloud and how they communicated within it. And recently Dr. Hishkan had twice broadcast the information that human beings had the space instrument. The static bursts he'd produced had been recorded a great deal farther away from Mezmiāli than the Pit.

Volcheme interrupted with angry incredulity. "So you're suggesting aliens from the Pit have come here for it!"

"I'm suggesting just that," Danestar said. "And Dr. Hishkan, at least, must be aware that a ship which vanished in the Pit a few years ago reported it was being attacked with what appeared to be radiation weapons."

"That's true! That's true!" Dr. Hishkan's face was white.

"I think," Danestar told them, "that when that airtruck came into the Depot, something came in with it the truckers didn't know was there. Something that had a radiation weapon of a kind we don't know



about. Volcheme, if you people have a single functioning brain cell left between you, you'll tell the control building right now to put out a call for help! We're going to need it. We want the heaviest Navy ships near Mezmiali to get down here to handle this, and--"

"Volcheme!" a voice cut in urgently from the screen communicator.

The smuggler's head turned. "Go ahead, Yee!" His voice was harsh with impatience.

"The U-League group that's been hunting for this Wergard fellow doesn't answer!" Yee announced. He was the man Volcheme had stationed in the control building. "Seven men--two wearing communicators. We've been trying to contact them for eight minutes. Looks like they might have got wiped out somewhere in the Depot the same way as the truck crew!"

There was an uneasy stir among the men in the office. Volcheme said sharply, "Don't jump to conclusions! Have the operators keep calling them. They may have some reason for staying quiet at the moment. The others have checked in?"

"Yes," said Yee. "Everyone else who isn't in the control building is sitting tight behind defense screens somewhere."

"They've been told to stay where they are and report anything they observe?"

"Yes. But nobody's reported anything yet."

"Let me know as soon as someone does. And, Yee, make very sure everyone in the control building is aware that until this matter is settled, the control building takes orders only from me."

"They're *real* aware of that, Volcheme," said Yee.

The smuggler turned back to the group in the office. "Of course, we're not going to be stupid enough to take Miss Gems's advice!" he said. If he felt any uncertainty, it didn't show in his voice or face. "Somebody has pulled a surprise trick with some radiation device and killed a number of people. But we're on guard now, and we're very far from helpless! Decrain will stay here to make sure Miss Gems does not attempt to interfere in any way. The rest of us will act as a group."

He indicated the men who had been searching for Wergard. "There are four high-powered energy rifles on the shuttle. You four will handle them. Galester, Dr. Hishkan, Tornull, and I will have handguns. Dr. Hishkan tells me that the radiation suits used for dangerous inspection work in the Depot are stored on the ground level of this building.

"Remember, this device is an antipersonnel weapon. We'll be in the suits, which will block its effect on us at least temporarily; we'll be armed, and we'll be in the shuttle. There's a barrier exit at the building loading dock, through which we can get the shuttle out into the Depot. Scanscreens are being used in the control building to locate the device or its operator. When they're found--"

The communicator clicked. Wergard's voice said, "Volcheme, this is Wergard. Better listen!"

Volcheme's head swung around. "What do you want?" It was almost a snarl.

"If you'd like a look at that antipersonnel weapon," Wergard's voice told him drily, "switch your screen to Section Thirty-six. You may change your mind about chasing it around in the shuttle."

A few seconds later, the wall screen flickered and cleared. For an instant, they all stared in silence.

Like a sheet of living purple fire, the thing flowed with eerie swiftness along the surface of one of the Depot's side streets toward a looming warehouse. Its size, Danestar thought, was the immediately startling factor--it spread across the full width of the street and was a hundred and fifty, perhaps two hundred, yards long. As it reached the warehouse, the big building's defense field flared into activity. Instantly, the fiery apparition veered sideways, whipped around the corner of the street and was gone from sight.

Shifting views of the Depot flicked through the screen as Dr. Hishkan hurriedly manipulated the controls. He glanced around, eyes wide and excited. "I've lost it! It appears to be nowhere in the area."

"I wouldn't worry," Volcheme said grimly. "It will show up again." He asked Galester, "What did you make of that? What *is* it?"

Galester said, "It's identical, of course, with what we saw engulfing the truck and the men at the lock. We saw only one section of it there. It emerged partly above the surface of the Depot and withdrew into it again. As to what it is... ." He shrugged. "I know of nothing to compare it to precisely!" He hesitated again, went on. "My impression was that it was moving purposefully--directing itself. Conceivably an energy weapon could control a mobile charge in such a manner that it would present that appearance."

Dr. Hishkan added, "Whatever this is, Volcheme, I believe it would be very unwise to attempt to oppose it with standard weapons!"

The smuggler gave him a tight grin. "Since there's no immediate need to make the attempt, we'll postpone it, at any rate, Doctor. To me, the significant part of what we just saw was that the thing

avoided contact with the defense field of that building.... or was turned away from it, if it's the mobile guided charge Galester was talking about. In either case, our enemy can't reach us until we decide what we're dealing with and how we should deal with it."

Danestar said sharply, "Volcheme, don't be a fool--don't count on that! The ships that disappeared in the Pit carried defense fields, too."

Volcheme gave her a venomous glance but didn't answer. Dr. Hishkan said thoughtfully, "What Miss Gems says is technically true. But even if we are being subjected to a similar attack, this is a very different situation! This complex was once a fort designed to defend a quarter of the continent against the heaviest of spaceborne weapons. And while the interior fields do not compare with the external barrier in strength, they are still far denser than anything that would or could be carried by even the largest exploration ships. I believe we can depend on the field about this building to protect us while we consider means to extricate ourselves from the situation." He added, "I feel far more optimistic now! When we have determined the nature of the attacking entity, we should find a method of combating it available to us in the Depot. There is no need to appeal to the authorities for help, as Miss Gems suggested, and thereby have our personal plans exposed to them--which was, of course, what she intended!"

Wergard's voice said from the communicator, "If you want to continue your studies, Dr. Hishkan, you'll get the chance immediately! The thing is now approaching the main building from the north, and it's coming fast."

Dr. Hishkan turned quickly back to the screen controls.

There was a wide square enclosed by large buildings directly north

of the main one. The current of fire was half across the square as it came to view in the screen. As Wergard had said, it was approaching very swiftly and there was a suggestion of purposeful malevolence in that rushing motion which sent a chill down Danestar's spine. In an instant, it seemed, it reached the main building and the energy field shielding it; and now, instead of veering off to the side as it had done before, the tip of the fiery body curved upwards. It flowed vertically up along the wall of the building, inches away from the flickering defense field. For seconds, the wall screen showed nothing but pale purple flame streaming across it. Then the flame was gone; and the empty square again filled the screen.

From the communicator, Wergard's voice said quickly, "It crossed the top of the building, went down the other side and disappeared below the ground level surface--"

The voice broke off. Almost immediately, it resumed. "I've had more luck keeping it in view than you. It's been half around the Depot by now, and my impression is it's been looking things over before it makes its next move--whatever that's going to be.

"But one thing I've noticed makes me feel much less secure behind a section energy field than some of you people think you are. The thing has kept carefully away from the outer Depot barrier--a hundred yards or so at all times--and it cuts its speed down sharply when it gets anywhere near that limit. On the other hand, as you saw just now, it shows very little respect for the sectional building fields. I haven't seen it attempt to penetrate one of them, but it's actually contacted them a number of times without apparent harm to itself, as it did again in passing over the main building a moment ago."

Volcheme snapped, "What's that supposed to tell us?"

"I think," Wergard said, "that, among other things, our visitor has

been testing the strength of those barriers. I wouldn't care to bet my life on what it's concluded, as you seem willing to do. Another point-- it may be developing a particular interest in the building you're in. I suggest you take a close look at the square on the north again."

At first glance, the square still seemed empty. Then one noticed that its flat surface was alive with tiny sparks, with flickers and ripples of pale light. The thing was there, almost completely submerged beneath the Depot's ground level, apparently unmoving.

Tornull said, staring fascinatedly, "Perhaps it knows we have that specimen in here!"

Nobody answered. But in the square, as if aware its presence had been discovered, the fire shape rose slowly to the surface of the ground until it lay in full view, flat and monstrous, sideways to the main building. The silence in the office was broken suddenly by a chattering sound. It had not been a loud noise, but everyone started nervously and looked over at the table where the pile of instruments had been assembled.

"What was that?" Volcheme demanded.

"My shortcode transmitter," Danestar told him.

"It's recorded a message?"

"Obviously."

"From whom?"

"I'm not sure," said Danestar evenly. "But let's guess. It's not from outside the Depot because shortcode won't go through the barrier. It's not from Wergard, and it's not from one of your people. What's left?"

The smuggler stared at her. "That's an insane suggestion!"

"Perhaps," Danestar said. "Why don't we listen to the translation?"

"We will!" Volcheme jerked his head at Decrain. "Go over to the table with her. She isn't to touch anything but the transmitter!"

He watched, mouth twisted unpleasantly, as Decrain followed Danestar to the table. She picked up the miniature transmitter, slid a fingernail quickly along a groove to the phonetic translator switch. As she set the instrument back on the table, the words began.

"Who ... has ... it ... where ... is ... it ... I ... want ... it ... who ... has ... it ... where... ."

It went on for perhaps a minute and a half, three sentences repeated monotonously over and over, then stopped with a click. Danestar wasn't immediately aware of the effect on the others. She'd listened in a mixture of fear, grief, hatred, and sick revulsion. Shortcode was speech, transmitted in an economical flash, restored to phonetic speech in the translator at the reception point. Each of the words which made up the three sentences had been pronounced at one time by a human being, were so faithfully reproduced one could tell the sentences had, in fact, been patched together with words taken individually from the speech of three or four different human beings. Human beings captured by the enemy in the Pit, Danestar thought, long dead now, but allowed to live while the enemy learned human speech from them, recorded their voices for future use... .

She looked around. The others seemed as shaken as she was. Volcheme's face showed he no longer doubted that the owner of the alien instrument had come to claim it.

Dr. Hishkan remarked carefully, "If it should turn out that we are

unable to destroy or control this creature, it is possible we can get rid of it simply by reassembling the device it's looking for and placing it outside the defense screen. If it picks it up, we can open the barrier lock as an indication of our willingness to let it depart in peace with its property."

Volcheme looked at him. "Doctor," he said, "don't panic just because you've heard the thing talk to you! What this does seem to prove is that the specimen you're selling through us is at least as valuable as it appeared to be--and I for one don't intend to be cheated out of my profit."

"Nor I," Dr. Hishkan said hastily. "But the creature's ability to utilize shortcode to address us indicates a dangerous level of intelligence. Do you have any thoughts on how it might be handled now?"

Galester interrupted, indicating the screen. "I believe it's beginning to move... ."

There was silence again as they watched the fire body in the square. Its purple luminescence deepened and paled in slowly pulsing waves; then the tip swung about, swift as a flicking tongue, first toward the building, then away from it; and the thing flowed in a darting curve across the square and into a side street.

"Going to nose around for its treasure somewhere else!" Volcheme said after it had vanished. "So, while it may suspect it's here, it isn't sure. I'm less impressed by its apparent intelligence than you are, Doctor. A stupid man can learn to use a complicated instrument, if somebody shows him how to do it. This may be a stupid alien ... a soldier type sent here from the Pit to carry out a specific, limited mission."

Galester nodded. "Possibly a robot."



"Possibly a robot," Volcheme agreed. "And, to answer your question of a moment ago, Doctor--yes, I have thought of a way to get it off our necks."

"What's that?" Dr. Hishkan inquired eagerly.

"No need to discuss it here!" Volcheme gave Danestar a glance of mingled malevolence and triumph. She understood its meaning well enough. If Wergard could be located, Volcheme could now rid himself of the Kyth operators with impunity. There were plenty of witnesses to testify that the monstrous creature which had invaded the Depot had destroyed over a dozen men. She and Wergard would be put down as two more of its victims.

"We won't use the shuttle at present," Volcheme went on. "But we want the portable guns, and we'll get ourselves into antiradiation suits immediately. Decrain, watch the lady until we get back--use any methods necessary to make sure she stays where she is and behaves herself. We'll bring a suit back up for you. The rest of you come along. Hurry!"

Decrain started to say something, then stood silent and scowling as the others filed quickly out of the office and started down the hall to the right. The big man looked uneasy. With a gigantic fiery alien around, he might not appreciate being left alone to guard the prisoner while his companions climbed into the security of antiradiation suits. As the last of the group disappeared, he sighed heavily, shifted his attention back to Danestar.

His eyes went huge with shocked surprise. The chair in which she had been sitting was empty. Decrain's hand flashed to his gun holster, stopped as it touched it. He stood perfectly still.

Something hard was pushing against the center of his back below

his shoulder blades.

"Yes, I've got it," Danestar whispered behind him. "Not a sound, Decrain! If you even breathe louder than I like, I'll split your spine!"

They waited in silence. Decrain breathed cautiously while the voices and footsteps in the hall grew fainter, became inaudible. Then the gun muzzle stopped pressing against his back.

"All right," Danestar said softly--she'd moved off but was still close behind him--"just stand there now!"

Decrain moistened his lips.

"Miss Gems," he said, speaking with some difficulty, "I was, you remember, a gentleman!"

"So you were, buster," her voice agreed. "And a very fortunate thing that is for you at the moment. But--"

Decrain dropped forward, turning in the air, lashing out savagely with both feet in the direction of the voice. It was a trick that worked about half the time. A blurred glimpse of Danestar flashing a white smile above him and of her arm swinging down told him it hadn't worked here. The butt of the gun caught the side of his head a solid wallop, and Decrain closed his eyes and drifted far, far away.

She bent over him an instant, half minded to give him a second rap for insurance, decided it wasn't necessary, shoved the gun into a pocket of her coveralls and went quickly to the big table in the center of the office. Her control belt was there among the jumble of things they'd brought over from her room. Danestar fastened it about her waist, slipped on the white jacket lying beside it, rummaged hurriedly among the rest, storing the shortcode transmitter and half a dozen other items into various pockets before she picked up her emptied

instrument valise and moved to the opposite end of the table where Galester had arranged the mechanisms he'd removed for examination from the false asteroid.

She'd had her eye on one of those devices since she'd been brought to the office. It was enclosed in some brassy pseudometal, about the size of a goose egg and shaped like one. Galester hadn't known what to make of it in his brief investigation, and Dr. Hishkan had offered only vague conjectures; but she had studied it and its relationship to a number of other instruments very carefully on the night she'd been in Dr. Hishkan's vault, and knew exactly what to make of it. She placed it inside her valise, went back to the collection of her own instruments, turned on the spy-screen and fingered a switch on the control belt. The spy-screen made a staccato chirping noise.

"I'm alone here," she told it quickly. "Decrain's out cold. Now, how do I get out of this building and to some rendezvous point--fastest? Volcheme's gone berserk, as you heard. I don't want to be anywhere near them when they start playing games with that animated slice of sheet lightning!"

"Turn left when you leave the office," Wergard's voice said from the blank screen. "Take the first elevator two levels down and get out."

"And then?"

"I'll be waiting for you there."

"How long have you been in the building?" she asked, startled.

"About five minutes. Came over to pick up a couple of those antiradiation suits for us, which I have. The way things were going then, I thought I'd better hang around and wait for a chance to get you

away from our friends.

"I was about to start upstairs when Volcheme and the others left. Then I heard a little commotion in the office and decided you were doing something about Decrain. So I waited."

"Bless you, boy!" Danestar said gratefully. "Be with you in a minute!"

She switched off the spy-screen, went out of the office, skirting Decrain's harshly snoring form on the carpet, and turned left down the quiet hall.

• • •

The hideaway from which Corvin Wergard had been keeping an observer's eye on events in the Depot was one of a number he'd set up for emergency use shortly after their arrival. He'd selected it for operations today because it was only a few steps from an exit door in the building, and less than a hundred and twenty yards from both the control section and the outer barrier lock—potential critical points in whatever action would develop. Guiding Danestar back to it took minutes longer than either of them liked, but the route Wergard had worked out led almost entirely through structures shielded from the alien visitor by section defense screens.

She sat across the tiny room from him, enclosed in one of the bulky antiradiation suits, the shortcode transmitter on a wall shelf before her, fingers delicately, minutely, adjusting another of the instruments she had brought back from Hishkan's office. Her eyes were fixed on the projection field above the instrument. Occasional squiggles and ripples of light flashed through it—meaningless static. But she'd had glimpses of light patterns which seemed far from meaningless here,

was tracking them now through the command detector to establish the settings which would fix them in the visual projection field for study. That was a nearly automatic process—her hands knew what to do and were doing it. Her thoughts kept turning in nightmare fascination about other aspects of the gigantic raider.

What did they know about it? And what did it know about them?

That living, deadly energy body, or its kind, had not built the signaling device. If it was not acting for itself, if it had hidden masters in the Pit, the masters had not built the device, either. Regardless of its origin, the instrument, though centuries old, still had been in use; and in the dust cloud its value in establishing location, in permitting free purposeful action, must be immense. But whoever was using it evidently had lacked even the ability to keep it in repair. Much less would they have been able to replace it after it disappeared—and they must be in mortal fear that mankind would discover the secrets of the instrument and return to meet them on even terms in the cloud... .

So this creature had traversed deep space to reach Mezmiali and recover it.

Volcheme, conditioned to success in dealing with human opponents, still believed his resourcefulness was sufficient to permit him to handle the emissary from the Pit. To Danestar it seemed approximately like attempting to handle an animated warship. The thing was complex, not simply an elemental force directed by a limited robotic mind. It had demonstrated it could use its energies to duplicate the human shortcode system, and the glimpse she'd had in the detector's field of one of its patterns implied it was capable of much more than had been shown so far. And it might not have come here alone. There could be others of its kind undetected beyond the Depot's barrier with whom it was in communication.

In the face of such possibilities, Volcheme's determination amounted to lunacy. They might have convinced the others of the need to call for outside help; but the intercom system had been shut off, evidently on the smuggler's orders, when Danestar's escape was discovered. Through various spy devices they knew he was coordinating the activities of his men with personal communicators, and that a sectional force barrier was being set up across the center of the main building, connected to the external ones. Completed, the barrier system would transform half the building into a box trap, open at the end. The men and the specimen from the Pit would be in the other half. When the monster flowed into the trap to get at them, observers in the control building would snap a barrier shut across the open end. The thing would be safely inside ... assuming that barriers of sectional strength were impassable to it.

Volcheme's calculations were based entirely on that assumption. So far, nothing had happened to prove him wrong. The alien creature was still moving about the Depot. Wergard, before the multiple-view screen through which he had followed the earlier events of the day, reported glimpses of it every minute or two. And there were increasing indications of purpose in its motions. It had passed along this building once, paused briefly. But it had shown itself three times about the control section, three times at the main building. Its interest appeared to be centering on those points.

Until it ended its swift and unpredictable prowling, they could only wait here. Wergard was ready to slip over to a personnel lock in the barrier about the control building when an opportunity came. A gas charge would knock out the men inside, and the main barrier would open long enough then to let out their prepared shortcode warning. Their main concern after that would be to stay alive until help arrived.

Their heads turned sharply as the shortcode transmitter on the shelf before Danestar gave its chattering pickup signal. She stood up, snapped the headpiece of her radiation suit into position, collapsed the other instruments on the shelf, slid them into the suit's pockets, and picked up the valise she'd brought back from Dr. Hishkan's office.

"... where ... is ... it ... I ... want ... it... ." whispered the transmitter.

"Pickup range still set at thirty yards?" Wergard asked.

"Yes," she said.

"There's nothing in sight around here."

Danestar glanced over at him. He'd encased himself in the other radiation suit. A small high-power energy carbine lay across a chair beside him. His eyes were on the viewscreen which now showed only the area immediately around the building. She didn't answer. The transmitter continued to whisper.

It wasn't in sight, but it was nearby. Very near. Within thirty yards of the transmitter, of their hideout, of them. And pausing now much longer than it had the first time it passed the building.

"... who ... has ... it ... where ... is ... it... ."

Her skin crawled, icy and uncontrollable. If it had any way of sensing what she held concealed inside the valise, it would want it. She didn't think it could. No spying device she knew of could pierce the covering of the valise. But the egg-shaped alien instrument within--no bigger than her two fists placed together--was the heart and core of

the specimen from the Pit, its black box, the part which must hold all significant clues to the range and penetrating power of its signals. Without it, the rest of the contents of that great boulder-shaped thing would be of no use now--to Volcheme or to the alien.

They waited, eyes on the viewscreen, ready to move. If the building was attacked and the creature showed it could force its way through the enclosing energy barrier, there was an unlocked door behind them. An elevator lay seconds beyond the door; and two levels down, they would be in the underground tunnel system where a transport shell waited. If they were followed, they could continue along the escape route Wergard had marked out, moving from barrier to barrier to slow the pursuer. Unless it overtook them, they would eventually reach the eastern section of the Depot, known as the Keep, where ancient defense screens formed so dense a honeycomb that they should be safe for hours from even the most persistent attacks.

But retreat would cost them their chance to make use of the control section... .

The transmitter's whisper faded suddenly. For some seconds, neither stirred. Then Wergard said, relief sharp in his voice: "It may have moved off!"

He shifted the screen mechanisms. A pattern of half a dozen simultaneous views appeared. "There it is!"

On the far side of the control building, flowing purple fire lifted into view along fifty yards of one of the Depot's streets like the back of a great surfacing sea beast, sank from sight again. Danestar hesitated, took the commband detector quickly out of her suit pocket, placed it on the wall shelf. She pressed a button on the little instrument and the projection field sprang into semi-visibility above it.



Wergard, eyes shifting about the viewscreen, said, "It's still only seconds away from us. Don't get too absorbed in whatever you're trying to do."

"I won't."

Danestar released the bulky radiation headpiece, turned it back out of her way. Her fingertips slipped along the side of the detector, touched a tiny adjustment knob, began a fractional turn, froze.

The visual projection she'd been hunting had appeared in the field before her.

A flickering, shifting, glowing galaxy of tiny momentary sparks and lines of light ... the combined communication systems of a megacity might have presented approximately such a picture if the projector had presented them simultaneously. She licked her lips, breath still, as her fingers shifted cautiously, locking the settings into place.

When she drew her hand away, Wergard's voice asked quietly, "What's that?"

"The thing's intercom system. It's ... let me think--Wergard! What's it doing now?"

"It's beside the control building." Wergard paused. He hadn't asked what her manipulations with the detector were about; she seemed to be on the trail of something, and he hadn't wanted to distract her.

But now he added, "Its behavior indicates ... yes! Apparently it is going to try to pass through the section barrier there!"

The viewscreen showed the ghostly, reddish glittering of an activated defense barrier along most of the solid front wall of the control

building. Two deep-rose glowing patches, perhaps a yard across, marked points where the alien had come into direct contact with the barrier's energies.

It hadn't, Danestar thought, liked the experience, though in each case it had maintained the contact for seconds, evidently in a deliberate test of the barrier's strength. Her eyes shifted in a brief glance to the viewscreen, returned to the patterns of swarming lights in the projector field.

The reaction of the creature could be observed better there. As it touched the barrier, dark stains had appeared in the patterns, spread, then faded quickly after it withdrew. There was a shock effect of sorts. But not a lasting one. Danestar's breathing seemed constricted. She was badly frightened now. The section barriers did hurt this thing, but they wouldn't stop it if it was determined to force its way through their energies. Perhaps the men in the control building weren't yet aware of the fact. She didn't want to think of that--

She heard a brief exclamation from Wergard, glanced over again at the screen.

And here it comes, she thought.

The thing was rising unhurriedly out of the street surface before the control building, yards from the wall. When it tested the barrier, it had extruded a fiery pointed tentacle and touched it to the building. Now it surged into view as a rounded luminous column twenty feet across, widening as it lifted higher. The top of the column began to lean slowly forward like a ponderous cresting wave, reached the wall, passed shuddering into it. The force field blazed in red brilliance about it and its own purple radiance flared, but the great mass continued to flow steadily through the barrier.

And throughout the galaxy of dancing, scintillating, tiny lights in the projector field, Danestar watched long shock shadows sweep, darken, and spread ... then gradually lighten and commence to fade.

When she looked again at the viewscreen, the defense barrier still blazed wildly. But the street was empty. The alien had vanished into the control building.

"It isn't one being," Danestar said. "It's probably several billion. Like a city at work, an army on the march. An organization. A system. The force field did hurt it--but at most it lost one half of one percent of the entities that make it up in going through the barrier."

Wergard glanced at the projection field, then at her.

"Nobody in the control building had access to a radiation suit," he said. "So they must have been dead in an instant when the thing reached them. If it can move through a section barrier with no more damage than you feel it took, why hasn't it come out again? It's been in there for over five minutes now."

Danestar, eyes on the pattern in the projection field, said, "It may have been damaged in another way. I don't know... ."

"What do you mean?"

She nodded at the pattern. "It's difficult to describe. But there's a change there! And it's becoming more distinct. I'm not sure what it means."

Wergard looked at the field a moment, shrugged. "I'll take your word for it. It's a jumble to me. I don't see any changes in it."

Danestar hesitated. She had almost intuitive sensitivity for the significance of her instruments' indications; and that something was

being altered now, moment by moment, in the millionfold interplay of signals in the pattern seemed certain.

She said suddenly, "There's a directing center to the thing, of course, or it couldn't function as it does. Before it went through the force field, every part of it was oriented to that center. There was a kind of rhythm to the whole which showed that. Now, there's a section that's going out of phase with the general rhythm."

"What does that add up to?"

Danestar shook her head. "I can't tell that yet. But if the shock it got from the barrier disrupted part of its internal communication system, it might be, in our terms, at least partly paralyzed now. A percentage of the individual entities--say about one-tenth--are no longer coordinating with the whole, are disconnected from it... . Of course, we can't count on it, but it would explain why it hasn't reappeared."

Both were silent a moment. Then Wergard said, "If it is immobilized, it killed everyone in the control building before the shock got through to it. Otherwise we would have had indications of action by Volcheme by now."

She nodded. The intercom switch on the viewscreen was open, but the system remained dead. And whatever the smuggler and the group in the main building were engaged in, they were not at present in an area covered by her spy devices. But the space shuttle had not left the building, so they were still there. If the creature from the Pit was no longer a menace and Volcheme knew it, every survivor of the gang would be combing the Depot for traces of Wergard and herself. Since they weren't, Volcheme had received no such report from the control building. Whatever else had happened, the men stationed there had died as the alien poured in through the barrier.

Her breath caught suddenly. She said, "Wergard, I think ... it's trying to come out again!"

"The barrier's flickering," he acknowledged from the viewscreen. An instant later: "Full on now! Afraid you're right! Watch for signs of damage. If it isn't crippled, and if it suspects someone is here, it may hit this building next, immediately! It isn't in sight ... must be moving out below ground level."

Danestar snapped the radiation headpiece back in position without taking her eyes from the projection field. Shock darkness crisscrossed the pattern of massed twinkling pinpoints of brightness again, deepened. She could judge the thing's rate of progress through the barrier by that now. There were no indications of paralysis; if anything, its passage seemed swifter. Within seconds, the darkness stopped spreading, began to fade. "It's outside," she said. "It doesn't seem seriously injured."

"And it's still not in sight," said Wergard. "Stay ready to move!"

They were both on their feet. The shortcode transmitter on the shelf was silent, but this time the creature might not be announcing its approach. Danestar's eyes kept returning to the projection field. Again the barrier had achieved minor destruction, but she could make out no further significant changes. The cold probability was now that there was no practical limit to the number of such passages the creature could risk if it chose. But something about the pattern kept nagging at her mind. What was it?

A minute passed in a humming silence that stretched her nerves, another ... and now, Danestar told herself, it was no longer likely that the monster's attention would turn next to this building, to them. The barrier had remained quiet, and there had been no other sign of it. Perhaps it wasn't certain humans were hiding here; at any rate, it

must have shifted by now to some other section of the Depot.

Almost with the thought, she saw Wergard's hand move on the viewscreen controls, and in the screen the area about them was replaced by a multiple-view pattern.

Nothing stirred in the various panels; no defense field was ablaze about any of the buildings shown. The entire great Depot seemed empty and quiet.

"At a guess," Wergard remarked thoughtfully, "it's hanging around the main building again now." He moved back a step from the screen, still watching it, began to unfasten his antiradiation suit.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

He glanced over at her. "Getting out of it. One thing these suits weren't made for is fast running. I expect to be doing some of the fastest running in my career in perhaps another minute or two."

"Running? You're not--"

"Our alien," Wergard said, "should take action concerning Volcheme's boys next. But whatever it does, the instant we see it involved somewhere else, I'll sprint for the control building. It may be the last chance we get to yell for help from outside. And I don't want to be slowed down by twenty pounds of suit while I'm about it."

Danestar swallowed hard. He was right. But there was something, a feeling... .

"No! Don't go there!" she said sharply, surprising herself.

He looked around in bewilderment. "Don't go there? What are you-- watch that!"

His eyes had shifted back to the screen. For an instant, she couldn't tell what he had seen. Then, just as the view began to blur into another, she found it.

Volcheme's space shuttle had darted out of the cover of the main building, swung right, was flashing up a wide street toward the eastern section of the Depot.

"Making a run for the Keep!" Wergard said harshly. He fingered the controls, following the shuttle from view section to view section. "They might just--no, there it is!"

The great fire body--flattened, elongated--whipped past between two warehouse complexes, a rushing brightness fifty feet above the ground, vanished beyond the buildings.

"Too fast for them!" Wergard shook his head. "It knows what they're doing and is cutting them off. Perhaps their guns can check it! You watch what happens--I'm going now."

"No! I... ."

Then at last the realization surged up. Danestar stared at him, completely dismayed.

"It's a trap," she said evenly. "Of course!"

"What is? What are you talking about?"

"The control building! Don't you see?" She jerked her head at the projection field. "I *said* a section of the thing was splitting off from the main body! When it came out through the barrier again, *that* section wasn't showing any shock effects. I saw it but didn't understand what it meant. Of course! It didn't come through the barrier at all. It's still *in*

*there*, Wergard! In the control building. Waiting for any of us to show up. There're two of them now... ."

She watched stunned comprehension grow in his face as she spoke.

The smugglers' shuttle was caught not much more than a minute later. It had discovered the enemy between it and the Keep section, turned back. When the space thing followed, tiny bursts of dazzling white light showed the shuttle's energy guns were in action. The fire body jerked aside and paused ... and now the shuttle turned again, flashed straight at its pursuer, guns blazing full out.

For a moment, it seemed a successful maneuver. The great creature swept up out of the path of the machine, slipped over the top of a building, disappeared. The shuttle rushed on toward the Keep--and at the next corner a loop of purple radiance snared it, drove it smashing into a building front. The fire giant flowed down, sent the shuttle hurtling against the building again, closed over it. For seconds, the radiance pulsed about the engulfed vehicle, then lifted into the air, moved off. There was no sign of the shuttle until, some hundreds of yards away, the fire body opened to let the shattered machine slide out, drop to the surface of the Depot. Its lock door was half twisted away; and Volcheme and his companions clearly were no longer within it.

To Danestar, watching in sick fascination, it had seemed as if a great beast of prey had picked up some shelled, stinging creature, disarmed it, cracked it to draw out the living contents, and flung aside the empty shell.

The alien swung west, toward the central section of the Depot, seemed to be returning to the main building complex, but then flowed down to the surface, sank into it and vanished.



Minutes passed and it did not reappear. Again the Depot's sections stood quiet and lifeless in the viewscreen.

"It may be waiting for somebody else to break from cover," Wergard said suddenly. "But you'd think the first thing it would do now is push into the main building and get its gadget! Volcheme must have left it there--the thing wouldn't have slammed the shuttle around like that if it hadn't been sure the contraption wasn't inside."

Danestar didn't reply. Their nerves were on edge, and Wergard was simply thinking aloud. They had no immediate explanation for the thing's behavior. But it had been acting purposefully throughout, and there must be purpose in its disappearance.

All they could do at present was wait, alert for signs of an approach on any level. She had discarded her antiradiation suit, as Wergard had done previously. The men in the shuttle might have gained a second or two of life because of the protection the suits gave them; but against so overwhelmingly powerful a creature they obviously had made no real difference. And they were cumbersome enough to be a serious disadvantage in other respects. If there were indications that the second energy body, the smaller one in the control building, had left it, Wergard would still attempt a dash over there.

There were no such indications. There were, in fact, no indications of any kind of activity whatever until, approximately ten minutes after it vanished, the big space creature showed itself again.

It was rising slowly from the ground into the square before the deserted main building when Wergard detected it in the screen. Then, while they watched, it flowed deliberately up to the building and into it.

And no defending force fields flared into action.

As it disappeared, they exchanged startled looks. Wergard said quickly, "Volcheme must have had the barriers shut off just before they left by the lock--so the thing could pick up its device... ."

"And let them get away?" Danestar hesitated. There'd been talk of that before she escaped from Volcheme's group. But she was not at all certain that the smuggler, even under such intense immediate pressures, would abandon his prize completely. The flight might even have been designed in part to draw the raider away from it.

"Otherwise--" Wergard scowled, chewed his lip. "Has there been anything in the projection pattern to show it's split again?"

She shook her head. "No. But if you're thinking it could detach a section small enough to get in through a personnel lock and turn off the building's barrier--"

"That's what I'm thinking."

Danestar shrugged, said, "I wouldn't be able to tell that, Wergard. I've been watching the projection. But it would be too minor a difference to be noticeable. It may have done it."

He was silent a moment. "Well," he said then, "it has the gadget it came for now. We'll see what it does next." He added, without change of tone, "Incidentally, it doesn't have all of it, does it?"

Danestar gave him a startled glance.

"How did you guess?" she asked.

A half-grin flicked over Wergard's tense face. "It's the sort of thing you'd do. You've been hanging on to that valise as if there were something very precious inside."

"There is," Danestar agreed. "It's not very big, but the specimen won't work without it. And when those things in the Pit realize it's gone, they won't be able to replace it."

"Very dirty trick!" Wergard said approvingly. He glanced at the valise. "Supposing we manage to get out of this alive--how useful could the item become?"

"Extremely useful, if it gets to really capable people. As far as I could make out, it must embody all the essentials of that system."

Wergard nodded. "We'll hang on to it, then. As long as we can, anyway. We may have to destroy it, of course. Think the thing could spot there's a part missing?"

"It could if it has a way of testing it," said Danestar. "But if the specimen's been reassembled and resealed, nothing will show... . There the creature comes now!"

They watched its emergence from the main building. It poured out of the landing lock area, swung west across the central square, moving swiftly. It might be carrying the specimen with it, as it had carried the shuttle.

"Coming back here!" Wergard remarked some seconds later. "And if it can open sectional barriers, it can open the main Depot lock in the control building... ."

Danestar knew what he meant. The Pit creature might believe it had achieved its objective in regaining the lost signaling instrument and simply leave now. She began to feel almost feverish with hope, warned herself it was much more probable it did not intend to let any human being in the Depot remain alive to tell about it.

Her gaze shifted again to the patterns in the projection field. No further changes had been apparent, but a sense of dissatisfaction, of missing some hidden significance, still stirred in her each time she studied them. I'm not seeing everything they should tell me, she thought. She shook her head tiredly. Too much had happened these hours! Now her thinking seemed dulled.

She heard Wergard say, "It's stopped for something!"

It had come to an intersection, paused. Then suddenly it veered to the right, moved swiftly past three buildings, checked again before a fourth. A probing fire tentacle reached toward the building, and defense barriers promptly blazed into activity.

The creature withdrew the tentacle, remained where it was, half submerged in the street. Activated by its proximity, the defense field continued to flare while one or two minutes passed. Then the field subsided, vanished. The creature moved forward until some two-thirds of it appeared to be within the building. Barely seconds later, it drew back again, swung away... .

"It caught somebody inside there!" Wergard said. "It couldn't have been looking for anything else. How did it know some poor devils had holed up in that particular section?"

The intercom signal on the viewscreen burred sharply with his last words, then stopped. They stared at it, glanced at each other. Neither attempted to move toward the switch.

The intercom began ringing again. It rang, insistently, jarringly, with brief pauses, for a full minute now before it went silent.

"So that's how!" Wergard said heavily. He shrugged. "Well, if it--or a section of it--can manipulate a barrier lock and reproduce shortcode

impulses, it can grasp and manipulate an intercom system. Not a bad way to locate survivors. If we don't answer--"

"We can't stay here, anyway," Danestar told him, frowning at the projection field. She had spoken in an oddly flat, detached manner.

"No. It's mopping up before it heads home--and now it can apparently cut off every sectional barrier that isn't locally maintained directly from the control building. It won't be long before it discovers that--if it hasn't already done it." Wergard picked up the energy gun. "Grab what you need and let's move! I've thought of something better than trying to make it to the Keep and playing hide-and-seek with it there. With the tricks it's developed, we wouldn't last--" He looked over, said quickly, sharply, "Danestar!"

Danestar glanced around at him, bemused, lips parted. "Yes? I... ."

"Wake up!" Wergard's voice was edged with nervous impatience. "I think I can work us over to the section the thing just cleared out. If we leave the barrier off, there's a good chance it won't check that building again. Let's not hang around here!"

"No." She shook her head, turned to the instruments on the shelf. "You've got to get me to our quarters, Wergard--immediately!"

"From here? Impossible! There're several stretches--over three hundred yards in all--where we'd be in the open without the slightest cover. It's suicide! We--" Wergard checked himself, staring at her. "You've thought up something? Is it going to work?"

"It might, if we can get there."

He swore, blinked in scowling reflection.

"All right!" he said suddenly. "Can do--I hope! Tell me on the way or

when we're there what you're after. We'll make a short detour. There's something I could do to keep our friend occupied for a while. It may buy us an additional twenty, thirty minutes... ."

. . .

Hurrying up a narrow dim passage behind Wergard, Danestar felt clusters of eerie fears hurry along with her. Wergard swung on at a fast walking pace. Now and then she broke into a run to keep up with him; and when she did, he slowed instantly to let her walk again. It was sensible--they might have running enough to do shortly. But staying sensible wasn't easy. Her legs *wanted* to run.

They were blind here, she thought. Her awareness of it was what had built up the feeling of frightened helplessness during the past minutes to the point where it seemed hardly bearable. She couldn't use her instruments, and the sectional barriers in this area were turned off; they were also deprived of that partial protection. As Wergard had suspected, the alien had discovered the force fields could be operated from the central control office. The Depot was open to it now except in sections where human beings had taken refuge and cut in defense barriers under local control. Such points, of course, were the ones it would investigate.

And they might encounter it at any moment, with no warning at all. Whether they got through to their quarters had become a matter of luck--good luck or bad--and Danestar, who always prepared, always planned, found herself unable to accept that condition.

Wergard halted ahead of her; and she stopped, watched him cautiously edge a door open, glance out. He looked back, slid the energy carbine from his shoulder, held it in one hand, made a

beckoning motion with the other. Danestar followed him through the door and he eased it back into its lock. They had come out into one of the Depot's side streets. It stretched away on either side between unbroken building fronts, a strip of the dull black dome of the main barrier arching high above.

They darted across the street, ran fifty feet along the building on the far side before Wergard stopped at another door. This one opened on a pitch-dark passage; and, a moment later, the darkness closed in about them.

Wergard produced a light, said quietly, "Watch your step here! The section was sealed off officially fifty years ago and apparently hasn't been inspected since."

He moved ahead, rapidly but carefully, holding the light down for her. They were some five minutes from their starting point. Beyond that, Danestar did not know what part of the Depot they'd come to, but Wergard had told her about this building. It had been part of the old fortress system, cheaper to seal off than remove, an emergency unit station which operated the barrier defenses of the complexes surrounding it. If the equipment was still in working order, Wergard would turn on those barriers. Approximately a tenth of Depot would again be shielded then, beyond manipulation by the control office. That should draw the creature's attention to the area, while they moved on. Their living quarters were in a building a considerable distance away.

Eyes shifting about, Danestar followed the pool of light dancing ahead of her feet. The flooring was decayed here and there; little piles of undefinable litter lay about, and the air was stale and musty. Wergard, in his prowling, might in fact have been the first to enter the building in fifty years. They turned a corner of the passage, came to a dark doorspace. There he stopped.

"You'd better wait here," he told her. "There's a mess of machinery inside, and some of it's broken. I'll have to climb around and over it. If the barrier system is operating, I'll have it going within three or four minutes."

He vanished through the door. Danestar watched the receding light as it moved jerkily deeper into a forest of ancient machines, lost it when it went suddenly around a corner. There was complete darkness about her then. She fingered a lighter in her pocket but left it there. No need to nourish the swirling tide of apprehensions within her by peering about at shadows. Darkness wasn't the enemy. After a minute or two, she heard a succession of metallic sounds in the distance. Presently they ended, and a little later Wergard returned. He was breathing hard and his face was covered with dirt-streaked sweat.

"As far as I can make out, the barriers are on," he said briefly. "Now we'd better get out of the neighborhood fast!"

• • •

But they made slower over-all progress than before, because now they had to use the personnel locks in the force fields as they moved from one complex section to the next. In between, they ran where they could. They crossed two more side streets. After the second one, Wergard said, "At the end of this building we'll be out of the screened area."

"How far beyond that?" Danestar asked.

"Three blocks. Two big sprints in the open!" He grimaced. "We *could* use the underground systems along part of the stretch. But



they won't get us across the main streets unless we follow them all the way to the Keep and back down."

She shook her head. "Let's stick to your route." A transport shell of the underground system could have taken them to the Keep and into the far side of the Depot in minutes. But its use would register on betraying instruments in the control building, and might too easily draw the alien to the moving shell.

The personnel lock at the other end of the building let them into a narrow alley. Across it was the flank of one of the Depot's giant warehouses. As they started along the alley, there was a crackling, spitting, explosive sound--the snarl of a defense field flashing into action.

Wergard reached out, snatched the valise from Danestar's hand.

*"Run!"*

They raced up the alley. The furious crackle of the force field came from behind them, from some other building. It was not far away, and it was continuing. A hundred yards on, Wergard halted abruptly, caught Danestar as she plowed into him, thrust the valise at her.

"Here--!" he gasped. She saw they'd reached a door to the warehouse; now Wergard was turning to open it. Clutching the valise, thoughts a roiling confusion of terror, she looked back, half expecting to see a wave of purple fire sweeping up the alley toward them.

But the alley was empty, though the building front along which the barrier blazed was only a few hundred yards away. Then, as Wergard caught her arm, hauled her in through the door, a closer section--the building from which they had emerged a moment before--erupted in glittering fury. The door slammed in back of her,

and they were running again, through a great hall, along aisles between high-stacked rows of packing cases. And--*where was the valise?* Then she realized Wergard had taken it.

She followed him into a cross-aisle. Another turn to the right, and the end of the hall was ahead, a wide passage leading off it. She had a glimpse of Wergard's strained face looking back for her; then, suddenly, he swerved aside against the line of cases, crouched, his free arm making a violent gesture, motioning her to the floor.

Danestar dropped instantly. A moment later, he was next to her.

"Keep ... down!" he warned. "*Way* ... down!"

Sobbing for breath, flattened against the cases, she twisted her head around, saw what he was staring at over the stacked rows behind them. A pale purple reflection went gliding silently along the ceiling at the far end of the hall, seemed to strengthen for an instant, abruptly faded out.

They scrambled to their feet, ran on into the passage.

Even after they'd slowed to a walk again, had reached a structure beyond the warehouse, they didn't talk about it much. Both were badly winded and shaken. It had been difficult to believe that the thing could have failed to detect them. Its attention must have been wholly on the force fields it was skirting, even as a section of it flowed through the warehouse within a few hundred feet of them.

If they'd been a few seconds later reaching the alley... .

Danestar reached into her white jacket, turning up its cooling unit. Wergard glanced at her. His face was dripping sweat. He wiped at it with his sleeve.

She asked, "You're still wearing the sneaksuit?"

Wergard lifted a strand of transparent webbing from under his collar, let it snap back. "Think it might have helped?"

"I don't know." But the creature might have the equivalent of a life detector unit as part of its sensory equipment, and a sneaksuit, distorting and blurring the energy patterns of a living body, would perhaps afford some protection. She said, "I'll get into one as soon as we reach our quarters. It may have known somebody was around but didn't want to waste time picking up another human until it found out why the defense barriers were turned on again in that area."

Wergard remarked dubiously, "It seems to me it's got picking up humans at the top of its priority list!" After a moment, he added, "The long sprint comes next. Feel up to it?"

Danestar looked at him. "I'd better feel up to it! If we see that thing again--I'm one inch this side of pure panic right now!"

He grunted. "Quit bragging!" He slid the carbine from his shoulder. "It's that door ahead. Let me have a look out first."

As he began to unlock the door, Danestar found herself glancing back automatically once more at the long, lit, empty corridor through which they had come, their hurried steps echoing in the silence of the building. Then she saw Wergard had paused, half crouched and motionless, at the barely opened door.

"What is it?" she asked quickly.

"I don't know!" The face he turned to her was puzzled and apprehensive. "Come up and take a look!"

She moved to where she could look out past him. After a moment,

she said, "There are adjustment instruments for the Depot lighting somewhere in the control section."

"Uh-huh," said Wergard. "Another item that's been sealed away for a hundred years or so. But our Number Two Thing in the control building seems to have got to them. I'd like to know what it means."

He opened the door wider. Both moved forward carefully, glancing along the street outside.

This was one of the main streets of the Depot. Across from them, a hundred and fifty yards away, was the massive white front of the structure which housed the central generators. Approximately two hundred yards to the left, it was pierced by a small entrance door which was the next step on Wergard's route to their quarters. To west and east, the street stretched away for half a mile before rows of buildings crossed it.

But all this was in semi-darkness now; too dim to let them make out the door in the wall of the generator building from where they stood. A hazy brightness above the line of buildings across the street indicated the rest of the Depot was still flooded by the projection lighting system which was that of the old fortress--wear-proof and ageless. If not deliberately tampered with, it would go on filling the Depot with eternal day-brightness for millennia.

But something had tampered with it and was still tampering with it. As they looked, the gloom along the street deepened perceptibly, then, slowly, lightened to its previous level.

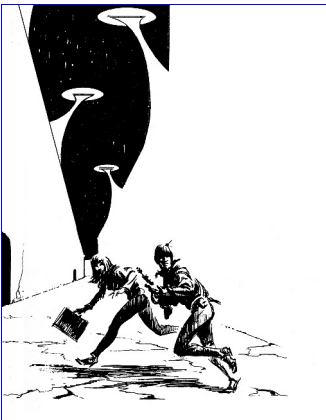
"There can't be much light in the Pit, of course," Wergard said, staring up the street to the west. The control section, Danestar realized suddenly, lay in that direction. "It may be trying to improve visibility in the Depot for its perceptions."

"Or," said Danestar, "ruin visibility for ours."

Wergard looked at her. "We don't have the time left to try another route," he said. "Whatever it's doing, we may make a mistake in crossing the street while it's experimenting. But waiting here makes no sense."

She shook her head. "The intention might be to keep us waiting here."

"Yes, I thought of that. So let's go. Right now. Top speed across. I'll stay behind you."



For an instant, Danestar hesitated. Her feeling that the uncertain darkness of the wide street was under the scrutiny of alien senses, that they would be observed and tracked, like small scuttling animals,

as soon as they left the shelter of the doorway, became almost a conviction in that moment. The fact remained that they could not stay where they were. She tightened her grip on the handle of the valise, drew a deep breath, darted out.

They were half across when the darkness thickened so completely that they might have moved in mid-stride into a black universe. Blind, she thought. It was an abrupt mental shock. She faltered, almost stumbled, felt she had swerved from the line she was following, tried to turn back to it ... suddenly didn't know at all in which direction to move. Now panic closed in.

*"Wergard!"*

"That way!" His voice, hoarse and strained, was on her right, rather than behind her. As she turned toward it, his light flicked on, narrowed to a pale thread, marking a small circle on the wall of the generator building ahead of Danestar. She was hurrying toward the wall again as the thread of light cut out ... and seconds later, the wall and the street began to reappear, dim and vague as before, but tangibly present. They reached the wall together, turned left along it. Again the street darkened, became lost in absolute blackness.

Wergard's hand caught her arm. "Just walk." He added something, muttered and indistinct, which might have been a curse. They went on, breathing raggedly. Wergard's hand remained on Danestar's arm. The darkness lightened a trifle, grew dense again. "Hold on a moment!" Wergard said, very softly.

She stopped instantly, stood unmoving, let her breath out slowly. Wergard's hand left her arm. She had an impression of cautious motion from him, decided he'd raised the carbine to fire-ready position. Then he, too, was still.

He'd speak when he thought he could. Danestar's eyes shifted quickly, scanning the unrelieved dark about them. The only sound was a dim faint hum of machinery from within the structure on their right.

Then she realized something had appeared in her field of vision.

It was ahead and to the left. A small pale patch of purple luminescence, moving swiftly but in an oddly jerky manner, its outline shifting and wavering, as it approached their path at what might be a right angle. How far away? If it was touching the ground, Danestar thought, or just above it, it must be at least two hundred yards farther up the street. That would make it a considerably larger thing than her first impression had suggested.

As these calculations flicked through her mind, their object passed by ahead, moved on to the right, abruptly vanished.

"You saw it?" Wergard whispered.

"Yes."

"Went in between a couple of buildings. Not so good--but it was some distance off. We don't seem to have been noticed. Let's go on."

. . .

Wergard had glimpsed another of the minor fire shapes just before they stopped. That one had been smaller--or farther away--and had been in sight for only an instant, on the left side of the street.

"They shouldn't be too large to get through a personnel lock and

switch off a barrier for Thing Number One," he said as they hurried along a catwalk in the generator building. "But that doesn't necessarily mean Number One is in this area."

"Scouts?" Danestar suggested.

That had been Wergard's thought. The Pit creature could have split off several dozen autonomous sections of itself of the size they had observed without noticeably reducing its main bulk, and scattered them about the Depot to speed up the search for any humans still hiding out. The carbine couldn't have done significant damage to the alien giant but should have the power to disrupt essential force patterns in these lesser replicas. "They don't make things easier for us," Wergard said, "but we'll have to show ourselves only once more. After that, we'll have cover. And we can change our tactics a little... ."

At the end of the generator building was the central street of the Depot, slightly wider than the last one they had crossed. It was almost startling to find it normally lit. Directly opposite was the entrance recess to another building. This was the final open stretch on the way to their quarters. Wergard mopped his forehead, asked, "Ready to try it?"

Danestar nodded. She felt lightly tensed, not at all tired. Dread had its uses--her body had recognized an ultimate emergency and responded. She thought it would go on running now when she called on it until it fell dead.

Wergard was wearing a sneaksuit; she wasn't. It was possible they were being followed, that the light-shapes they'd seen were casting about in the area for the source of the life energy they'd detected here, of which she was the focus. In that case, getting across the central street might be the point of greatest danger. They'd decided she should go first while Wergard covered her with the carbine. He



would follow as soon as she was within the other building.

She slipped out the door ahead of him, drew a deep breath, ran straight across the too-silent, bright-lit street toward the entrance recess.

And nothing happened. The carbine stayed quiet. The paving flowed by, and it seemed only an instant then before the building front swayed close before her. Danestar flung herself into the recess, came up gasping against the wall.

A door on the left, Wergard had said. Where?—she discovered it next to her, pulled it open.

For a moment, her mind seemed about to spin into insanity. Then she was backing away from the door, screaming with all her strength, while two shapes of pale fire glided out through it toward her. Somewhere, she heard the distant sharp snarl of the carbine. A blizzard of darting, writhing lines of purple light enveloped her suddenly, boiled in wild turmoil about the recess. The closer of the shapes had vanished, and the carbine was snarling again.

Abruptly, her awareness was wiped out.

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"Got your third setting now, I think!" Wergard announced.

Danestar glanced at him. He sat at a table a few feet to her left, hunched forward, elbows planted on the table, face twisted in concentration as he peered at the tiny paper-flat instrument in his left hand.

"Uh-huh, that's it!" He sighed heavily. "Four to go."

His right forefinger and thumb closed cautiously down on the device, shifted minutely, shifted back again. It was an attachment taken from Danestar's commband detector. She had designed it, used it on occasion to intrude on covert communications in which she had a professional interest, sometimes blanking a band out gently at a critical moment, sometimes injecting misinformation.

But it was an instrument designed for her fingers, magical instruments themselves in their sensitized skill, deftness, and experience. It had not been designed for Wergard's fingers, or anyone else's; and the only help she could give him with it was to tell him what must be done. Both hands were needed to operate the settings, and at present she couldn't use her left hand. What had knocked her out in the building entrance, an instant before Wergard's gun disrupted the second of the two Pit things that surprised her there, seemed to have been the approximate equivalent of a near miss from a bolt of lightning. Wergard had carried her two Depot blocks to their quarters, was working a sneaksuit over her, before she regained consciousness. Then she woke up suddenly, muscles knotted, trying to scream, voice thick and slurred when she started to answer Wergard's questions. They discovered her left side was almost completely paralyzed, her tongue partly affected. As soon as he could make out what she wanted, what her plan had been, Wergard hauled her down to the ground-level barrier room of the building, along with an assortment of hastily selected gadgetry, settled her in a chair next to the barrier control panel, arranged the various instruments on a table before her where she could reach them with her right hand. Then he went to work on the attachment's miniature dials to adjust them to the seven settings she'd told him were needed.

He swore suddenly, in a gust of savage impatience, asked without

looking up, "How long have I been playing around with this midget monster of yours?"

"Sixteen minutes," Danestar told him. The paralysis had begun to lift; she could enunciate well enough, though the left side of her face remained numb. But she still couldn't force meaningful motion into her left hand. If she had been able to use it, she wouldn't have needed half a minute to flick in the dial readings, slap the attachment back into the detector. It was a job no more involved than threading a series of miniature needles. The problem was simply that Wergard's hands weren't made for work on that scale, weren't trained to it.

"Sixteen minutes!" He groaned. His face was beaded with the sweat of effort. "Well, I seem to be getting the hang of it. Our luck may hold up."

It might, she thought. It was still a matter of luck. They'd had good luck and bad luck both during the past half hour. Until now, the main alien body had been engaged in the cluster of activated defense barriers on the north side of the Depot. The viewscreen on the table showed her the intermittent flickering of force fields there; now and then, a section blazed brightly. And sometimes she'd seen the great purple glow passing among the buildings. While it remained in that area, they had time left. But the barriers were being shut off, one by one. Detached work segments of the thing would be able to enter by a personnel lock and cut the controls. And--perhaps when the locks could not be immediately found--the main body was again driving directly through the force fields and absorbing what damage it must to get into a protected building.

During the past four minutes alone, it appeared to have passed through three such sectional barriers. Changes in the detector's visual pattern revealed the damage. The accumulated effect was not inconsiderable.

Danestar's gaze went to the locked instrument valise, lying on the table between the detector and the shortcode transmitter, in immediate reach of her right hand. Within it was still the alien instrument she'd taken from Dr. Hishkan's office, the small, all-essential coordinating device without which the artificial asteroid from the cosmic cloud was a nonoperative, useless, meaningless lump of deteriorating machinery.

Had the alien mind discovered it wouldn't function, that the humans here had removed a section of it?

She thought it had. The repeated acceptance, during these last minutes, of the destruction of whole layers of its units in the raging force fields, to allow it to reach the barrier controls more quickly, suggested a new urgency in its search for human survivors. It would have been logical for it to assume that whoever had the missing instrument had sought refuge in the one area still shielded by multiple barriers.

But when the last of those defense fields was shut off and the last of the northern buildings hunted through, the creature would turn here. In that, their luck had been bad--very bad! To avoid attracting attention to the building, they'd planned to leave its barrier off as long as possible. They were in sneaksuits, perhaps untraceable. They might have remained undetected indefinitely.

But they had been in the barrier room only a few minutes before one of the prowling segments found them. Danestar had the streets along two sides of the building under observation, and nothing had been in sight there. Evidently, the thing had approached through an adjacent building. Without warning, it erupted from an upper corner of the room, swept down toward them. Danestar barely glimpsed it before Wergard scooped up the carbine placed across the table beside

him and triggered it one-handed.

The segment vanished, as its counterparts in the building entry had done, in an exploding swirl of darting, purple-gleaming lines of light. The individual energy entities which had survived the gun's shock-charge seemed as mindless and purposeless as an insect swarm whirled away on a sudden gust of wind. Danestar had slapped on the building's defense fields almost as Wergard fired; and in seconds, the indicators showed the fields flickering momentarily at thousands of points as the glittering purple threads flashed against them and were absorbed. Within a minute, the building was clear again.

But almost immediately afterwards, the barrier was impacted in a far more solid manner; and now the viewscreen showed a sudden shifting and weaving of fire shapes in one of the streets beside the building. Four or five segments had appeared together; one had attempted to slip into the building and encountered the force field. Lacking the protective bulk of the main body, it was instantly destroyed. The others obviously had become aware of the danger.

"If they can find the personnel lock here, they should try that!" Wergard remarked.

He laid Danestar's instrument carefully to one side, stood waiting with the gun. The entry surface of the lock was in the wall across from them, ringed in warning light to show the field was active. Danestar kept her eyes on the control panel. After a moment, she said sharply, "They have found the lock!" A yellow light had begun to flash beside the field indicators, signaling that the lock was in use. As it began to open on the room, the carbine flicked a charge into it, and the purple glow within exploded in glittering frenzies.

The attempt to use the lock wasn't repeated. The scouting segments were not in themselves an immediate danger here. But in the open,

away from the building, where they could bring their destructive powers into play, a few of them should be more than a match for the carbine. To retreat again to some other point of the Depot had become impossible. The things remained in the vicinity and were on guard, and other segments began to join them.

That made it simply a question of how many minutes it still would be before the main body appeared to deal with the humans pinned down in this building. Neither Wergard nor Danestar mentioned it. They'd had good luck and bad, lasted longer than there had been any real reason to expect; now they'd run out of alternative moves. Nothing was left to discuss. Wergard had laid the carbine down, resumed his carefully deliberate groping with the spidery dials of Danestar's device. Danestar watched the instruments; and the instruments, in their various ways, watched the enemy. A tic began working in the corner of Wergard's jaw; sweat ran down his face. But his hands remained steady. After a time, he announced he had locked in the first setting. Then the second, and the third... .

• • •

There were developments in the instruments Danestar didn't tell him about. That the main body of the alien was absorbing savage punishment in its onslaught on the force fields became increasingly evident. The detector's projection field pattern almost might have been that of a city undergoing an intermittent brutal barrage. Blacked-out sections remained lifeless now, and there were indications of an erratically spreading breakdown in general organization.

But it should know, she thought, how much of that it could tolerate. Meanwhile it was achieving its purpose with frightening quickness.

Barrier after barrier blazed in sudden bright fury along the line of search through the northern complex, subsided again. The viewscreen panels kept shifting as Danestar followed the thing's progress. Then she cut in one more panel, and knew it was the last. The alien had very little farther to go.

She switched the screen back momentarily to the local area, the streets immediately around their building. There was evidence here, she thought, in the steadily increasing number of ghostly darting light shapes beyond the barrier, that alien control of the Depot was almost complete. The segments had been sent through it like minor detachments of an invading army to make sure no humans were left in hiding anywhere. They were massing about this building now because the composite mind knew that within the building were the only survivors outside of the northern complex.

The thing was intelligent by any standards, had used its resources methodically and calculatingly. The major section which had been detached from it after it captured the control building apparently had remained there throughout, taking no part in other action. That eliminated the possibility that humans might escape from the Depot or obtain outside help. Only during the past few minutes, after the alien mind was assured that the last survivors were pinned down, had there been a change in that part of the pattern in the projector field. The thing seemed to be on the move now, filling some other role in the over-all plan. Perhaps, Danestar thought, it would rejoin the main body as a reserve force, to make up for the losses suffered in the barriers. Or it might be on its way here.

Wergard said absently, as if it had occurred to him to mention in passing something that was of no great interest to either of them, "Got that fourth setting now... ."

Less than a minute later, in the same flat, perfunctory tone, he

announced the fifth setting was locked in; and hope flared in Danestar so suddenly it was like a shock of hot fright.

She glanced quickly at him. Staring down at the instrument he fingered with infinite two-handed deliberation, Wergard looked drugged, in a white-faced trance. She didn't dare address him, do anything that might break into that complete absorption.

But mentally she found herself screaming at him to hurry. There was so little time left. The last barrier in the northern complex had flared, gone dead, minutes before. The giant main body of the alien seemed quiescent then. There were indications of deep continuing disturbances in the scintillating signal swarms in the projector, and briefly Danestar had thought that the last tearing shock of force field energies could have left the great mass finally disorganized, crippled and stunned.

But then evidence grew that the component which had remained in the control station was, in fact, rejoining the main body. And its role became clear. As the two merged, the erratic disturbances in the major section dimmed, smoothed out. A suggestion of swift, multitudinous rhythms coordinating the whole gradually returned.

The Pit thing was the equivalent of an army of billions of individuals. And that entity had a directing intelligence--centered in the section which had held itself out of action until the energy defenses of the Depot were neutralized. Now it had reappeared, unaffected by the damage the main body had suffered, to resume control, restore order. Quantitatively, the composite monster was reduced, shrunken. But its efficiency remained unimpaired; and as far as she and Wergard were concerned, the loss in sheer mass made no difference at all.

And where was it now? She'd kept the panels of the viewscreen



shifting about along the line of approach it should take between the northern complex and this building. She did not catch sight of it. But, of course, if it was in motion again, it could as easily be flowing toward them below ground level where the screen wouldn't show it... .

Danestar paused, right hand on the screen mechanism.

Had there been the lightest, most momentary, betraying quiver in a section of the defense barrier indicator: just then? The screen was turned to the area about the building; and only the swift gliding ghost shapes of the segments were visible in the streets outside.

But that meant nothing. She kept her eyes on the barrier panel. Seconds passed; then a brief quivering ran through the indicators and subsided.

The thing was here, beneath the building, barely beyond range of its force field.

Danestar drew the instrument valise quietly toward her, opened its dial lock and took out the ovoid alien device and a small gun lying in the valise beside it. She laid the device on the table, placed the gun's muzzle against it. A slight pull of her trigger finger would drive a shattering charge into the instrument... .

Her eyes went back to the viewscreen. The swirling mass of light shapes out there abruptly had stopped moving.

• • •

She and Wergard had discussed this. The alien had traced the U-League's asteroid specimen from the Pit to Mezmiالي, and to the Depot. While the instrument now missing from the specimen had

been enclosed by the spyproof screens of Danestar's valise, the alien's senses evidently had not detected it. But it should register on them as soon as it was removed again from the valise.

One question had been then whether the alien would be aware of the device's importance to it. Danestar thought now that it was. The other question was whether it had learned enough from its contacts with humans to realize that, cornered and facing death, they might destroy such an instrument to keep it from an enemy.

If the alien knew that, it might, in the final situation, gain them a little more time.

She would not have been surprised if the barrier indicators had blazed red the instant after she opened the valise. And she would, in that moment, which certainly must be the last of her life and Wergard's, have pulled the gun trigger.

But nothing happened immediately, except that the segments in the streets outside the building went motionless. That, of course, should have some significance. Danestar waited now as motionlessly. Perhaps half a minute passed. Then the rattling pickup signal of the shortcode transmitter on the table suddenly jarred the stillness of the room.

Some seconds later, three spaced words, stolen from living human voices, patched together by the alien's cunning, came from the transmitter:

"I ... want ... it... ."

There was a pause. On Danestar's left, Wergard made a harsh laughing sound. She watched the barrier panel. The indicators there remained quiet.

"I ... want ... it... ." repeated the transmitter suddenly. It paused again.

"Six, Danestar!" Wergard's voice told her. He added something in a mutter, went silent.

"I ... want--"

The transmitter cut off abruptly. The force field indicators flickered very slightly and then were still. But in the viewscreen there was renewed motion.

The segments in the street to the left of the building lifted like burning leaves caught by the breath of an approaching storm, swirled up together, streamed into and across the building beyond. In an instant, the street was empty of them. In the street on the right, ghostly fire shapes also were moving off, more slowly, gliding away to the east, while the others began pouring out of building fronts and down through the air again to join the withdrawal. Some four hundred yards away, the swarm came to a stop, massing together. Seconds later, the paving about them showed the familiar purple glitter and the gleaming mass of the Pit creature lifted slowly into view from below, its minor emissaries merging into it and vanishing as it arose. It lay there quietly then, filling the width of the street.

The situation had been presented in a manner which could not be misunderstood. The alien mind wanted the instrument. It knew the humans in this building had it. It had communicated the fact to them, then drawn back from the building, drawn its segments with it.

The humans, it implied, were free to go now, leaving the instrument behind... .

But, of course, that was not the real situation. There was no possible compromise. The insignificant-looking device against which

Danestar's gun was held was the key to the Pit. To abandon it to the alien at this final moment was out of the question. And the act, in any case, would not have extended their lives by more than a few minutes.

So the muzzle of the gun remained where it was, and Danestar made no other move. Revealing they had here what the creature wanted had gained them a trifling addition in time. Until she heard Wergard tell her he had locked in the seventh and final setting on the diabolically tiny instrument with which he had been struggling for almost twenty minutes, she could do nothing else.

But Wergard stayed silent while the seconds slipped away. When some two minutes had passed, Danestar realized the giant fire shape was settling back beneath the surface of the street. Within seconds then it disappeared.

A leaden hopelessness settled on her at last. When they saw the thing again, it would be coming in for the final attack. And if it rose against the force fields from below the building, they would not see it then. She must remember to pull the trigger the instant the barrier indicators flashed their warning. Then it would be over.

She looked around at Wergard, saw he had placed the instrument on the table before him and was scowling down at it, lost in the black abstraction that somehow had enabled his fingers to do what normally must have been impossible to them. Only a few more minutes, Danestar thought, and he might have completed it. She parted her lips to warn him of what was about to happen, then shook her head silently. Why disturb him now? There was nothing more Wergard could do, either.

As she looked back at the viewscreen, the Pit creature began to rise through the street level a hundred yards away. It lifted smoothly,

monstrously, a flowing mountain of purple brilliance, poured toward them.

Seconds left... . Her finger went taut on the trigger.

A bemused, slow voice seemed to say heavily, "My eyes keep blurring now. Want to check this, Danestar? I think I have the setting, but--"

"*No time!*" She screamed it out, as the gun dropped to the table. She twisted awkwardly around on the chair, right hand reaching. "Let me have it!"

Then Wergard, shocked free of whatever trance had closed on him, was there, slapping the device into her hand, steadying her as she twisted back toward the detector and fitted it in. He swung away from her. Danestar locked the attachment down, glanced over her shoulder, saw him standing again at the other table, eyes fixed on her, hand lifted above the plunger of the power pack beside the carbine.

"Now!" she whispered.

Wergard couldn't possibly have heard it. But his palm came down in a hard slap on the plunger as the indicators of the entire eastern section of the barrier flared red.

. . .

Danestar was a girl who preferred subtle methods in her work when possible. She had designed the detector's interference attachment primarily to permit careful, unnoticeable manipulations of messages

passing over supposedly untappable communication lines; and it worked very well for that purpose.

On this occasion, however, with the peak thrust of the power pack surging into it, there was nothing subtle about its action. A storm of static howled through the Depot along the Pit creature's internal communication band. In reaction to it, the composite body quite literally shattered. The viewscreen filled with boiling geysers of purple light. Under the dull black dome of the main barrier, the rising mass expanded into a writhing, glowing cloud. Ripped by continuing torrents of static, it faded further, dissipated into billions of flashing lines of light, mindlessly seeking escape. In their billions, they poured upon the defense globe of the ancient fortress.

For three or four minutes, the great barrier drank them in greedily.

Then the U-League Depot stood quiet again.