

FROM A HIGH FAR PLACE

On Level 638, the doors opened into a roiling luminescent fog. Occasional beams lit it weakly, jacking the ambient light a little higher each time. They moved out into the mists. Andrew, feeling intense heat wrap him, looked at the outer lift doors; they hung torn and dangling, leaving the lift shaft open to the bottom. “They’re shooting from that end,” Grendel said, pointing down the fog-blocked corridor. Andrew noted his helm’s display showed an arrow aiming the same way. Angie had been silent, no doubt to avoid interfering with incoming messages; but Andrew’s blood surged, and he subvoked his thanks to her.

“Work your way along the wall the other way,” Ellichik said. “We can’t stay in the fog. They’re pumping it to plasma level, and when they get it hot enough, they’ll toss in reactives and shoot once more. Like fuel-air, but worse.” He moved as he talked, and the others followed him to where he stopped, then turned quickly into a recess which opened to a chamber with no door.

Ezzar raised a torch, and fifteen bodies sprawled like shattered husks on the floor. “Oh, no,” she said. Each body, its skin burned over wide areas, had been drained of its moisture until it resembled a desiccated mummy. Some still wore the helms of the insurgents, others, among them four andros, lay half-clothed, a few naked and torn. Andrew’s helm showed no residual infrared remaining in any of them. Weakness drained him for a moment, and then Angie said, “*It’s okay, here’s a helper,*” and a rush brought cold anger.

Ellichik said, “We’ve gotta get out of here and go on, now, before they light the street off and come suck us dry.” Andrew and the others followed close behind him as he went out again to the mist and sloped along the wall, his sidearm ready. The glow from the fog behind them let them see each other clearly now.

Just as Ellichik stopped, Andrew’s helm said to him, “*Friends ahead.*”

Ellichik called out, “Dust is rising high.”

A female voice answered fast and softly, “It gets in the high-priced vents. Ellichik, Get your asses out of this alley before it goes up.” They dived into a cubby with a heavy door, slamming it just as something metallic and heavy made a rolling approach in the mist. “Down,” the voice urged, and Andrew bellied against the stone floor, and the rolling stopped a distance away, and light brayed through tiny cracks under the door, and a huge fist grabbed all the air and stone and steel and

threw it at him at once. In a dream-flash, Janny's little face looked curiously at him from a high far place. She said, "Daddy di bye-bye."