THE VEILS OF AZLAROC

Fred Saberhagen

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ALL OF THEM TRAPPED IN THE MYSTERY OF

THE VEILS OF AZLAROC

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FRED

SABERHAGEN

ace books

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A GROSSET & DUNLAP COMPANY

360 Park Avenue South

New York,New York10010

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A portion of this book appeared in substantially different form in SCIENCE FICTION DISCOVERIES, ed. Carol and Frederik Pohl, Bantam 1976, copyright © 1976 by Fred Saberhagen.

An ACE Book

Cover art by Dean Ellis

First Ace printing: October 1978

Published simultaneously inCanada

Printed inU.S.A.

Day V minus 17

Cruising toward blacksky, Sorokin had noticed progressively fewer and fewer signs of other travelers; now he could see no tracks at all ahead of him upon the plain. It was an almost lunar surface that he traveled. He knew that in other regions it had preserved vehicle tracks and even unchanging human footprints for more than four hundred standard years. The absence of any predecessors' traces proved his destination to be monumentally unpopular. Well, that came as no surprise.

His dun-colored tractor was a functional vehicle. Its weight was slung low between wide treads, the driver's seat man-high above the ground in an open cab. Sorokin's ride was comfortably cushioned in the open-roofed cab, and almost silent as he drove at an easy hundred kilometers per standard hour. He had discovered that to drive much slower outside the city made him feel that the trip was being prolonged unbearably. And going faster brought on the sensation that blacksky was going to leap at him like a beast from beyond the rim of the landscape ahead.

In that direction a ridge of land now lay straight as a ruler across his path, bringing the horizon near. The horizon was generally distant on Azlaroc, whose air was clear beneath the constriction of its sky, whose surface was much larger, and therefore curved more gently, than that of a planet. The vastness of this world, spreading the small population thin, was one of the reasons-as Sorokin frequently reminded himself-that he had chosen years ago to settle here. With the city now only an hour behind him, he was already out of sight of all the faces and works and debris of humanity. At the moment, in fact, the vast land that he was crossing, essentially flat beneath the sunless surface that was not quite a sky, appeared to be completely lifeless; although he knew that was not true.

No dust rose into the clear, warm air behind the tractor's quietly speeding treads. There was no dust to rise. Even the regular, lightly impressed pattern of the tractor's trail looked no more artificial than the land it crossed.

Everywhere the natural features of the landscape were geometrically regular. The land threw up forms that looked as if they had been spawned inside some mathematician's dreaming mind-pyramids having three sides, four, or more; rhomboid solids; footballs and spheres that, when grown, sometimes broke free to roll with the motion of the land when next it became unquiet. Instead of bushes or trees or boulders or eroded ravines, these regular shapes and others marked the plain. These outcroppings ranged in size from the almost microscopic to the gigantic. All were of the land's own substance and color: on this particular stretch of plain a slightly mottled yellow-gray.

Now, the foot of the high ridge that had been blocking Sorokin's view ahead made a gentle thud beneath the tractor's treads. It was a gentle slope, but it began as abruptly as a doorway. Its beginning creased the land in an unbroken straight line that extended for many kilometers to right and left. Autopilot maintaining a steady speed, the tractor climbed toward the ridge's crest, an equally straight line against the background of the sky.

The flat slope went up for a long minute's drive. In the moment before his vehicle tilted its broad nose down again Sorokin could feel his hair rise lazily from his uncovered scalp. The top of his head was passing within a few meters of the sky of Azlaroc. What made his hair rise was a phenomenon analogous-but no more than analogous-to static electricity. He need not fear to have his skull split by a bolt of lightning. Nor had the ridge elevated him enough to make possible an actual, probably lethal, contact with the sky. When land and sky drew close as that, they invariably produced some warning signals. In twenty years Sorokin had learned to read the warnings well.

A few kilometers ahead he could now see another ridge that he was going to have to cross. It was as regular as the one whose rear slope he was now descending. In the rectilinear valley between the two parallel elevations Sorokin was surprised to see the undulating curve of another vehicle track. The double tread marks moved roughly parallel to Sorokin's own course across the valley, first sidling near, then dancing away coyly.

"Couldn't make up your mind if you were going on or not?" he asked aloud. As if offended or frightened by the question the marks swayed off again to vanish inconclusively in dots and dashes on entering a hard surfaced area. He smiled briefly to himself. No doubt many of the old track's twists and turns had been caused by an unequal creeping of the surface land toward some fast subduction zone nearby. The tracks could have been there years, decades, even centuries.

Thud again, and now up the front slope of the new ridge Sorokin was riding his steady tractor. It was a sturdy and imperturbable device that cared not what destination it might be bound for. The moment he reached the top of this ridge he could see, straight ahead and distant, an ebony meterstick laid across the far edge of the golden sky. His hands stayed firm on the steering wheel. This was unnecessary, but a reminder that he could stop and turn back at any time.

Toward that bar of ebon sky ahead the plain ran flat and once more trackless. Now, it seemed disturbingly emptier than before. There was no physical reason why people could not dwell here within sight of blacksky or even directly under it. Their artificial lights would work as well against that night as against any other. Under blacksky or under cheerfully glowing yellow, clean air of the same temperature and humidity would fill their lungs and move across their skins. Even so, to the best of Sorokin's knowledge no one had ever lived in the vast portion of the Azlarocean surface under that shade, or even within sight of it. Perhaps no one ever would.

Imagine the darkest and most ominous thunderstorm of Earth. Imagine the totality of Sol's eclipse or deepest night beneath a cloud of poisonous volcanic ash. Multiply the effect of terror by whatever factor will quickly overload your nerves. The overload is blacksky, cutting off almost half of Azlaroc's vast

surface.

Sorokin continued to drive toward it. He had known before he started that there was no light aboard his vehicle. The approaching dimness began to cover the control panel before him like a fog. A little further, and he reached out to switch off the autopilot and bring the tractor to a stop.

He still had light enough to drive, plenty of light here where there was no traffic. But it was as if his inner mind had recognized some limit beyond which this journey, this pilgrimage, was not to be entrusted to machinery. He climbed down from the tractor as soon as it had ceased to move and stood testing the overwhelming silence left by the cessation of its drive. A breath of wind, faintly cool as if presaging impossible rain, came from the direction of the Night. Sorokin's body underwent a single violent shiver; he forced his fingers to let go the metal of the door. Why should his fingers think that hanging on there could preserve him?

Without thinking, he began to walk toward the dark lands that lay invisible beneath blacksky. Behind him his tractor was left waiting open-doored in the silent wilderness.

The darkness ahead of him rose with every step. As Sorbkin paced he kept repeating silently that there was nothing intrinsically dangerous in blacksky. Nothing under it worse than the occasional risks to be encountered in the naturally lighted half of Azlaroc where men lived. What looked like terrible cloud ahead was only a failure, for several well-understood reasons, of the radiation that elsewhere caused the apparent sky of Azlaroc to glow. However often Sorokin repeated these things to himself, blacksky still leaped closer to him with every stride.

He had no light with him. He had no light.

He walked into the pall until it reached Zenith, stretching out of sight to right and left in a fuzzy boundary of mild collision with the lively glow. He walked on into the dark on trembling legs, unable to understand why he was making himself do this. It had to be partly a sheer fascination with his own fear. There was an exquisite sensation to be found in clinging to the certainty that he could go back. Yes, he could turn around and go back any time.

The faint, diffuse bandwork of his own shadow, cast by the light of living sky behind, strode on ahead of him into the dark country. Beyond five meters ahead he could not even see his own shadow.

Nothing, Walking there, he moved beyond terror to something else.

He went on in this way for an exhaustingly great distance, not looking back. In the utter darkness he began to stumble blindly over some of the small pyramids and other landforms. They grew here just as in the lighted territory, indifferent to the lack of radiation.

It came to Sorokin that twenty steps ahead of him now, maybe ten steps, maybe five, there could be a sphere or an angled shape as tall as a ten-story building, and he would not be able to detect it until he touched it. He had to thrust this thought away from him at once, or stop. He did not stop. He accidentally kicked an invisible small sphere, and heard it roll, a heavy slithering. He felt that gravity must be stronger here, although he knew it was steady, close to Earth normal, all across the physically habitable part of Azlaroc.

For many strides now, a long time, he had been afraid to turn back and see how far he was getting from the light. This fear was abruptly supplanted by a greater one: that he was liable to walk too far, that when he did turn the light would be entirely gone from the sky and he would have no way to find his way back

to it. It was ridiculous to think that he would be able to drive himself that far, of course. But when at last he did face round, there seemed to be hardly more than a sliver of brightness along the base of the sky to show the direction back.

It was enough to satisfy whatever demon had driven him to this remote edge. Suddenly Sorokin stood still, almost relaxed, feeling the full weight of his exhaustion. Deliberately, he started walking back toward the light. In time, as brightness gradually reclaimed the sky, the terror returned. The pressure of the Night increased behind him, and made him start to run, as if it could pursue.

When is the next veil going to fall?

Chang Timmins was trying to imprint the question voicelessly upon whatever passed for thinking mechanisms among the myriad deaf and voiceless lives that branched and grew around him. He was standing alone in the midst of a giant cluster of the native growths that men on Azlaroc called coral. The cluster, or atoll as it was called, had towering stalks and branches, many of them thicker than his body. They hid him completely from the eternal geometry of the Azlarocean plain surrounding.

He waited for an answer to his question.

Neither he nor the plants were markedly telepathic. It was just that after a century or more of patient effort, something was likely to begin coming through; Timmins had been trying to exchange mental impressions with the so-called coral of Azlaroc for more than twice that long. He waited-not marking time, no-letting time flow untrammeled.

And now an answer came: Soon, too soon. The life /drive/force /explosion must be prepared, and there is a shortage of space-in-which-all-things-are-done.

That last concept was one Timmins had heard from the plants before. In his own mind he translated it as "time."

A simple "soon" would not have surprised Timmins. He would have taken that to mean veilfall in ten standard days or so, instead of the seventeen that the best scientific forecasts now gave. But, "too soon" ? Did that mean not enough time available for the plants to ready this year's quantum-spores for broadcast? A veilfall so sudden and unexpectedly early would be unheard of. Still, what else could "too soon" be taken to mean, in the context of coral lives?

Like leafless, stub-branched, angled, multicolored trees, they stood around him. An old atoll, this one had been formed in his past. It grew in his present, and went on far into what was, in one sense at least, Timmins' future-the four hundred thirty local years, marked off by as many veils, that had passed since the beginning of the Year One in which Timmins had come to Azlaroc.

To Timmins' eyes, the portions of the coral structures formed before Year One were black and white and halftone photos, blurring progressively into a determined if eventually invisible past. The roots and origins of this particular atoll seemed certain to remain forever beyond the reach of probing, curious men. These plants were too old, their innermost portions collapsed into the past under the pressure of God knew how many weightless and eternal veils.

The coral of Year One was his completely. The growth that had taken place during that year appeared to his eyes as a thin surface of hard, simple plant tissue, perceived with banal clarity inside every stalk that was at least four hundred thirty years old.

From Year One to the present year, ‘430, the plant layers became ever more colorful. They had absorbed traces of the air, water and other substances that men had brought to this world or manufactured here to make it suitable for their own lives. But the layers of each stalk and branch also became progressively less visible to Timmins as they grew farther from his year toward the present. Their images, forming in his eyes a series of prismatic half-mirrors, staggered in Heisenbergian uncertainty into his future, became too blurred for him to study before they got fifty years away.

But the still newer parts of the coral, those formed after about ‘100, Timmins could freely enter, his flesh and clothing interpenetrating the stalks without noticeable effect on either side. A tourist of the present year, standing nearby, would have seen Timmins-if at all-as a vague disturbance emerging from and re-entering the almost solid tangle of mineral surfaces.

In fact no tourists were standing by. But suddenly they were onTimmins ’ mind. He closed his eyes and tried to force a thought through to the plants: The next veil is not due for seventeen days. It was virtually hopeless, he realized. Seventeen-or any other number-is an impossible concept for the plants. Day, on Azlaroc, had no meaning apart from the arbitrary human standard day; this world had no simple standard of rotation of its own, with respect to the fixed stars or the other massive bodies in its own system. Still, wanting to maintain the tenuously established contact with the plants, he tried.

In answer, there came first a blurred repetition of the plants’ first communication: Soon, too soon...

Then came a faint whistle and a sharp pop from a branch a meter or two away, and simultaneously a wave of odd sensations darted alongTimmins ’ heavily-sleeved left arm. Stimuli cascaded up the neurons, climbing nerve-trunks to barely touch his brain with what became a surge of terror before it was rapidly damped out.

A fired quantum-spore already! In some alarm, he began backing out of the atoll as fast as he could reasonably move amid the constrictions of its growth. Fortunately, quantum-spores from this particular type of coral were among the least harmful to human bodies. But bombardment by any type could be bad enough. No more spores were launched as he scrambled out, moving between and through the branches.

He might have provoked that single firing himself, by pushing in among the plants and trying to force his questions to them. But the disturbing fact remained that at least some of the coral were, at this extremely early date, ready to reproduce. Disturbing because it meant that the plants thought-if “thought” was the right word-that the fall of this year’s veil was imminent.

Veilfall within the next few days could create real problems. It made little difference toTimmins or any of the other permanent residents whether the next veil came down on their heads right now or right on schedule, but there were others to be considered.

Pushing his way out through the last fringes of the coral, he went straight to the tractor he had left parked nearby. If he hurried he would be able to reach the city in a couple of hours, but he realized that to find a way to spread his warning after he got there might well take longer. Well, he would have time to ponder that problem on the way.

He had been traveling at good speed for about an hour, and had part of Ruler Ridge in sight ahead, when he gradually overtook another tractor heading toward the city from a slightly different angle. The other was a much more modern vehicle than his andTimmins saw it as a distorted shifting of rigid translucent planes and prisms between him and a varying portion of the yellow landscape. The only reasonTimmins noticed the other vehicle was because it was moving toward the city from an unusual

direction. There was nothing out that way but blacksky.

Sorokin, having driven most of the distance back to the city after his pilgrimage, impulsively detoured to drive up to the crest of Ruler Ridge, one of the highest landforms in this part of the world. The crest was not close enough to the sky to make his hair stand on end once more, but just above the ridge the sky itself was affected by a faint rising current in the man-made atmosphere. Behind the clear ceiling of its surface tension, a few tens of meters higher than the crest, the bright golden skyclouds that lit the world whirled in a yellow moil, now and then flaring like soft flames.

From where he stopped his tractor on the crest Sorokin could look forward over the flat-graded expanse of the spaceport, painted with stripes and symbols, and dotted with parked starships. These huge machines looked like forgotten specks in this immensity. Twenty kilometers beyond the port, there protruded from the land the few aboveground structures of the nameless city; the only permanent community of any size on Azlaroc. Sorokin waited silent in his tractor for long minutes studying this view of port and city. It had not changed notably in the decades since he had first seen it as a fascinated tourist. Was he really still not tired of looking at it? Or was he simply refusing to admit that tiredness to himself?

For one committed to being a settler on Azlaroc, such questions were far from trivial.

He swung down from the tractor's cab and started walking along the crest, one foot on either side of the sharp line, his gaze moodily sweeping the land close before him. He had not gone far before he came to a surprised halt.

There was an eye sticking out of the ground, regarding him.

No, it was a lens, or at least some kind of round and faintly shiny artifact. A compact glitter, fixed into the slightly protruding rectangular corner of a black, hard-looking machine or box, the unknown remainder of which was buried in the firm, clay-textured land.

Using the little knife he generally carried at his belt, excavating the thing took Sorokin no more than a minute or two. It turned out to be about as big as his two fists held together, surprisingly heavy and an oddly polygonal shape. There was no apparent way of opening the thing. On one side of it a small plate, not quite rectangular, bore engraved words in letters whose shapes were warped out of true just like the plate that bore them.

Finder please return at once to Ramachandra Enterprises, Azlaroc. Substantial reward.

The style of print was a bold simple one commonly used on Azlaroc; one designed to be comparatively easy to read through veils. The engraving was perfectly clear to Sorokin, indicating that the object was of his own year, or not more than a year or two away.

Well, he had certainly heard the name of Ramachandra, which had been much in the local news a few years back. The "Enterprises" of course must be in the city. It did strike Sorokin as odd that Azlaroc should be specified in the return instructions. Where else could one take or send the thing?

Anyway, "substantial reward" had a nice sound and feeling when pronounced. Sorokin owned snares in a couple of small businesses, but there were always interesting things to be done with extra money. In another minute he was back in his tractor, driving it down the side of Ruler Ridge toward the city. He wondered if he should try cutting across a corner of the spaceport to save a little time.

He was halfway down when the question was taken out of his hands. Here came another spaceship, landing on the corner of the port nearest the city. A surprise, because landings at this late time of year were uncommon. It was a big liner, too, emerging from the low sky in silent majesty, the shape of a teardrop falling sideways, and bright as a drop of molten metal.

Ailanna had begun quarreling withHagen as the ship neared Azlaroc, and she was still picking at him half an hour later when they disembarked. A machine representing the local port authorities was waiting on the ground to greet the passengers, and as Hagen stepped up to it to give it their names, here came Ailanna (who liked to catch him at a disadvantage) shaking her blond hair and snapping at him from behind.

"Even suppose it was I who misplaced your camera! What does it matter if you didn't get a picture of the system as we were coming in? You can take a dozen as we depart!"

Hagentried to ignore her, and finished his brief business with the machine. As he stepped away from it, his eyes fixed upon the city, he was vaguely aware of the young-looking, slightly-built man who had been next in line moving up to the robot and saying to it: "Leodas Ditmars."

"Son of a nobody!" Ailanna kept atHagen 's shoulder as he started walking toward the city. She was bent on going on with this quarrel, because she knew something special was occupying his mind but she couldn't tell what. That made her angry. "You say this is the only settlement? How do you think we're going to find a place to stay if you've made no reservations?" She stabbed with her finger at the space ahead of them, where only a few fairyland towers showed on the surface amid the city's plazas and walks and drives.

Hagenkept quiet. Let her find out for herself how much of the city was underground. No surface vehicles had come out to meet the dozen or so arriving travelers as yet, and by now all of them had started walking.

Ailanna nagged him for a hundred meters across the plain until her words faltered as the scenery began to get through to her. In the area of the spaceport the colors of the fantastic landscape shaded from ripe wheat to bright gold. Beyond the flattened ramps and pads it was studded with paraboloid hills and balanced spheres of matter. In places the artificial-looking surface stretched right up to the sunless sky in asymptotic spires, that broke off in radiant glory at an altitude of a hundred meters or so where they met the surface tension of the sky. This represented the upper boundary of the habitable region of naturally modified gravity.

"Hagen, what's that?" All at once Ailanna's voice was no longer angry. Her switches of mood had something childlike in them that he sometimes found fascinating. Now she was looking toward a golden sphere, whose top loomed over the horizon in a way that made it seem awesomely remote and huge. To their right as they trudged toward the city, the sphere remindedHagen of a large planet seen rising from a vantage point on one of its own close-in satellites. But of course this sphere was entirely beneath the peculiar sky, and could not be anywhere near as large as its appearance first suggested to eyes used to the vistas of space and other worlds.

"Only part of the topography," he answered absently.

They left the port behind and walked without transition into the city itself. The walks were broad and curved, of a resilient surface kind to feet. Fountains modestly splashed and gurgled. Imported birds sang and flew, bright-colored, in a large and almost invisible cage.

As soon as the newcomers had descended one of the ramps that led below the surface, the true size of the city began to be apparent to them. A machine of the central tourist bureau came rolling up to offer greetings.Hagen spoke to the device; as he had anticipated, there turned out to be no problem in arranging for comfortable double lodgings. He thought to himself that most of this year's tourists must be already gone.

The machine accepted their payment pledge and directed them to an apartment. As they were walking toward it through one of the city's smaller buried passages,Hagen saw some man or woman of a long-past year coming toward them from the other direction. Had there been three or four people of the present year, or of recent years, in the corridor just then the passage of such an old one would have been almost unnoticeable and he might well have missed it. The old one did not appear to the visitors as a solid human figure, but only as a disturbance in the air and along the wall, a moving mound of shadows and moire patterns that throbbed with the beat of the pulsar somewhere beneath their feet. The disturbance occupied little space in this year's corridor, and Ailanna at first was not aware of it.

Hagenreached out a hand to take her by the upper arm and forced her, strong woman that she was, into three almost-dancing steps that left her facing in the proper direction to see. "Look. One of the early settlers."

With a small intake of breath, Ailanna fixed her gaze on the figure. She watched it out of sight around a corner, then turned her elfin face, smooth as dollskin and no longer marred by anger, back toHagen . Her eyes had been enlarged and her naturally small chin further diminished in accordance with the latest fashion dictates, which ran somewhat to plastic surgery; even asHagen 's dark eyebrows had been grown into a ring of hair that crossed above his nose and went down by its sides to meld with his mustache.

She asked: "Perhaps one of the very first? An explorer?"

"No." Walking on, he looked up at the ordinary overhead lights, hung from the smooth ceiling that had been cut right out of the yellowish rock-like substance of this world. "I remember hearing that this corridor was not cut out until '120 or '130. No settler in it can be older than that."

"I don't understand,Hagen . I wish you had told me more about this place before you brought me here."

"This way it will all come as a wonderful surprise." Just how much irony was in his words was hard to tell.

They met other people in the corridor as they proceeded. Here came a couple who had evidently settled here ten or fifteen years ago, walking in that time's fashionable nudity and draped with ten or fifteen of the sealing veils of Azlaroc. In Hagen's and Ailanna's eyes the bodies of the others shimmered slightly as they moved, giving off small diamond-sparks of reflected light. The veils of only ten or fifteen years were not enough to warp a settler out of phase with this year's visitors, so the four people meeting in the narrow passage had to give way a little on both sides, as if they were in a full sense contemporaries. Like full contemporaries they all excused themselves with vacant little social smiles.

Numbers, glowing softly on the walls, guided Hagen and Ailanna from one corridor to another toward their suite of rooms.

"Hagen, what is this other sign that sometimes appears upon the walls?" Ailanna gestured toward a red circle marked at shoulder height. A small pie-cut wedge of its interior glowed.

"The amount of the interior lighted shows the computed fraction of a year remaining until the next veil falls."

"Then there is not much of the year left for sightseeing." She pouted lightly. Her hand, that had lately reached out to take hold of his, fell free again.

"Our door should be one of these. I saw a more conventional calendar at the spaceport. There are supposed to be seventeen more standard days."

"Then I would say we have come at a poor time. Here it is." The door, already programmed from the central tourist bureau to respond to the touch of Ailanna's hand, slid open. Their scanty baggage had already been deposited inside.

They entered and looked around. There were two rooms, one essentially for rest, the other for entertaining, each with a viewscreen offering scenes of the surface. The decor in general was very nearly the latest in comfort and convenience.

"Well, the apartment's not bad,Hagen , I must admit. It's just that I wouldn't want to be trapped here... now what's the matter? What have I said?" She was sorry that something had really bothered him, which her inconsequential nagging rarely did.

"Nothing." He sighed. "Ample warning is always given of veilfall, so the tourists can get away. You needn't worry." He was moving toward the door to the corridor to close it, just as the figure of a man walked by outside.

Leodas Ditmars glanced in briefly at the bickering couple who had not yet bothered to shut their door, recognized them as a couple of his fellow passengers on the ship, and let them drop out of his mind. He walked on, looking at wall numbers. The address he wanted was three corridors farther on. They proved to be three progressively wider corridors, with progressively fewer and more elegant doors, suggesting that larger and more luxurious temporary quarters were to be found here.

The door he wanted was recessed from the public corridor within a small alcove entry way, elegantly tiled and timbered, and decorated with real plants growing in a sunlamp's glow. When he put his hand on the rough-hewn wood panel, a scanner set into it like a huge jewel glowed at him. Half a minute later the door slid back, revealing a stocky, well-dressed man who nervously beckoned Ditmars in.

"You are Leodas Ditmars?" The voice was soft, precise, and anxious.

"Yes. I presume I'm speaking to Person Bellow?"

"The same." In accordance with fashion's recent vogue for physical alteration, Bellow had chosen to let his face show lines of time, and his thick hair go quite gray. "Well, I can recognize you from your picture, though you look even younger in the flesh. Come in, be seated."

Ditmars in his time had been in even fancier apartments, though not a great many of them. He passed up low and doubtless very comfortable chairs to select a tall stool for himself. "Now, what can I do for you?"

Bellow remained standing for the moment. He seemed not yet absolutely sure that he was talking to the right man. "I was a bit surprised that you would send a photo of yourself."

Ditmars allowed himself a smile. “I don’t get an enormous number of requests. Besides, anyone who really wanted a good picture of me would somehow be able to obtain one, I’m sure.” He reminded himself that someday soon he ought to have his face changed again. Maybe when this job was over.

“I see. Drink, chew? A vibrator?”

“Not now, thanks. What do I do to earn my fee?”

Bellow, with a faint private sigh, let himself down into a soft chair. He began slowly. “There is an object, here on Azlaroc. I... that is, the client I represent, wants it retrieved from where it now is. It is to be restored to my client, who is the rightful owner.”

Ditmars nodded thoughtfully. “First, what sort of an object are we talking about? Second, just where is it now?”

“It’s a book.” Bellow held up white hairy hands, only a little more than a hand’s length apart. “About this big. And right now it’s in a conditivium.”

Ditmars was gazing at him blankly.

“A sort of catacomb,” the agent amplified. “Well, you might call it a mausoleum.”

“Aha. And just what are the local laws regarding robbery from a tomb?”

“This is not robbery at all.” Bellow almost growled. Ditmars got the feeling it was the imprecision of terms that offended him, not any moral implication. “Nothing to do with robbery. As I said, you will only be restoring an object to its owner. As next of kin of the deceased, the husband has a perfect right to reclaim some property of his that was mistakenly involved in the interment. No one will dispute his ownership.”

Waiting to hear more, Ditmars brought out a small snuffbox carved from a single jewel, drew a pinch of his private mixture into a nostril, and rode the momentary wave of sensation that it produced, a loop three prolonged heartbeats long that brought him back to business. He said, “Let’s move on to why it will be difficult.”

“Difficult?”

“Don’t be subhumanly slow.” The snuffbox shut with a sharp snap. “Why doesn’t the husband-why don’t you-simply go to the lady’s tomb and retrieve the property. Or get the cemetery authorities to do it. Why seek me out and hire me?”

Bellow flushed at the hard words, but he was not going to make an issue of them. “Of course there are difficulties. There’ll be a little problem even getting into the cemetery to begin with. It lies ten kilometers or so from the city, beyond West Ridge, where the land is now crumbling and sliding. Are you familiar at all with the geology of his world?”

“No. I share only the common knowledge that it and the veils are peculiar.”

“Well. The local authorities have strictly forbidden any entry to theOldCemetery because of the deteriorating condition of the land in that area. If we don’t get the book back before another veil falls, it may be permanently too late.”

"You mean the cemetery will be wiped out by some landslide or eruption?"

"The equivalent of that, yes. I'm not trying to conceal the element of physical danger in this job."

"Ah."

"Of course we could, instead of hiring you, appeal to the authorities. No doubt under the circumstances we would be granted an exhumation permit. I myself have seen several members of the Late Settlers' Council-that's the local government we'd have to deal with-walking about inside the proscribed zone. I don't believe the peril can be that immediate.

"But, if we did that, word would get out. My client is a very sensitive man. He has the feeling that any publicity in this matter would be very undesirable for him, both personally and... anyway, competence and discretion are among the reasons we are willing to pay your substantial fee, Ditmars. You seem to have a reputation for both."

"I've earned it. I generally earn the substantial fee also." He studied the other man for a few moments in silence. "I assume the authorities have erected some kind of fence or barrier to keep people out of this danger zone."

"They have. One of those electrically glowing things. I can't really tell you any details..."

"That's all right. All right. Before we go on, Person Bellow, let me say that if for some reason, after I look into the job, I should decide not to undertake it, I will let you know at once, and bill you only for my expenses in coming here. Fair enough?"

Bellow blinked at him judiciously. "It would seem so."

"Now tell me a little more about this property of your client's that I am to retrieve."

The other spread out open hands in a precisely measured gesture. "As I said, a small book. When my client's wife died some eight years ago, he placed this work of his as an offering upon her bier. He has realized it was a rash act. In a strict sense this work belongs to the world. Once written, his poems are not simply his to do with as momentary whims may dictate."

Ditmars leaned back on his stool, one foot hooking a rung to maintain balance. His original thought, derived from experience in listening to similar job offers, had been that Bellow was his own client, just trying to be cautious. But now Ditmars had a new and more startling view of the situation.

He loathed pop poetry and its makers. As much as possible he avoided seeing or hearing anything about them. And yet the name of Ross Gabriel had just come inevitably into his mind.

"I suppose no other copies of your client's poems were ever made."

"None. It is a peculiarity of the way he works."

"Surely a little memory stimulation would allow Person Gabriel to recall them, his own compositions, word for word?"

Bellow's controlled expression did not alter when Ditmars spoke the name. Certainly it would have been

hopeless for the agent to try to keep his client's name a secret from Ditmars in a case like this. "Person Gabriel will not allow such probings into his psyche. He considers them crude onslaughts upon his person. He has said in print more than once that he considers the inward curtains of forgetfulness a sacred barrier."

Ditmars grunted noncommittally. The public facts of the case were coming back to him. Eight years ago the publicity had been truly monumental. The woman's name he had not yet recalled, but he could breach that sacred barrier later. Yes, enormous publicity, especially when the woman's death was announced. Ditmars thought the dramatic offering of the popoet's recent work, laid in the tomb, had not been mentioned. Ditmars, despite himself, would no doubt have remembered that. He was impressed now-that the offering had been done without publicity argued that it had been a spontaneous and real sacrifice.

Had been. Now, of course, the book was wanted back.

What Ditmars did recall from eight years ago was the much-trumpeted rivalry of two men over this woman. One of them was her husband, the famous maker of verse; the other also very wealthy, and in the world's ways powerful. Now what had his name been?

Bellow was talking bleakly and almost convincingly about the great grief of the great (did he really believe that?) poet. A sorrow still unquenchable even after eight years (except now of course Gabriel wanted his poems back).

Maybe, Ditmars thought, the creative streams, or rivulets, were running dry. Anyway, any unfamiliar works of Gabriel's could no doubt be published and make a fortune. But according to Bellow, the main point of the recovery was that the poet would now be able to remember the woman even better once he could re-read his own immortal words written with her in mind.

Of course Bellow was trying, however unrealistically, to minimize the economic potential of the recovery in Ditmars' mind. The sums involved would no doubt be fantastic, and Bellow was probably afraid that Ditmars was going to hold them up for a higher fee; or even that Ditmars would be tempted to steal the book and try to sell it elsewhere. Of course, the verses would be valuable only with Gabriel's name on them.

This man talking didn't understand. Ditmars had long ago decided that doublecrossing clients would in the long run bring him more trouble than reward. It would also go against Ditmars' personal idea of honesty; something Bellow probably could never begin to understand even if he tried to explain.

Ramachandra, that had been the name of the popoet's rival. No first name, last, or middle. Just Ramachandra.

Day V minus 16

Sorokin had sent word of his find ahead, and then had clung to the little black box like a fanatic while he moved past the secretaries, bodyguards, and functionaries of unknown function that the wealthy recluse had gathered about himself. When Sorokin was finally permitted to confront Ramachandra in one of the city's most luxurious underground apartments, the potentate leaned forward in his throne-like chair, said "Well?" and held out his open hand.

Half a dozen others had recently made the same gesture, almost as imperiously but in vain. This time Sorokin honored it, handing over the heavy, hard little case, that was just about big enough to have contained a human heart or brain.

One of the many chamberlains nearby made a disgusted sound as soon as he got a good look at the box. "Not even the right size or shape. Is it even a message carrier?"

Ramachandra raised three imperious fingers. "Beside the distorted nameplate on this device is a mark that seems identical to one I put secretly on each unit that we sent out with the robots. Callisto? Come here and look. Could the very shape of the box have been changed? I see no sign that it's been crushed."

The woman called Callisto was either a tourist or a very recent settler, the details of her face and garments were just slightly blurred by the twenty veils Sorokin wore. Ramachandra himself seemed to belong to Sorokin's own yeargroup of settlers, for Sorokin saw him without veil-distortion indicating either past or future. Thickset and strong, he dressed in a heavy, flowing garb quite removed from any recent style. He had a nose like the beak of a raptorial bird, an impression his eyes did nothing to relieve.

Callisto was tall, a bit ungainly, and like most of the people to be seen on Azlaroc, visitors and settlers alike, she was of youthful appearance and bearing but indeterminate age. Now she was looking closely at the box as Ramachandra continued to turn it over in his brown, bejeweled, and powerful-seeming hands.

"Sir," she said finally, "I had not foreseen that its very shape might change, that it might carry back some residual alteration in the space within its atoms or molecules, but I cannot say that such a change would be impossible." She lifted black, veil-blurred eyes to Sorokin. "Where did you find this thing?"

"Up on the peak of Ruler Ridge, twenty or so kilometers from here."

"Which side of the peak?" Callisto asked him sharply. "And how near the top?"

"It was on the south side, toward the city, milady." There was some mockery of her sharpness, perhaps, in the honorific form of address. "And it was embedded in the ground not half a meter from the top."

Ramachandra cut in, speaking to Sorokin. "They tell me you are always finding or at least reporting mysterious things out in the desert. Have you reported this to anyone else?"

"I have not. As for my finding and seeing and knowing other things out there, why, I suppose I'm out there more than anyone else. Except perhaps some of the first settlers."

"Are you for hire?" the man on the throne-chair asked. He named a sum half again as much as most jobs paid. "Plus the promised reward for bringing this in, of course. Plus food and quarters here in my suite for an indefinite period of employment."

"My duties?"

"Consultant on the desert, its topography and wonders, shall we say?" Ramachandra's voice was dry. "I shall require that you remain in my suite, communicating with the outside only as I direct, as long as you are in my employ. Can you start at once?"

Sorokin paused for thought. "I can."

"Good. Now let's see what our message carrier holds."

One of Ramachandra's men was already leading a machine into the room. At a nod from his employer he tapped out on its input: DAMAGED RECORDER/MESSAGE CARRIER TO BE READ. Then he

took the black device from Ramachandra's hand and gave it to the machine's hand-like grippers.

"Everyone out of the room, please." Ramachandra raised his voice slightly to give the order. "Except you, Callisto, I'll want your opinion." His eyes swiveled to Sorokin. "And you stay, too. If this thing proves not to be authentic I'll want you right on hand."

Sorokin shifted his weight uneasily from one foot to the other. Since finding the recorder he had been trying to recall everything he had ever heard about Ramachandra, and his memory had turned up the fragments of some strange stories. Ramachandra was a man little known though much talked about. There was his famous affair with Ross Gabriel's wife. There were hints of violence in the stories, and more than hints of eccentricity.

When Sorokin was seated at the powerful man's right hand, Callisto at his left, and all others had left the room, the machine signalled that it was ready to display the contents of the message carrier. At Ramachandra's gesture it dimmed the ambient lighting and began to project a hologram into the middle of the room.

The indoor space faced by the three seated people disappeared; before them they saw the desert, utterly lifeless. Not the wheat-and-yellow plain immediately surrounding the city, nor the mottled gold-and-pink highlands of Ruler Ridge, but a pale orange and mauve Sorokin had often seen in the depression on the city's other side. It was the color of the land ten or twelve thousand kilometers from the city, where blacksky began.

Two people, Ramachandra and Callisto, were foreground in the hologram, standing a few paces away, looking toward the camera that was evidently held by a third person who was-no, Ramachandra had mentioned robots, hadn't he?-by a robot, perhaps, that was sinking slowly into the ground. With their eyes fixed studiously on a point near Sorokin, the images of Callisto and Ramachandra slid slowly upward, and the orange and mauve surface of the world rose too.

Beginning in the extreme foreground of the image and zigzagging off to vanish between mathematical hills, there ran something that might, on a more ordinary world where clouds shed fluids, have been taken for a dried-up watercourse.

But on mild Azlaroc it never rained, not even liquid lead. This purple-bottomed ditch in which the robot sank (By all the Veils, Sorokin hoped it was a robot, not a human!) had been formed not by erosion but by subduction, the slow infolding of the outer surface of the world down into unexamined depths beneath.

Men had not dug too deeply here, because they feared to break a balance of natural forces. Azlaroc was not a planet, and what lay beneath its habitable region was no mere molten rock. This world had a unique constitution, incorporating types of matter unknown elsewhere. Its mass was star-like, but it possessed zones of natural gravity inversion that made partial human colonization possible. It whirled through space in an intricate orbital dance with a fluid-core pulsar and a black hole of moderate size. Even the pulsar was peculiar, having a rotation period of almost four seconds. Azlaroc was a world strange enough for anyone, even without the veils that yearly formed and fell from space.

On Earth and elsewhere such trenches existed in the ocean bottoms, infolding rock and other matter from the sea floors into a planet's mantle, incidentally forming an impassable barrier to the spread of sea life along the bottom. Along the edge of a subduction zone on Earth, some ten centimeters of surface per standard year might be carried into the depths. Approximately the same amount is simultaneously being evolved from sub-oceanic ridges. On Azlaroc the analogous process seemed capable, in zones of rapid action, of consuming ten centimeters or more of surface per minute. Sorokin in his wanderings had

sometimes observed the landscape's smaller geometric solids being borne down into the trenches and out of sight.

Just as the robot holding the recorder was now about to be taken down. Now the recorder itself was on the very bottom of the trench, level with the purple floor that looked solid and yet not. For a moment longer, Ramachandra's and Callisto's eyes were visible looking down at it; beyond their imaged heads the yellowish sky-that-was-not-a-sky of Azlaroc glowed. Then the hologram went dark, with the absolute blackness of underground; completely dark save for a digital display of hours and minutes generated within the recorder itself that now appeared projected near the floor of the room. The display was running up from a zero hour, minute, and second that corresponded with the time the carrier machine began its descent into the trench.

In the darkened room Ramachandra leaned forward to make some adjustment to the machine. When he spoke his voice was tense. "We'll speed it up a little. No telling how long this phase of darkness lasts." The digits appearing in the picture blurred into a faster flow.

"Why shouldn't the darkness last the whole time the camera's underground?" Sorokin asked. He was involved in this, for better or worse, and he decided he had better speak up and learn all he could of what was going on. "I mean, I assume this recorder was somehow carried through the interior of the world, and brought up again by natural forces at Ruler Ridge. How long ago did you put it into the trench?"

Ramachandra did not answer. He was still leaning forward in his throne-like chair, staring, wholly absorbed, into the darkness of the hologram.

Callisto said, abstractedly: "About one year." Sorokin had almost expected that answer, having come to note the same periodicity in all sorts of apparently unrelated Azlarocean events. Years elsewhere might be based upon some seasonal or astronomical cycle of little intrinsic importance to human society, or the borrowed standard year of Earth might be applied. But, here, the systemic years were marked by the falling of the veil, a central fact of human life. That the Azlarocean veil-year, slightly variable in length, should so closely approximate Earth's standard solar year, was called coincidence because no sane, scientific connection between them had yet been imagined.

After a moment, Callisto went on, "We put down more than twenty recorders in all, at widely separated points along different subduction trenches. This is the first to be recovered. I rather suspect it may also be the last."

"Why?" Sorokin asked. The hologram still displayed nothing but darkness, accented rather than relieved by the flicker of time below (one hundred twenty days now on the chronometer, one hundred twenty-one...) and by the ghostly signals that the watching eye and brain began to generate within themselves.

When she didn't answer immediately he went on: "I mean, I get the impression that this isn't an ordinary research project, and... it's Doctor Callisto, isn't it? Haven't you been involved in physics research on Azlaroc for some time? I've seen or heard your name in that connection, now that I think about it."

She looked at him more closely than before. He of course would look blurred to her, as she to him, though in a somewhat different way. He, fenced by twenty veils into her past, must be somewhat colorless and flat in her perception; even as, in his eyes, her figure vibrated and sparkled with new colors, the fine details less determined than if they were contemporaries. With something like a pang of fear he thought: The time will come when I can't see the tourists and the visitors at all.

"Yes," Callisto said, "I have been involved in such research. And you're also right that this is not purely research."

Ramachandra reached out to slow the machine, then he had reversed it briefly, before once more letting it run forward, somewhat more slowly than before. "I thought I saw something there-but no. This is engineering, Person Sorokin. We're out to achieve something specific aside from any gain of knowledge."

"What are we out to achieve, Person Ramachandra?"

The other man shifted his position, but remained intent on the hologram. "I intend to leave Azlaroc."

For a moment Sorokin thought that the other was saying euphemistically that he was soon to die; settlers spoke of leaving Azlaroc in that sense when they spoke of it at all. But death could be easily managed without so straining one's eyes after stray gleams of enlightenment issuing from very strangely mangled and very expensive recorders; and this was not a man for euphemisms.

"But you're a settler here," Sorokin said.

It had been written of one of the old king-capitalists of Earth that facing his stare was like standing in the path of an oncoming locomotive. Locomotives, transport devices of the time, had evidently been (like some of the men who owned them) exceedingly powerful and very crudely controlled, ready to push through human flesh as indifferently as through air. Sorokin was reminded of this now when Ramachandra stopped the machine and turned to give him a full gaze.

"I settled here by my free choice some twenty years ago, Person Sorokin. Now I choose to leave."

Sorokin could only look at him dumbly. Twenty of the impenetrable veils of Azlaroc were bound around the atoms of this man's body, yet now he had decided to depart. Even if there had been only a single veil to hold him down all the power of all the engines ever built by man could not lift a single atom of his body free.

In the hologram bright number images stayed poised in darkness. "Person Sorokin. Since you are going to be working for me, let me make sure you understand me." Ramachandra gestured economically toward a corner of the room where a set of carved pieces waited on a mosaic board. "We are playing chess. You tell me it is impossible for me to move my pawn from the second rank back to the first. I have no choice but to agree, since I have bound myself to abide by the rules of chess. Now it is a common misconception that leaving Azlaroc after getting caught under a veil is impossible in the same sense as is moving one's pawn backward. It is not, though of course it has never yet been accomplished." With the air of one who had made a point to his own complete satisfaction, Ramachandra turned back to his machine and started the numbers piling up again.

Sorokin raised his eyes to Callisto's; the look she gave in return refused any agreement that her employer was mad.

Sorokin asked them both: "Do you expect that this recorder will give you some clue toward getting through the veils?"

The others exchanged a quick look. "Getting through them in the usual sense may not be necessary," said Ramachandra. "Have you ever studied the way in which the falling veils contract about this world?"

Before Sorokin could reply, his eyes were dazzled by a burst of blue-white radiance from the hologram. The projector would of course create no image of an intensity injurious to human eyes, but the blurred brightness of this one suggested that its original might well have been of such power. There was no longer any up or down perceptible in the image, which was of layers of blue and white in many shadings and combinations, layers and stripes of light and seeming fire that riffled past first horizontally and then diagonally as the robot or whatever was left of it changed attitudes during its speeding passage through-through what? Just what medium was it traversing now, at some unknown depth beneath the habitable zone?

Azlaroc was as round as a planet or a star, and snug beneath its cloudy pseudo-sky its usable surface was warmed gently by internal heat, lighted by harmless radiation that several causes splashed across half its seeming sky, and robed in air and moisture that men with their fine machinery could generate for themselves and then recycle as required. After a veil fell the next thing men had to do was generate new air and water for the next season's visitors. Otherwise they would quickly die while breathing air of ample pressure. Each atom of air and water of preceding years was bound inside its portion of its own year's veil. The partial pressures of the various co-existing atmospheres never added up to much more than Earth-normal unity. The same effect that made the settlers and their artifacts warp farther from present reality with every year that passed, each veil that fell upon them, was even more marked at the molecular and atomic levels.

Sorokin had seen, from time to time and with no particular interest, scientists' accounts of their careful probings into Azlaroc's mysterious interior. Jargon filled recitals of numbers and pressures and phases, densities and chemical symbols and more numbers and relativistic effects and still more numbers and mathematics, with professionally cautious suggestions that space near the core of Azlaroc might connect directly somehow with space at the crystalline surface of the companion pulsar. This, if true, no doubt had some connection with the veils...

The famed veils of Azlaroc were formed out of the material that the triple system gathered to itself as it revolved on its way through space. They were the stuff between the stars, worked on by the unimaginable gravitation and radiation, the electric and magnetic fields that obtained within the belts of space in-system that all ships had to avoid. Once every systemic year a veil of this transformed matter fell on Azlaroc. The first veil that men had ever seen was the one that took a large exploring party-who thus became the first old settlers-by surprise. They saw it as a net of gossamer that fell toward them from a sky gone mad.

After discovering that they could not leave, the trapped explorers had soon discovered that life here was not uncomfortable, and that healthy life was considerably prolonged. Since that time thousands of other settlers had come to the strange world voluntarily.

Sorokin had also seen the scientists' estimates that about forty million of the impervious, indestructible veils had fallen upon Azlaroc and become part of its fabric since the unique triple system had reached its present apparently stable state. Forty million years... not long on a stellar time scale, but imagine that many of the veils all gathered somewhere...

The speeding blue stripes of the hologram ran through a complex sequence of change: narrowing, widening, then contracting abruptly into a singularity of darkness that exploded outward into light, the bold glory of a star-filled universe.

"By all the Veils!" Sorokin found that he was on his feet, his hand reaching instinctively toward Ramachandra, who brushed the irritation from him. Ramachandra had stopped time, frozen the spinning

star-fields.

One hundred eighty-seven days after going down into the subduction zone the recorder had somehow emerged among the stars.

Only after he had been confronted with the scene for a few moments did Sorokin notice that the stars in its lower half formed a slightly blurred mirror-image of those above, as if reflected in a smooth frozen ocean. And all the stars were bluer than one would have expected a random selection of the galaxy's stellar population to appear, as if these were being viewed from the bottom of some deep gravitational well.

"I thought there was no place on Azlaroc where one could see..." Sorokin sat down and let his foolish words trail off. He knew full well there could be no such view from any point on Azlaroc.

To Chang Timmins the city's fountains had never been more than ghostly glimmerings of light. He had never heard their music. When the fountains were made, he had already been on Azlaroc for centuries. Their spray was visible only to the degree that it contained water of his own year or a year close to his own. On the last three or four of his infrequent visits to the city, the fountains had looked very faint indeed, and today he could not see them at all. No one was bothering to keep the fountains going for Yeargroup One, or even for the early settlers.

But the old fairyland towers, some of them built before '30, were here today to serve him as clear landmarks. He parked his tractor about half a kilometer from what had been the city's edge in the first years of its development-no telling where the edge was now-and walked the rest of the way in. The plain about him was visibly and audibly alive with the hazy forms of modern people. He hoped that walking might let him discover one or two who were chronologically close enough to him for communication.

As he moved ahead on foot, a shoal of tourists or late settlers came around him, looking like a surge of atmospheric heatwaves. Whenever he tried to get close to one, the face melted away before him or exploded into a rainbow of uncertain images. None of their voices would become distinct, try as he might to listen. These people were all too many veils away.

Maybe he would do better underground. Near the center of the city he descended, on a timeworn pedestrian ramp. Of all the city's excavated entrances and buried corridors, Timmins could use only those dug in his day. Some of these he had worked on himself. Modern folk shared the ramp with him, but once they reached the first level underground many of them disappeared to right and left through what were to his eyes solid walls. Others boarded another ramp he could not even see and sank like phantoms through his floor. The explorers could come here and dig their own passages another layer deeper, of course. But to what purpose? Their yeargroup seemed to have almost deserted the city anyway.

Timmins smiled, for as soon as he had come to this conclusion there appeared the clear defined figure of a man walking toward him. Wearing rather drab, utilitarian clothing much like Timmins' own, the man quickly came close enough to be recognizable. Timmins had not seen Govindjee Sze for more than a decade, but now he could not notice-nor did he expect to find-any particular change in him.

Being members of the same yeargroup, the two were old acquaintances, though never close friends. They now exchanged matter-of-fact greetings, as if their last meeting had taken place five days ago instead of more than twice that many years.

"I'm looking for Kosta Wurtman, Govindjee. He hasn't answered my radio calls, and so far no one else has been able to help me locate him. I know he used to spend a fair amount of time in the city, and I

thought maybe I'd run into him here."

"Yes, he is in the city, or was yesterday. May I ask what's so urgent?"

"I have reason to expect that this year's veilfall will come very early."

"Ah?"

"If it is going to be early, we ought to make every effort to warn the tourists. Kosta may be the only one who can do that."

"Ah? And is there anything that I can do?"

"Well, perhaps. Pass on what I've just said to any explorers you meet. The more I think about it, the more it seems to me that our yeargroup ought to make an organized, cooperative effort to pass on the warning. And of course if you have the chance to talk to any old settlers you can pass it on to them as well."

Govindjee signed agreement. "And if they pass it on in turn to later settlers, it must eventually reach the tourists... well, I will try, if you think they really are in danger. And if I do see Kosta I'll ask him to call you on radio."

"Thanks." Timmins said goodbye to the other and pressed on with his search. But not until he had looked into all the subterranean corridors that he could enter, and had returned to the surface, did he find another person whom he could talk to. This was Wurtman himself, who stood leaning his pudgy, coveralled figure idly against the base of one of the old towers. Wurtman and the tower were almost the only solid and dependable things in Timmins' sight, amid a visual field that was here almost totally distorted by modernity. Wurtman had a thoughtful look as he observed the moving human blurs around him in the busy plaza, almost as Timmins had stood regarding the coral structures not long ago.

"Kosta."

The man turned, startled by the clear voice coming suddenly out of the blur of modern sounds, to rouse him from his thoughts. Wurtman also wore clothing resembling that of the explorers when they had first arrived on Azlaroc. It was almost as if he and Timmins and Wurtman and the rest were still in uniform.

"Chang, good to see you." Wurtman paused to stare at him meditatively. "Well, we have a few more veils on our heads since last we spoke, no?"

"We do. But it's the veil that's coming next that's on my mind. That's what brings me searching for you now." Rapidly Timmins described his recent experience in the coral. "Some people had been asking me to pick up some spore-pods for their artwork, so I thought I'd try a little early harvesting. It might prove to be very fortunate that I did."

"Fortunate?"

"For this year's tourists, I mean. I don't imagine they have any inkling of how early veilfall's going to be. If the veil-detectors in orbit are still operated as they were when we were still with the present, they probably haven't even been put on full alert as yet. Today's only V minus 16. By the way, I've been trying to reach you by radio."

"I've got out of the habit of listening for calls." Wurtman did not seem particularly excited by Timmins' news. "I can't remember a veil ever falling sixteen days early. Not since the forecasting system was established."

"They've come down very nearly this early, though. Remember '221?"

Wurtman appeared to make some effort to pick that particular year out of memory but he soon gave it up. "You think you can obtain a really reliable forecast from those plants?"

"I do. Don't ask me how they know what's going on out in space where the veils form, but they almost always start getting ready to broadcast their spores no more than three or four days ahead of time. Those plants I saw were nearly ready. The one I triggered must have been some kind of a freak, but still... their broadcast almost never starts earlier than twenty-four hours before veilfall."

Wurtman grunted, evidently thinking the situation over. Then his mouth pulled into a lopsided twist that might have been taken for either a smile or a frown. "Well, assume you're right. What's to be done about it?"

"Warn the tourists, of course."

"But how?"

While the two men conversed, the blurred forms of people, many of whom were almost certainly tourists, were passing close about them. It hadn't happened since they began to talk, but at any moment some tourist or late settler might come walking right through Timmins or Wurtman, and in the ordinary course of Azlarocean events there would be no notice taken or given of the encounter on either side. It would be easier by far for a member of either group to communicate with his own yearmates at Azlaroc's antipodes, than to force a single bit of information through more than four hundred veils to a person with whom he shared the plaza.

Timmins gestured his growing frustration. "Yes, how? That's why I've come to you. I thought your chain of relay stations might well provide the way; but I wanted to talk to you before I tried to use them. Just in case there was something I should be brought up to date on first."

Centuries ago, Wurtman had been responsible for the beginning of a series of communications devices intended to keep the various yeargroups and each year's visitors in contact with one another. The plan had required the building of a new station every decade or so, and a number of them-Timmins could not recall just how many-had been constructed and tried out. Wurtman had built most of the basic device, the Year One Station, himself.

But now his twisted frown only grew deeper. "The relay stations? Everyone I know, myself included, abandoned those things many years ago."

"Not everyone, surely!"

Wurtman only looked at him.

Timmins, astounded, stumbled on: "I'm sure I've heard or read somewhere, during the last fifteen or twenty years, that a new relay station was being built."

The pudgy man shook his head. "It's more like eighty years, I bet, since anyone's even seriously

discussed working on the project."

"But... you're telling me that the other year-groups have just abandoned the idea? Why?"

"Not only the other yeargroups. Ha. The very fact that you have to come to me to try to find out where the stations are, andhow they work, explains why." Wurtman leaned closer, emphasizing. "No one ever used the stations."

"No one? That's got to be an exaggeration."

"Not by very much. The past and the future have nothing to say to each other. Don't you know that yet?"

"They do now. Listen, Kosta, this thing with the coral could be very serious."

"What, that a few tourists may be trapped? We've managed to survive the same experience. Anyway, how do you even know there are still tourists coming to this world?" He made a gesture encompassing the plaza. "This throng of-of blots we see skittering around us may all represent new, willing settlers. Or maybe we've been invaded by some alien race. Who'd know the difference?"

Timmins looked around. The walks were almost crowded now with people in motion. The sound of their voices and feet and the rustle of their clothing came through like a seashell's roar, and the plaza shimmered in his sight. He waved his hand. "It doesn't seem likely that these should all be settlers."

"All right, so there must be tourists here. They come to Azlaroc as if it were a zoo, and gape at us, the confined specimens."

"Really, Kosta, they can hardly see us any more. Nor we them."

"Then what does their fate matter to us?"

Timmins had to pause to find the words he wanted. "There exists a connection of humanity among us all."

Wurtman grumbled a little more, but in the end he seemed to concede that the problem could not simply be forgotten. He suggested trying to communicate with the visitors of '430 by means of a living relay system: a chain or team of settlers of different year-groups, passing the word along from one to another, with no more than a couple of dozen years between any two conversing members.

Timmins stood listening, with folded arms. "All right, fine. Don't you suppose I've thought of that already? Just how are we to form this living chain? To begin with, can you suggest someone to be the first link futureward from us? Someone from '27, maybe?" That had been the year in which the first group of deliberate settlers were allowed to come to Azlaroc. "Can you name one man or woman from '27 who's still alive and sane, and tell me where they can be found?" Paradoxically, the trapped explorers had thrived better than the earliest volunteers. Even so, decade after decade and century after century, a few more willing settlers had been attracted.

"We'd have to start with a later yeargroup, then."

"All right. But start very much later, and we'll have trouble talking to them."

Wurtman again muttered gloomily. He appeared to be trying to think of something helpful, but at the same time Timmins got the impression that the other man actually enjoyed the prospect of a crop of zoo visitors being marooned.

He sighed. "Kosta, keep thinking on it, will you? Spread the word whenever you have the chance to talk to someone, and ask them to pass it on in turn; I'll do the same. Meanwhile, I'm going out and locate that first relay station of yours. Using the stations might not be utterly hopeless after all. Is it still in the same place?"

"It will be hopeless, but I don't think it's been moved. You remember where we built the thing? I scarcely do myself. Let's see..."

"I remember. But it's a good long way from here. Getting out there will probably take me most of a day."

"Tell me about diving," Ailanna asked brightly, her voice sounding as if she were really interested. She and Hagen had just finished their breakfast at one of the city's oldest restaurants. There was nothing really remarkable about the place except that it contained scenes no other world could offer. All there at the same time were visitors, new settlers, middle settlers, old settlers, and (for all that anyone could show to the contrary) some of the explorers themselves. These folk of different eras were walking, ordering, sitting and eating not only side by side but sometimes literally in each other's laps. The interference was only psychic and esthetic, of course, not physical. Meanwhile the robot waiters of several ages glided through each other, sharing space in aisles and kitchen.

Now Hagen and Ailanna were coming put of doors again, riding a smoothly lifting ramp up to the eternally fresh light of the surface.

"Better than that, I'll show you. Do you want to try it right now?"

"Why not?"

Hagen selected their direction and they started walking. He had fallen into a thoughtful silence, and at first Ailanna only waited for him to speak, meanwhile watching him with her artifically enlarged eyes, greenish and feline. As they walked they both could hear the pulsar component of the triple system beating as sound; the sound of the pulsar came now from overhead, thick, soft and unobtrusive, paced at one-third the speed of a calm human heart.

"Hagen, perhaps you'd better tell me a little, at least, before we try."

He looked around him as if startled, and shook his head to rid it of broken thoughts. Then he took Ailanna by the arm and smiled at her. He said: "What is called diving, on Azlaroc, is a means of approaching the people and things that lie under the veils of the years. Nothing can pierce the veils, of course, but diving stretches them. And there is a deconvolution process involved, accomplished by the computer that's part of every diver's gear."

"Deconvolution?"

"Well, it means mat your perceptions of veil-bound objects are enhanced, in the direction of what the computer thinks they ought to be. With optimum performance from the system, the effective distortion caused by veils is reduced by a factor of approximately five."

"You say 'in the direction of what the computer thinks'-that sounds something like restoring an antique. How do you know if you've got close to what the original was really like?"

"I suppose you don't." Hagen gestured, the equivalent of a shrug. "Actually it's quite accurate for the middle past, at least. Say, back to the year '250 or thereabouts. It lets one get close enough to settlers later than that time to see them more clearly, make photographs, talk to them." And more than that, thought Hagen, Gods of Space, more than that! But for the moment he said no more.

The city's plazas were busy today with late settlers and with visitors, most of them walking, most of the visitors probably on the verge of winding up their vacation trips here and going home. Like Hagen and Ailanna, most were wearing this year's fashion of scanty garments each of a hundred colors. In the mild calm air, under the yellow not-sky, and bathed in sunless light, Hagen had almost the feeling of being indoors. A feeling that made him uneasy, as it had on his last visit.

It was an annoyance, nothing more. Mentally he shrugged again, knowing the uneasiness would soon pass. He was walking quickly and purposefully, looking for the divers' shop he remembered from last time.

Once in diver's gear, whether Ailanna was with him or not, he would be able to begin his own private search in earnest.

For the moment, Ailanna kept pace easily at his side. This morning she was not quarrelsome at all, and had been showing an increasing interest in this world. "You say nothing at all can pierce the veils, once they've fallen in to wrap themselves around this planet?"

"No matter can pierce them. Light and other radiation gets through, with some distortion. Sound waves pass, distorted also. And this is not a planet. I suppose 'star' is the best term for a layperson to use, though the purist scientists might wince at that. There's the divers' shop I want-see the sign ahead, right there beside the cave?" The cave mouth, a dark rectangular hole in the side of a sharp-angled rhombic hill, was perhaps artificial but looked no more so than the rest of the landscape. Inside the shop, Hagen and Ailanna were greeted by the proprietor's voice, coming from a machine. He was a settler, swathed in what must have been more than a hundred veils, and right on his counter he had his own set of electronic relay stations to let him talk with customers. The relay stations comprised a set of small modules, to which a new unit was doubtless added every year. Hagen had seen similar systems in use in other places of business here; none seemed to go back more than a couple of hundred years. The system in this shop must be among the oldest for to Hagen's eyes its oldest module was a mere smear of moire patterns.

After a brief discussion about available equipment and prices, the owner began to measure their bodies. For this he used an attachment to his communications system.

Hagen stood holding his arms high, as directed. "Ailanna, when we dive, what would you like to see?"

"Things of beauty." Her voice was a cheerful chirp. "Also I would like to meet one of those first, stranded explorers. I think theirs is a fascinating story."

"A popular wish this year," commented the proprietor's voice, its tones somewhat dehumanized by all the subtle machinery it was coming through. "Another young lady, a settler, expressed it only an hour ago. Now, sir, raise your right leg, please."

Hagen said to her: "The beauty will be all about, and there are signals and machines to guide the tourists to some of the exceptional sights. As for locating an explorer, perhaps it would be best to hire a guide."

The shop owner's voice said: "The good ones seem all to be employed, or at least out of town. I made inquiries for the young lady before you. How long will you be wanting to keep these outfits?"

"Several days," Hagen answered vaguely. "Well, we can still try for the explorer. When I was last here it was still possible to dive near enough to see their faces, if not to converse. Now, when sixty-five more veils have been added, I doubt if we'll even be able to see them, but we can try."

They left the shop wearing their diving gear. The most conspicuous parts were carapaces and helms of melded glass and metal that flowed like thick water over their upper bodies. Ailanna found it awkward at first, but Hagen moved with unforgotten skill. Now that his suit had been firmed into place, Ailanna looking toward his face saw only a distorting mirror, that gave back an eerie semblance of her own countenance.

Suddenly she wanted to hear his voice. "Hagen, if nothing can pierce the veils, how are all these underground rooms dug out?"

His speech sounded inside her helm, familiar and reassuring. "Digging is possible because the individual particles of matter can be shifted about, those of different years jumbled together or separated again-as long as one doesn't try to move them too far, or lift them through the sky."

"I see." But her voice was doubtful.

Hagen tried again, from another tack. "You see, there are two kinds of matter, of physical reality, here coexisting. The basic stuff of the landscape, all these mathematical shapes and the plain they rise from, is really comparatively common matter. Its atoms are docile and workable, at least here in the region of mild gravity and pressure. The explorers realized from the start that this mild region needed only air and water to provide men with a comfortably habitable surface larger than that of any known planet. People had to bring their own food in, of course, and kept recycling..." Hagen's voice trailed off. It seemed that he was being distracted by some silent thought.

"Where are we going, Hagen?"

"Oh. I think to Old Town. That's what they call the part of the city that the explorers can use. Maybe we'll at least meet an older settler there who can tell us how to locate someone from Yeargroup One." All the while his eyes were searching the plazas around them, though not for an explorer.

The two of them walked, sometimes aboveground and sometimes below, armored in their strange suits and connected to the year of their own visit by umbilical cables as fine and flexible and unbreakable as artists' lines drawn on paper. Only the small terminal sections of their own lifelines were visible to them; rarely was one aware, while diving, of having the cable on at all.

Hagen had adjusted his gear for maximum deconvolvance, and he was nervously scanning the faces of all the passing settlers. He was sure that none of these were old enough to be explorers.

"You said there were two kinds of matter, Hagen, two physical realities. What about the second kind? You mean the veils?"

"Yes. The material between the stars, gathered up as this triple system advances through space; just common dredgings from the interstellar medium, to begin with. But what is not sucked right into the black hole is sieved through nets of the pulsar's radiation, squeezed by the black hole's gravities, shattered and

transformed in all its particles as it falls toward Azlaroc through all the system's belts of peculiar space. Once every systemic year, conditions are right and a veil comes down. What descends on this world then is no longer matter that men can work with, any more than they can work in the heart of a black hole."

They were entering Old Town now, and Hagen paused to speak to some of the older settlers mat they now began to meet. Yes, at least one of the explorers-whether it had been a man or woman, even these old-timers could not tell-had been here only a little while ago. But the person had gone off, heading west, probably about to leave the city-only minutes ago. It might be possible to catch up, if Hagen and Ailanna hurried.

They put on speed, Ailanna almost running to keep up with Hagen's reaching strides. Ahead, West Ridge slanted at an angle away from their due-west course, its far reaches vanishing in a vertiginous perspective. Already they had left behind the city proper; now they were hurrying across the fringes of the desert.

"Ailanna, are you tuned to maximum deconvolvance? Look just ahead."

Even seen with all the help that diver's gear could give, the figure they were approaching was no more than a shadowy image, flat-looking and insubstantial. It wavered toward an equally phantasmal al-though much larger shape. Hagen's computer presented this large, inanimate object to him as a tent and then as a vehicle on treads. Sixty-five years ago, he recalled, someone had pointed out a similar half-visible thing to him as the mobile dwelling of a nomadic explorer.

Hagen had never spoken to an explorer himself, but suddenly he found that he was eager to try; not just because it was something Ailanna wanted. He had his own reasons that he had not consciously thought out. So now he began to run. The gear he wore was only a slight hindrance.

Amid glowing, gently-sloped pyramids, a little taller than a man, Hagen slowed to a stop again, thinking that he had lost the explorer. The hue of the land had changed here, from yellow to a pink so subtle that it was in effect a new color. Then suddenly the fluttering, ghostly photograph of a human being was visible again, right in his path. Almost, he ran through or collided with it when he moved forward again.

Flustered, Hagen regained his balance and tried to speak casually. "Honorable person, we do not wish to be discourteous, and we will leave you if our inquiries are bothersome. But we would like to know if you are one of the original explorers."

Eyes that looked one moment like skeletal sockets, and the next moment as fleshly, and more human, than Ailanna's, regarded Hagen. Or were those really human eyes at all? What Hagen saw was only what his diver's computer painted for him, working the best it could with the input available. Operating the controls of his gear, he gained for for one instant a glimpse of a face, certainly human but doubtfully either male or female. Squinting and intense, with hair blown about it as if by a terrible wind, the face confronted Hagen and seemed to be trying to speak to him, but whatever words came seemed to be blown away.

A moment more and the figure was gone. The person must of course be still standing or walking somewhere nearby, but had gone so out of focus that he or she might as well have flown off somewhere behind West Ridge.

Question or answer, Hagen? Which had it offered you?

And now he could no longer see the tent or tractor, either. If it had been a tent or tractor.

Ailanna's hands clamped hard on his arm. "Hagen, I saw! It was-terrible."

He reached to pat her hand. "No, that was only a man or woman. What lies between us and them, that can be terrible sometimes."

Ailanna began to dial her deconvolvance down. For his eyes her form went out of focus as if she had departed futureward-enlarging blurrily, gaining too much color and depth. Hagen adjusted his own controls to return fully with her to their own year. Very little of the land around them changed in his sight as he did so. West Ridge got a little higher; and a chain of small pink hills, separated precisely from one another by hyperbolic paraboloid saddles, seemed to grow up out of nothing in the middle distance. That was about all.

"Hagen, that was an explorer, wasn't it? It must have been. Oh, I wish he had talked to us, even though he frightened me. Could you hear anything he said? Are they still sane?"

"Why shouldn't they be?" he snapped at her. After a frowning moment he started to lead the way back toward the city's plazas, dotted with sharply visible tourists. He went on: "People who get trapped here continue to lead reasonable human lives, you know. Actually they're protected against aging far better than we are on the outside. There's nothing so terrible about Azlaroc, why shouldn't they be sane? Many others have come here to settle voluntarily."

"All right, all right! Why are you so touchy? Let them be happy. Let a million people live here if they wish. Nothing I've seen so far, though, makes me want to give up my freedom."

Staring straight ahead, Hagen said, "I didn't force you to come along on this trip, you know."

"I didn't say it wasn't interesting. Only that I pity the poor people who got trapped." He knew that Ailanna's enlarged eyes would be brightening as she looked forward to an argument. Arguments were her most successful art form. She could build up their dimensions while deftly keeping them from collapsing into brawls or separations.

Hagen stopped walking, faced her sternly, and used the tone that meant that he had had enough. "Ailanna, maybe it will be better if we separate for a time. During the days, at least. This world is as safe as any to explore. Wander, and surprise yourself."

If she was upset to hear this, she was not going to show it. "And you, Hagen?"

"I will, wander too."

The successive transitions from planet's time to ship's time to this world's arbitrary chronology should, according to Leodas Ditmars' expectations, have thrown his mental clock and biorhythms into disarray. But somehow it did in fact feel like morning when he awoke from his first sleep on Azlaroc. The viewscreen of his subterranean hotel room showed him a sample of the activity on the surface above. This view was not noticeably different from what it had been when he retired. There were people in various degrees of blurriness, dressed in divers fashions, strolling or driving about on pleasure or business. The shadowless natural light fell from the vast yellow sky, bathing walks, fountains, the occasional bit of sculpture, and the few towers that the city thrust up.

On the table in Ditmars' room there lay a few brochures and printouts that he had started to look at before he went to bed. He had thought it would be wise to read up a little on the veils and the other

peculiarities of this world before starting on the job that he had tentatively agreed to do. The special conditions might well affect his work. But concentrating on the study last night had proved an unexpectedly hard task, and it looked no more attractive this morning. He picked up some of the brochures, shuffled them and put them down again, and went on getting dressed.

After a routine restaurant breakfast-he happened to choose a place inaccessible to early settlers or explorers, and so was not entertained or distracted by some old-timer sitting in his lap-Ditmars strolled out into the city, a tourist among tourists. He wanted to get his bearings in this world, and also to find out how real tourists acted here.

He saw a number of visitors in vehicle-rental shops. These provided fast-crawling groundcars called tractors, vehicles well-adapted to the peculiar terrain.

Ditmars rented a small tractor for himself. In another hour, armed with maps, binoculars, and camera, he duly visited one or two of the more well-known local marvels of the landscape. Half an hour after that, he had crossed the formation called West Ridge-which ran from southeast to northwest between the city and his destination-and had parked at the foot of the ridge in a spot overlooking the Old Cemetery.

The cemetery was only a few hectares in extents and Ditmars thought that an agile man ought to be able to run across it in less than a minute. He gathered there was a newer burial ground somewhere on the other side of town, though most people on Azlaroc, as elsewhere, doubtless preferred to have their bodies incinerated after death, or otherwise melded back into nature.

He parked between a ten-story tetrahedron and an outcropping almost as high with a sharp peak and sides of smooth mathematical curves that Ditmars could not have named. Here the tractor was effectively concealed, without looking as if he had made an effort at concealment.

When he got out of the vehicle, he had only a few meters to walk to the fence surrounding Old Cemetery. The fence was glowing lines drawn in air, without a sign of a gate or other break, encompassing the cemetery and a small additional area of land. The warning signs, every few meters along the perimeter, were plain, glowing like the fence itself:

NO ENTRY DANGEROUS LAND MOVEMENT

For all its glaring visibility, the barrier looked insubstantial. Twenty or so bright, purplish lines ran like unsupported wires in the air, horizontally. The lowest skimmed the uneven planes of the bare ground, while the uppermost was perhaps three meters higher. Maybe the space above that height was left unguarded, but maybe not. Ditmars would take no chances.

His first impression of the few hectares enclosed by the fence was that they supported more surface structures than had been visible above the whole city of the living Azlaroceans he had just left behind. His second was that the land inside the fence was violently wrinkled. Forces had buckled it, but on this world even natural violence played within tidy geometric rules. Toward the center of the enclosure, the land's wrinkle-patterns had evidently reinforced one another and a sizable hill had been built. This hill had developed in regular steps and turrets, so that it had the aspect of some ancient ruin from Earth's golden age of fortification. But the effect of its formation on the memorial structures of the cemetery, man-made things, had been untidy. Tomb-tops and monuments were leaning every which way like the masts of ships caught in a turbulent harbor. One or two of them had fallen. Maybe some kind of illusion was responsible, but Ditmars thought that the light from the sky was dimmer just over and around this hill.

The tomb-or conditivium, as Bellow for some reason insisted on calling it-that Ditmars had to enter was

supposed to be somewhere near the middle in there. From where he stood he could manage to pick it out among the others. Wanting to get a look at it, and also wanting to make a thorough examination of the fence, he began walking around the cemetery.

When he ran his hand along a strand of the fence for a short distance, its forceline felt cool, hard and harmless. If he should try to push his way through it, or climb over, things would be different. The fence appeared to be a common type he had encountered before. It was practically impervious to the casual trespasser or amateur robber, but totally ineffective against an expert like himself. Still, he would need several uninterrupted minutes in which to work on it, when he was ready to go through.

Today he was only scouting. As he fiddled with his camera, he was pleased to see another tourist party on the far side of the cemetery, also taking photographs. Good, not enough people around the cemetery to get in his way, but it was apparently visited often enough that his own presence would not attract attention.

While getting some pictures, Ditmars also managed to unobtrusively consult several other devices he was carrying in his camera bag. His readings gave him no reason to believe that the fence was any more formidable than it appeared. There was no reason it should have been, but his thoroughness had kept him out of trouble before.

Ditmars realized with a start that he was working again after a quarter of a year of contemplative idleness, and still he was running mainly on habit, on inertia. He had hoped that getting back to work would be good for him, shake him out of the apathy he had fallen into. Well, at least the job gave him something besides himself to think about.

Now the tourist party across the way, the only other people in sight, were packing themselves back into their tractor. In a moment Ditmars would be alone.

Camera in hand, he walked along the fence. He stopped where a conglomeration of tracks, both human and vehicular, suggested the recent presence of a crowd. The marks must be older than the fence, or else the fence had been turned off for their makers, for they went through it as if it were not there. Maybe all these tracks had not been made at once. Perhaps a throng of people had entered here for some well-attended burial.

Ditmars squatted to inspect one of the tracks closely. It was the mark of a bare foot, small and probably a woman's. The individual toe-prints had rounded into perfectly circular depressions, and the heel-print had become a larger circle-while a vehicle track only a few centimeters away probably looked no different from when it was made.

He went back to studying the footprint, which now looked as if it might have been made by a robot. Even the almost microscopic crumbling around the edges of its circles had altered itself into regular and mathematical form, tiny pyramids and wedges of debris arranging themselves into a lattice like teeth on a file.

He rubbed his eyes. His vision was normally very acute, but some of the small particles were blurred.

Then he smiled at himself. Of course, he was seeing the multiple nature of the land. The blurred grains must be older matter, squeezed by a great number of veils till they were hard for modern eyes to see. Eventually they would be squeezed close to oblivion-although, as Ditmars understood from his brief study, they would never quite reach it. Meanwhile, new atoms were being spontaneously created throughout the bulk of Azlaroc at a steady pace that just balanced the mass of land lost to the veils. This

was a fascinating world. Someday he would come back just to explore it.

No, probably he wouldn't. He no longer seemed to do anything just because it would be fascinating.

He raised his eyes. The footprint aimed in toward the center of the cemetery, and for a moment he pictured Milady Rosalys walking that way, pictured her face and body as he had seen them yesterday in the eight-year-old news pictures. She wouldn't have been walking when she came this route, though.

She was Ross Gabriel's wife and, all reports agreed, Ramachandra's lover at the same time. Young and very beautiful, she had probably been half mad as well. No one would call her condition madness these days, but Ditmars, in the privacy of his own thoughts-where he seemed to spend more and more of his time-often preferred to use the ancient words. People like Milady Rosalys except for her money and power were now called deviant by the various supposed authorities who sat in judgment on behavior, matching mind-waves against the ideal patterns. Ditmars himself was called deviant whenever they managed to get their hands on him.

Continuing his slow progress around the cemetery, squinting in toward its center from various points on its perimeter, he gradually became convinced that the ambient light was really dimmer in there among the tombs. When he finally thought to use it, an instrument on his camera confirmed this.

He almost chuckled. It was all rather like some grotesque and superstitious fancy of the days when humanity had been confined upon one planet with only one sun to give them light, and that sun on the other side of the world for half of any one man's lifetime. Then they had taken their graveyards and darkness very seriously.

Now, with a sigh, he supposed he ought to consider whether this dimming might have have some effect upon his work. But no, he guessed it wouldn't; things weren't that dark in there. After all, he couldn't research everything.

Feeling irritated with himself, he walked along. It bothered him that he could generate no enthusiasm for this job. Of course, he hadn't yet agreed to do it. He could still give it up and move on.

Move on where, though? There were a few habitable places in the galaxy he had not visited, and none that he especially wanted to see again.

Yesterday he had memorized a sketch Bellow had made for him of the general design of the tomb inside and out. Now, frowning and squinting through binoculars into the dim jumble of columns, walls, and statuary a hundred meters or so away, Ditmars at last thought he could recognize the domed little house in which Rosalys rested. Recognition was difficult because the structure, like those around it, seemed to have sunk partially into the land. According to Bellow's information, the entrance to the tomb should be on this side, but no door was visible. Ditmars thought he saw near ground level a projection that could be the lintel that topped the doorway.

So already, complications. If the land's shifting had buried the entrance, he was going to have to dig it out. Even his brief studies had warned him that digging on Azlaroc could be a weirdly troublesome operation. Or else he would have to find some other way of getting into the tomb.

With the onset of apparent difficulties, a real interest in the job began to take hold of him at last. He continued to study the scene through the binoculars and his camera's lenses.

In the semi-darkness surrounding the central tombs stood a number of multicolored shapes, vaguely like

branching trees. Ditmars guessed these were about the size of people or a little larger, and he had at first taken them for some peculiar kind of statuary. But now, looking more closely at the shapes and locations of the things-some clung to the sides of tombs, a few sprouted from roofs-he decided they must be native growths. Maybe it was the stuff that the brochures called coral. Whatever it was, there was quite a lot of it growing in there.

He supposed he ought to do a little research on the coral, too. Yes, he'd have to. He walked along the fence again. The land was hard here, and didn't take tracks very easily.

Rosalys. He kept picturing her walking here, coming with the mourners to someone else's interment. Such vitality had shone out of the few pictures of her he'd seen, that it was hard for him to think of her as dead.

All of this, of course, was not helping him decide about the fence. Either of two basic approaches had seen him easily through this type of barrier in the past, and he would have to decide which one-

There was a small but penetrating noise from the communicator built into Ditmars' fashionable small shoulderpad. "Yes?"

"Bellow here," a tiny voice buzzed at him. "Before you proceed too far, come in for a conference. My client has just arrived onworld and he wants to talk to you face to face."

"Right now?"

"That would be best, I think."

"As you wish."

He had seen all he wanted to see of the cemetery. All for this day, at least. He walked back to the tractor and started for the city. Before he was halfway over West Ridge, he received a second call from Bellow.

"Ditmars, about that conference, put it off until tomorrow morning."

"All right. I'll call you then?"

"Yes." The connection broke off. This time the agent had sounded really harried.

So, more complications, thought Ditmars. Perhaps this time they were serious, and just as I was getting interested. He slowed down his vehicle, trying to guess the chance of Bellow and Gabriel refusing to pay even his travel expenses after they'd called off the job. Well, even if they haggled, they'd pay. Although Ditmars' position outside the law kept him from threatening legal action to collect, the same position added more than compensating force to several other threats he might make.

Meanwhile, there was no reason to assume the job was going to be called off. And if it was going forward, there was some more research he ought to do. After parking his rented vehicle in a space provided almost directly above his hotel room, he sought out a public informachine. This told him how to get to the main library on one of the lower levels of the city. He might just as easily have ordered printouts and facsimiles from the library in his room, or, for that matter, got them from the informachine before him. But he preferred the feel of real books and papers in his hands when he had the choice.

Before descending to the library, he took a short walk aboveground to a vantage point overlooking the spaceport. On the flat, painted field, so vast that it looked abandoned with only a dozen ships in sight, there had indeed been a new arrival since the ship Ditmars had come on. This latecomer was a smallish modern craft, privately-owned according to its insignia. Ships of its type were often rented or chartered to private parties.

Ditmars turned away. One might have thought that a popoet of Ross Gabriel's prominence would own his own starship. But maybe Gabriel was not, or not any longer, as wealthy as he would like to be. That would help to explain the sudden decision, after eight years, to profit by some old, entombed, and previously unpublished verses.

The library, two levels below the hotel, was on a deck that almost constantly groaned and shifted its footing slightly. It gave Ditmars the feeling of being in the hold of a ship at sea. A modest notice on the wall beside the robot librarian reassured visitors that these sounds and motions were due merely to the shifting of the land, and that the annoyance would be eliminated when the permanent library facilities were complete. Meanwhile there was no danger.

Well, all right. Still it did occur to Ditmars, not for the first time, to wonder just why the city had been dug underground at all. You couldn't very well build high on Azlaroc-the few "towers" were not much more than thirty meters high-but there was no shortage of room to spread out laterally. And in this perfect climate, a community could as easily be a cluster of tents as of solid walls. Wherever security was wanted, force-barriers like the one that ringed the cemetery could do the job. So what did digging accomplish that easier contrivances could not?

For one thing, probably, a feel of permanence, a sense of psychological security. He would keep on the lookout for other answers to the question.

The library was better stocked than Ditmars had expected. His day's research seemed likely to prove an easy and even enjoyable task. There were real books to be handled-a large shipment brought in every year, it seemed-and up-to-date holographic infocubes.

Some of these depicted Milady Rosalys, laughing or smiling with her husband. Other pictures showed the two of them with the man called Ramachandra. The accompanying text described Ramachandra as an entrepreneur and financier, and he generally looked as if his thoughts were elsewhere. Some were of the Lady Rosalys and Ramachandra alone and obviously happy with each other's company.

With the pictures there were captions, all gush and innuendo, so basically uninformative that Ditmars soon abandoned hope of learning much of anything from them. He did gather that within the famed triangle there had been fights, reconciliations, at least one contracted marriage, more fights, stormy departures and even stormier returns. Even Ramachandra's settling here on Azlaroc in '410 was discovered to be a gesture that in some way proved his love for the lady, at least to the satisfaction of the gossip-writers. A few years later Rosalys had settled here too, to prove her love for him. But her eminent husband, retaining his visitor's prerogative, had gone away, thereby demonstrating-in the eyes of some-that his love, not wishing to deny his wife her happiness, was the greater after all.

Love, fate, freedom, destiny-all were invoked ad nauseum, and if the captions could be believed these ultimate concerns had occupied the full attention of the three principals for decades. Ditmars, reading the breathless descriptions of their lives, could not escape the impression that none of the three had ever been free of raging passion and its demands for fifteen minutes at a stretch. They must have spent a long period of their lives unable to do any work, have any fun, get a good night's sleep, or even answer a call of nature.

Well. All that remained visible at this late date, of course, was some publicist's (Bellow's?) concoction, fitted over the real events like a painted clay mold, hiding their shape. Ditmars could understand men fighting over Rosalys, though. Her face had been heartmeltingly lovely throughout the years. A certain look from those brown eyes might be valued very highly, indeed. He bitterly hoped she was a bitch.

In the late photos she had changed a little, not grown any less lovely, but a little more fragile and tired-looking. All the pranks and all the drugs and all the erotic vagrancy had somehow taken toll. She looked out of some of these later photos as if appealing for help despite the two famous men still doggedly at her side. In one picture, each had hold of her arm, as though they were about to pull her in opposite directions.

Help! she seemed to be crying out to Ditmars. Help, someone! Someone get me out of this!

Well, she had got out of it, with no help from him. He didn't want to read about the details of her illness and her death, so without looking at the last records he turned in the materials he had checked out. Research completed.

He was almost out of the library before he remembered that he had not come here to learn about the woman at all, but to find out something about the Azlarocean coral.

Day V minus 15

Sorokin had spent the night in moderate luxury, his room and board and even new clothing provided by his new employer Ramachandra. The wanderer had accepted the arrangement willingly enough. There was nothing to draw him back to his own lonely lodgings at the city's edge. Still he was bothered by the impression that a refusal to stay would not have been taken lightly.

In the morning, smoothly efficient serving machines brought him his breakfast; Half an hour later he was summoned back to the meeting room where yesterday the strange recording had been played. Entering, he found Ramachandra and Callisto seated as before, watching the early scenes again; the blue-white stripes were just coming into view.

The man on the tall chair turned and indicated a place at his side. "Sit here, Sorokin. My investigations since yesterday have given me no reason to doubt you are telling the truth about how you found this recorder. And no reason to think it has been tampered with."

"That's good," said Sorokin, with deliberate lightness.

Ramachandra stared at him, then let out a brief sound with some resemblance to a laugh. "Indeed it is. So, we are still faced with the interesting problem of just what to make of this scene before us. I trust you have managed to find time to think about it?"

"Sir, I admit I do not know what to think. It is different from anything that I have ever seen before on Azlaroc."

"Or anywhere else, I dare say."

The blue and white stripes had been moving very slowly; Ramachandra now reached to push the speed control of the machine up to a real-time pace. The stars flashed into being just as suddenly as before. At real-time speed their diurnal circles were only streaks. Each star took no more than two seconds to move

from horizon to horizon, rising to setting, while its image simultaneously tracked across the unbelievable mirror-like plain below. The entire scene was jumping, pulsating, at about one-third the speed of a calm human heart. The innumerable speedstreaked star images by which the plain was visible all jumped in unison with every pulse, the pulses being timed to coincide with...

"The pulsar, then," Sorokin blurted out, "the neutron star. It recorded this scene from the pulsar's surface? But that's completely..."

"Impossible, my friend? Ha? Hey?" It was the first time Sorokin had seen the big man smile.

Ramachandra was clearly elated. He stopped the action in the hologram, reversed it, ran it forward slowly from the point of the recorder's entry onto the pulsar's surface. He was obviously savoring every moment.

Sorokin had the feeling that he was the one who was being swindled here, shown a concocted show, made to believe in the unbelievable. Why should Ramachandra, or anyone else for that-matter, go to such pains to fool him?

No, the recorder could not possibly have been planted out there in the wilderness for him to find. It had been half-buried in the undisturbed Azlarocean surface. And no one had known that he was going that way, he hadn't known it himself half an hour in advance.

But it was far more preposterous that the recorder could have come snugly and smugly to rest in a field of a hundred billion gravities, where not even an atom could remain intact. First the gross structure of any kind of matter would be whisked away, as if by some magician's gesture, and then within nanoseconds the relatively fragile electron-orbits would be bent in and collapsed, and then even the nuclei themselves. From weak to strong, all the orders of physics bowing down in turn before the Great God Gravity. Negative electrons mashed brutally into positive nucleons, nothing left but the neutron soup that made a neutron star, and that could still hold against a hundred billion gravities in this last stand before the ultimate collapse, the ultimate abyss.

What was left was a star (if one could still call it that) maybe ten kilometers in diameter, with maybe as much mass as the Sun. Radiating very little in the visible part of the spectrum, but throwing an avalanche of radio waves and X-rays and other wavelengths in its furious searchlight beam that swept and pulsed with its rotation. Take up a cubic centimeter of its solid, crystalline surface, if you can dig into what has some billions of times the strength of steel. Lift it on your thumbnails-yes, do that. Hundreds of millions of tons. Drop it from your imaginary thumbnail onto the surface of the Earth and it will fall all the way through the hard solid Earth, like a rock through a cloud of thin vapor, and then fall back again toward the center.

Yet the recorder, wherever it had been, had obviously survived though its attendant robot had been lost.

Ramachandra stopped the action in the hologram again. "Diaphaneity reading?" he snapped.

Callisto was peering at the image through another instrument. "Impossible to get a good one," she answered, her voice tense and at the same time abstracted.

"We've got to be looking out onto that surface through the veils. All the veils. Damn near forty million of them. Nothing breaks them, but they can be stretched. And the recorders that didn't come back-some of them may have got out."

Dr. Callisto straightened, and turned in her chair to face him. “Person Ramachandra, I must in all conscience tell you I think it far more likely that the other recorders were simply lost, destroyed, somewhere between here and the pulsar’s surface. The second most likely possibility, in my opinion, is that they reached the surface of the pulsar and were not protected by the veils as this one seems to have been. Remember, ten to the eleventh power standard gravities, approximately.”

“And is there a third possibility? Have your calculations taken you that far?”

“All right. Yes, of course. I have as yet found no evidence that your theory is impossible. All the veils of Azlaroc were evidently shielding this recorder when it reached the pulsar’s surface, and they might be enough to protect a man as well. It is still my opinion that the veils cannot be pierced by any matter, or broken by any force.”

“Excuse me,” Sorokin put in, “but in that case I do not see what all this has to do with getting a man out from under them.”

Callisto’s gaze shifted to him. “Have you studied topology, Person Sorokin? In the field of-“

“Don’t bury him in technicalities,” interrupted Ramachandra. “Sorokin, I asked you before if you know how the veils fall. What I meant was this: there is some disagreement among authorities, but it seems at least probable that now and again a veil falls in a looped manner, like a sheet thrown carelessly upon a bed. In a sense we are still under it, but actually its outer surface, folded around, is what touches us. Topologically we are still outside it. There exists what I consider acceptable mathematical evidence that the veil of ‘410, your year and mine, fell in that manner. If that is so, it can be demonstrated that all the people of our particular yeargroup are still outside it.”

Sorokin knew a strange, hollow feeling. “Then we might be able to leave?”

“If we can locate the folding of the veil, and go around it.”

Until this very moment Sorokin had thought himself contented here in his self-imposed imprisonment. But now...”What of all the other veils that have fallen on us since our first year?”

“You will be outside those, too,” Callisto informed him, “if you are really outside your first year’s veil, and can get around its folded edge.”

“And where will the edge be?”

“Perhaps somewhere just underground, almost in reach. Perhaps on the surface of the neutron star. Perhaps in the black hole.”

Sorokin blinked. If he could believe that the recorder had survived the pulsar’s surface, why should he not swallow any other scientific incredibility? But, viewing matters another way, he might do better to reject the recorder’s evidence if it required him to accept the proposition he now spoke aloud: “One end of an object is here and the other end there? One end inside a black hole and the other out?”

“If the veils of Azlaroc are objects, yes.” Ramachandra was getting his locomotive look again. “I tell you, men need not quail before the seemingly infinite powers that oppose them. How does a mathematician manipulate an infinite number?” He turned his gaze briefly on Callisto. ‘”Pick up another infinite number and beat it over the head with that. Force it into the shape you want. Am I right?”

Her attitude seemed to say that she did not necessarily agree, but neither was she going to argue.

"All right, don't answer. But stripped of your scientist's legalistic precision, that's what it all comes down to. I know I'm dealing with physical reality here, not some mathematician's invention. But the principle's the same. If I can't generate the power I need to pull me free from Azlaroc, I'll put a harness on a greater power to do it." The matter settled, not that it had ever been in doubt, he turned back to the hologram.

After the recorder had endured some eleven minutes on the surface of the neutron star, during which time it seemed to make several shifts at instantaneous speed to different locations on the surface (with each shift the starstreaks changed angles, as did their reflections in the black, glistening mirror below), the device was somehow sucked back into the dark portal in space from which it had emerged, and thence back to the racing bands of light.

Some three hundred and seventy standard days after it had left, it was back on the surface of Azlaroc. Its eye-positioner still functioned phototropically, and when Sorokin came into sight its eye was above ground and it centered the hologram on him. By that time it was some fifty or sixty centimeters down from its point of emergence, on the very top of Ruler Ridge.

"I'm going, then. I'm going to take the chance." Ramachandra with a slap of his hand shut off the hologram, and the room's lights restored themselves to normal. The front of the locomotive turned again toward Sorokin. "Are you willing to come with me, away from Azlaroc and back to the great world?"

"Down into that subduction funnel? Across the neutron star, looking for a fold in that veil, just to see if we can rejoin the aging universe? If we don't locate a folding on the surface of the pulsar, I suppose we'll look into the black hole as well. How are we going to recognize a fold in the veil if we should come upon it?"

"To answer your last objection first, we'll have some specialized instruments along. And if we locate the edge of the fold, no matter where, we should be able to stretch it back with us into that space of blue light-bands, from which an exit into normal space can be arranged.

"To answer your other questions: yes, yes, and yes. Add another yes if I have left one out. Look here." And with a vast gesture Ramachandra seemed to scatter machines and hired scientist out of his way and draw Sorokin into a close conference above the surface of a small table. "You and I are yearmates here, so one of us can go exactly where the other goes, as far as veils are concerned. Just coincidence? At this stage in my life I doubt if such a thing exists in a pure form, where human beings are concerned at any rate. Two people going will have a better chance than one of overcoming unforeseen obstacles. Besides... there is another reason why I don't want to go alone."

"Will I come with you? Why, it seems insane, but yes." Ever since the chance of leaving Azlaroc had acquired some reality, however tenuous, Sorokin had had the feeling that his own life was passing through a singularity, a condition wherein the old laws failed to hold, into a new stage in which nothing was quite the same as it had been. Now he saw with bitter clarity that a man who spent his time roaming deserts and trying to be an adventurer had made a grave mistake to settle on all-but-changeless Azlaroc.

He wanted to be an adventurer, but did he really want adventures? Already he perceived the difference. Later the perception would be much more forcible.

He had surprised Ramachandra with his answer, stalled the locomotive for the moment. "Fine," was all that Ramachandra said, and then reached out to shake his hand.

Walking out of the city on one of the old surface ways, Chang Timmins kept on looking, with a sense of increasing urgency, for someone with whom he could communicate. He had almost reached his tractor when his hopes were briefly raised by the appearance of some man or woman of a much later group-maybe it was even a visitor, in diver's gear-who was perhaps aware of Timmins, even trying to talk to him. Striving to prolong contact, to keep the other person in focus as much as possible, Timmins jumped and danced about, alternately squatting and stretching to get the best angle of vision, while he several times yelled out his warning for the tourists. But there were far too many veils between them, and Timmins' efforts were in vain. In spite of all he could do, the other disappeared before his eyes, vanished completely into the landscape. There was nothing for the explorer to do but give up and climb into his vehicle.

Before leaving the area of the city, he checked the supplies in his tractor. All his stores seemed adequate. The crawler was powered by a hydrogen fusion lamp, so there was no need to load fuel; a little atmospheric moisture, collected as needed, served well enough.

Then, driving east-by-southeast on a heading that would bring him to the area where Wurtman had long ago built his first communications relay station, Timmins keyed in his radio. Using a power that should reach the entire habitable surface of the world, he sent out a broadcast convoking a general session of the Council of Yeargroup One. Such a call placed all yeargroup members hearing it under a social obligation to physically attend the Council if it were at all possible for them to do so. This might mean trouble and inconvenience for some, but if he did not put the summons to help in such strong terms he was sure many would disregard it. Also, the personal computers of those group members who missed his broadcast would record this message and play it back insistently. Timmins thought that trying to save the tourists was worth causing his peers some inconvenience. If it were finally decided in Council that he was wrong, let the group censure him.

His radio message included the warning he was trying to disseminate, and an appeal to all who heard it to begin at once trying to pass it through the veils toward the people of '430. There was a chance that someone from a later yeargroup than Timmins' might be able to pick up his broadcast, moving the warning forward at once from their own year. This was only a slight chance, though, Timmins knew. Radio waves were as thoroughly garbled by the veils as were the frequencies of sound or light.

Once the broadcast had gone out, he set his transmitter to repeat it automatically at intervals. This accomplished, he checked his course-he had crossed West Ridge and was heading into desert- put on the autopilot, and tried to relax, leaning back in his conformal chair and swiveling it a quarter-turn to let him cross his legs. He selected some music and turned it on. His tractor was more than transportation, a self-contained living unit in which two or three people could reside in comfort. It was more his home than any tent or other unwheeled dwelling that he had ever tried on Azlaroc. A majority of his yeargroup shared with him this preference for a semi-nomadic lifestyle.

Leaning back in his chair with closed eyes, he tried to think of some other means of speeding his warning message up through the years. But no good ideas came. Telepathy? Some people, including himself, had occasional success communicating with plants and sometimes higher lifeforms. But Timmins had never seen any convincing evidence mat telepathy could be made to work reliably between one human and another.

What else? The most respected scientists of the Galaxy had maintained for centuries that it was in principle impossible to find any means of passing information directly through more than about fifty veils at the most. True, sometimes chance opened a temporary contact through a much greater number, as when Timmins had met the modern man or woman at the city's edge. But there was no depending upon chance.

Simply flashing a bright light on and off, making dots and dashes in some simple code, was more effective than most other ways of trying to communicate through many veils. This method was basically not much different from that used by the coral in hurling out their quantum-spores to carry genetic information futureward and maintain a foothold for the species in the present. But a code used between people required prearrangement, some line of communication already open.

The past and future have nothing to say to each other, Wurtman had asserted.

The tractor was carrying him into the desert at about two hundred kilometers per standard hour, its top cruising speed. Even so, he was in for a long ride. Other folk of Yeargroup One had long ago provided themselves with faster vehicles, and he might have done the same. No one's chasing me, he'd always said. And nothing and no one that I'm going after is likely to run away.

After a while, with no ideas coming, he switched the music to something brighter and got up and stretched. Then he walked back into the roomy interior of the vehicle, flipping foldable seats out of his way as he passed. Control room, living room, galley, bath, bedchamber, workshop-the space could be divided to form any two or three at once. Tana had always preferred a tent, while he was happier to act out most of the routines of life in this one flexible container. Change scenery today, change neighbors tomorrow. Live near the city for a while, and then in isolation. There were no real economic necessities, for an explorer at least, what with all the technology a grateful Interstellar Authority had provided for them. Work was whatever one wanted to work at.

Two practiced flicks of his hand brought two seats out of the wall, melding them into a bachelor's cot. Timmins slipped off his boots and sprawled on it for a nap. The autopilot would stop the tractor and call him when it reached the preset destination-if he should sleep that long.

He was roused in an hour by a steady rolling motion. Looking out, he saw that he had reached the Sine Waves; some called it the Sea of Azlaroc. The land here looked like a rather clumsy imitation of a sunlit ocean. It was frozen in great, smooth, too-regular waves, some blue, some green.

After watching abstractedly for a while, he fixed himself some food, sat down and ate, and went through the brief and simple process of cleaning up. He still had a long way to go before his destination came into sight. He turned his music off and sat thinking until landmarks told him his journey's end was near.

In the early years of their exile the men and women of Yeargroup One had planned an elaborate permanent settlement in this area. The generally held idea had been that their settlement would one day become a great city, perhaps rivalling those sprawled on a hundred other human-inhabited worlds across the Galaxy. This particular area of Azlaroc had been chosen for settlement because of the then-current idea that the land here was somehow more Earth-like than elsewhere. The theory about the land had been disproved along with a lot of other early ideas.

This was rough country. The Sea of Azlaroc had been left behind. Squint across this landscape with eyes almost closed and you might, if you had largely forgotten Earth, almost convince yourself that this looked like part of it. Some portion of the west coast of North America, perhaps, with the Sine Waves imitating the Pacific glimpsed through a gap in rugged hills.

The attempt to terraform Azlaroc had got as far as bringing in plants and animals from Earth and from certain Earth-like worlds where humanity had been established for centuries. The life forms had been treated to intensive genetic preparation before they were imported, and also much work had been done here to prepare the land. But the land of Azlaroc seemed capable of absorbing human work as a desert

might soak up water, or an ocean swallow snow, leaving no trace visible. But some of the imported plants, at least, were evidently still surviving. Across Timmins' path, as the autopilot steered him between towering landforms, a mutant tumbleweed now blew, a bone-dry rolling yellow cage high as a man. It looked almost like some offbeat variety of the native mobile spheres.

His journey almost over, Timmins settled himself back into the driver's seat and glanced at the instrument panel to confirm his position. Reclaiming manual control, he throttled back the tractor and turned it on a course that appeared to lead straight into an impassable wall of steep angular hills. Before he had traveled more than two kilometers in this direction, a broad channel in the land came into view. He angled his car down into this and began to follow it.

He was within a few minutes of the site of the explorers' city, very little of which had ever actually been built. It had never been named, either. Maybe names tended to get lost on Azlaroc; more likely, they just never become important.

He steered through the many sharp twists of the ravine, an inactive subduction trench. It made a road through a belt of extremely rugged territory where the best tractor would otherwise have had great difficulty. No chance now of missing the way. Centuries of tractor tracks preceded him; their purposeful though uneven curves, glaringly alien to this land, were all kinked sideways at intervals by the land's erratic creep. Sporadically, the surface was cut through by a gaping geometrically regular crack. Groundquakes were one thing that this world shared with Earth.

Around a hairpin bend in the jagged ravine he found its bed blocked from wall to horizontal wall by a horde of the self-rolling spheres. The rollers were the nearest thing Azlaroc possessed to a native fauna. The spheres, of different sizes and as varied in color as the land from which they came, sensed the vehicle's approach even as Timmins touched his brakes. The mass of them parted and flowed away as if prodded by some invisible force, moving hesitantly but making room.

A final zigzag turn, and the ravine debouched abruptly into flatland several kilometers across. Here, more of the spheres were widely enough dispersed that it was easy to avoid hitting them. Whether they were life-forms or land-forms was still being argued by the experts, but Timmins had always tried to avoid destroying any. They drew energy from their environment in the forms of conducted heat and radiation. They moved about, in migrations that Timmins sometimes thought made about as much or as little sense as those of the trapped restless explorers. Sometimes the spheres reproduced, by a primitive method of fission that left succeeding generations trapped in the same year as their parent. This, unlike the coral that seeded their descendants down through the veils by means of quantum-spores of radiant energy. Every year seemed to produce some new spheres spontaneously from its new land.

In the midst of these flatlands the explorers had once plotted their individual estates, and roads, and plotted houses. Why any of them had ever thought they wanted hard-walled houses, except for reasons of sheer nostalgia, was more than Timmins could now recall or understand. Certainly not for shelter against the weather. Here precipitation was nil and the temperature invariably comfortable.

Nor was privacy a valid reason. Tents could have achieved that just as well as houses, especially the new soundproof fabrics becoming available. Maybe their real need-a need Timmins could not remember ever being openly discussed-had been for a feeling of security. Houses might serve as miniature strongpoints or forts, or give the feel of stability at least. Just in case the billions of galactic humanity, from whom the explorers had been so suddenly and permanently severed, should ever decide to attack the outcasts. Crazy, of course, a thoroughly deviant notion, but they must all have been a little deviant then.

From the slightly elevated cab of the tractor, as it rolled on across the almost perfectly flat plain, Timmins

could see the remnants of the few explorers' houses that had actually been built. The materials were native slabs, painstakingly cut from the land and set on edge or used like bricks; partly real stone and petrified timbers brought from other worlds at considerable expense. In those days a grateful and grieving Interstellar Authority had been willing to do anything-well, anything within reason-to ease the fate of the crack exploration team it had so suddenly and poignantly lost.

As Timmins recalled it now, work on the houses had ceased gradually. Some people had lived in them for a little while perhaps. But now people very rarely came here for any reason. For centuries now Yeargroup One, or the vast majority of it, had preferred to dwell in fleets of tractors, tent villages, single house-vehicles like Timmins', or isolated camps. A few group members spent much of their time in the city, the real city, where the successive groups of voluntary settlers had congregated. Within the explorers' group, their social patterns shifted like their dwellings. There were various forms of marriage vows, some conditional, such as the ones he and Tana had shared for several decades. Periodically sociologists from many other worlds came here to study the explorers-or they had come, before the weight of accumulating veils made it impossible to contact their subjects.

Timmins himself preferred to study coral, when he felt the urge for scholarship at all. Periodically he waxed enthusiastic over some of the rougher physical games. He could, as a rule, take company or leave it alone. Sex as an art form had intrigued him too, but lately he had tapered off that kind of activity; perhaps he was beginning to grow old.

The tractor gave an uncharacteristic bump, jouncing over something that Timmins had not seen coming. He looked behind, and saw a forgotten segment of someone's house wall, looking as if it belonged to some ancient and age-melted pueblo on the Earth.

Reducing his speed again, Timmins now passed what had once been a street corner in the proposed settlement. This was one place he could still recognize at once, even though the wall-remnants looked much worn down since he had been here last. Time eroded all, even without weather. The land vibrations had cracked the houses, the alien matter and the veils had taken control of all their molecules, and probably the rolling spheres' incessant soft buffeting had helped to flatten them.

Someone had once said: I think right here we'll build the school.

Timmins gunned his almost silent engines, making the tractor leap ahead. Four hundred and thirty years ago, when the explorers first understood that they were trapped for life, a state of shocked despair had claimed them all. But they were tough people, and their ultimate reaction was optimistic planning.

If they could not go home, then they would transform Azlaroc.

Many of the explorers had come to expect, in that first period of optimistic planning, that off world visitors-and not just tourists-were going to throng to their new city as soon as it was built. Scientists and poets would be drawn to see the unique world, and what people were making of it. The leaders of human thought and action would do pilgrimage, the movers and shakers in every field from philosophy to fashion design.

But of course it hadn't worked out like that. Most of the galactic populace had forgotten about the people trapped on Azlaroc. A ripple of news and that was that, except for the few who became interested and the fewer still who came deliberately to settle. The oddest part of the story, or the funniest part perhaps, was that now more and more visitors did flock to Azlaroc each year, and more and more leaders of one type and another were among them.

Anyway, the real city had grown up two thousand kilometers away. It was near the spaceport, logically enough. The port was in the place the spacemen had found most convenient for getting their great vessels in through this world's uncanny, tenuous outer layers and setting them down safe and snug beneath the sky. With the unique problems presented by space travel in the Azlaroc system, it was no doubt inevitable that those who drove the starships should be accommodated.

Timmins slowed the tractor once again to walking speed. Finding the old city had been easy, but he was no longer precisely sure of where Wurtman's long-ago workshop had been located. Every little while he spotted some remembered landmark, but others were missing and all of them were altered.

He had almost crossed the plain, and now a hundred meters ahead the land again broke up into rows of flat pillboxes, gigantic jagged sawblades, and ranks of ferocious teeth. Here its color varied as violently as its shape, giving the impression of having been striped and splashed with gaudy paints. He knew there was an easy way among these formations if he could but find it. Rapid land movement here had obliterated the river of old tracks he had been able to follow through the ravine and part way across the plain.

Just how many years was it since he had come this way? Certainly the Council session he had just called for would be the first such meeting to take place here in many decades.

It would have taken only a little bad luck to make him spend a long time searching for the relay station. But today, in this at least, his luck was excellent. Right at the edge of the flatland he recognized a small, purplish ridge whose base branched into a million angled members like the squashed legs of some nightmarish millipede. Halfway up this low ridge he saw where the station waited, half buried in the land.

When he stopped his tractor near the foot of the slope for a moment he thought he could hear the whispery crunching of another set of treads, sighing to a halt somewhere nearby in echo of his own. There was no other vehicle to be seen. As he listened intently the silence was emphasized by a breath of dry wind with no dust to move.

Climbing the steep purple slope, trying to dig his boots into the resistant land, Timmins made an effort to recall the design and operation of the station. It was a boxlike thing, the size of a small dinner table that jutted out of the slanted surface ahead.

He remembered it as a self-contained unit, incorporating its own fusion power source. Wurtman's idea had been to send voice or continuous wave messages on a multitude of frequencies simultaneously. The next unit in the chain of stations was to be located within fifty veils futureward and less than a kilometer distant in space. Redundant and repetitive transmissions were to be used to prevent irreparable loss of information between each pair of stations. Before being sent on to the next station, the signal would be cleaned up and its information enhanced as effectively as possible. In theory there seemed to be no reason why a chain of such stations should not be extended through an infinitely large number of veils. The explorers should have been able to remain in touch with, modern humanity, at least as long as modern humanity continued to visit Azlaroc.

Before four hundred years had passed, though, the necessary continuity of effort had failed. As far as Timmins had been able to discover, no one in the explorers' yeargroup had tried to protest when it did. No one had even noticed, apparently, that news of galactic events was no longer obtainable. After the first few decades, the galactic world around them had apparently become as remote to the explorers' lives as ancient Rome or the empire of the Incas.

He reached the unit, a black-and-brown thing in a metallized case, put a hand on a projecting corner,

and tried to wiggle it loose. But the land held it firmly. He paused to look around. Originally, Timmins recalled, there had been a workshop building here where the thing was constructed and housed. Maybe scavengers had at some time taken the building down to get its off world materials, or perhaps it had come apart like the houses and had simply been swallowed by the land.

Now Timmins went down on his right knee beside the half-buried station, his left leg straightened downslope for support. Most of the unit's master viewscreen was showing aboveground, as well as some of the controls. He hadn't remembered the thing as being quite so complex. Wurtman had insisted on making the system capable of handling several thousand messages simultaneously in order to accommodate all the expected traffic. Timmins wondered if ten thousand channels could be more silent than one.

As he selected a hand tool from those at his belt and began trying to dig the station free, he recalled the excitement with which Wurtman and others had begun this project. That kind of eagerness about anything, he mused, grunting and digging meanwhile, seemed to have vanished from the explorers' lives, his own included. In the last day or two he seemed to have regained some of that early enthusiasm with his decision that he was going to find some way or other to transmit his warning up to the '430 folk.

Presently he gave up on his little hand shovel, exchanging it for a power tool that cut, scraped, hammered, pushed, or dragged, depending on the quality of resistance that its workface met. To use the thing properly required an artist's skill, but it could often work the Azlarocean surface when no other tool manageable by one person would do the job.

Even so, the material that had crept up around the communications station remained stubborn. This purple ridge evidently contained matter from many different times, distant years all intermingled by land movement. Through the tool the stuff felt a little like clay or marl, a little like soft plastic, maybe more like hard cheese than anything else. When it began to pull and gum like taffy, he lost the headway he had made.

Every time you tried to dig a simple hole on Azlaroc it was a new adventure. The underground burrows of the city had demanded much more sophisticated technology and a lot more work than most visitors realized, though the land there was not as difficult as this. Timmins decided to go down to his vehicle and try to find more suitable tools. He rose and skipped down nimbly.

No sooner had he stepped off the purple slope onto flat ground than red-white fire bloomed all around him in instantaneous, painless, blinding glare. It was death, instant annihilation-

Then he knew he was not dead. He could see again, at least well enough to know that a crater had just been ripped out of the land-the modern part of the land, that is-directly beneath his feet. He could see it, but the land surface of his own year and nearby years was still intact, so his footing hardly wavered.

He was not dead, nor even, it seemed, seriously hurt. He dallied there another moment, gaping foolishly. The blasted hole into which he was not falling yawned beneath his boots, it was almost as if he stood on translucent ice looking down into a suddenly created pond.

Only now, several seconds after the flash, did the garbled sound of the explosion begin to slowly reach his ears through all their veils. It began with what sounded like a series of staccato echoes, and extended itself into a hollow, prolonged seashell roar.

Timmins raised his head and looked around, searching in vain for some cause. And only now, seconds after the sound had started to reach him, came the delayed wave of heat. He was given plenty of time to

walk deliberately away, out of the small zone of rising temperature, before the heat of the blast became anything worse than a discomfort. Maybe there were so many veils between him and the event that it never could have become worse than that.

Walking clear, he kept looking in every direction. He was looking for an enemy, for as soon as he began to think at all he was convinced that the explosion represented a deliberate attack. No possible accidental cause came to mind. And in the back of his mind, for some years now, there had been a half-formed expectation of something of this sort.

So violent had the detonation been that bits of new land were still pelting down around Timmins, some dropping through him without contact. He continued to walk away from the site, moving quickly and purposefully, scanning the landscape on every side. There were plenty of places to hide-

There. About thirty meters from the foot of the purple slope, a human figure was standing, almost concealed, behind a pyramidal landform truncated at about shoulder height. He had heard a second vehicle following him.

Standing motionless, Timmins looked at the figure intently. There were a lot of veils between, and he could just make out the head and shoulders of a diver. The mirror-surfaced helm, still turned to face the crater, was shot through with iridescent colors, like oil filming water. Even diving, the figure was far from clear to Timmins; too clear to be that of a visitor, but still there were a lot of veils between.

What settler, experienced in the peculiarities of this world, would fire a weapon at an explorer? A settler should know such an attack was unlikely to succeed. Had it been only some kind of a deviant joke, then?

Timmins began to move again, walking slowly in a wide circle that would eventually bring him up behind his assailant's back. No, he could not believe that attack had been a joke. As he began to get a better look at the figure behind the pyramid he could read deadly seriousness in its still, taut attitude.

When he had gone a little farther along his stalking path, he decided the form was that of a woman. So far he had not been able to get a clear look at the rod-shaped object she was holding in both hands, but he thought he knew what it was: a kind of nuclear torch often used on Azlaroc in digging and construction projects. He had a similar one somewhere in the tractor.

He glanced behind him, and calculated how the landscape there would be likely to look to someone of the attacker's era, standing where the attacker was. Then he calculated further how he himself should move to take the best advantage of this terrain for concealment. Then Timmins walked on, altering his course slightly. The girl, or woman, had doubtless been more dazzled by the blast than he, and she had obviously lost sight of her intended victim.

Continuing to peer toward the crater she had made, she now stepped from behind her broken-looking pyramid and moved cautiously toward the hole. To Timmins, watching with more than four hundred years' experience in observing human behavior, a great nervousness was apparent in her movements. A coltish hesitancy suggested real youth as well. She must, then, be one of a new generation within her yeargroup, the daughter of some settlers of an intermediate time.

Slowly the woman, or girl, advanced until she was standing right beside the crater. To her eyes it must be a raw gaping hole. She might believe the blast had destroyed him utterly-if she somehow failed to realize how many veils in her past he lived.

Now she stepped down into the hole and out again, looking the ground over carefully. Now she raised

one hand to make some tugging adjustment of her helm. Probably she was not accustomed to wearing diver's gear. She continued to stand near the crater uncertainly.

Timmins by now had got behind her, and was closing in methodically. His advancing feet slid soundlessly through a low mound of debris. This was material that the explosion had thrown out in ragged heaps, but which was already moving in slow motion to sort itself into neatly ridged radii centered on the crater. In a matter of days, or a standard month or two at most, the hole would doubtless assume the shape of a smooth, hemispheric bowl, or an inverted pyramid-mold perhaps. Of course Timmins would still be scarcely able to see the cavity, and would have to dig his way if he wanted to go down into it.

Now he was only four or five meters behind the preoccupied young woman, and he slowed his advance, intently scanning the air within an arm's length ahead of him. He took another cautious step, and suddenly the spiderweb strand of her taut lifeline wavered into his methodically searching gaze. The line was coming to her from somewhere in the distance, in the direction of the city. One more step, and now he stood within reach of the small segment of the line that he could see. The question was: Would his hands or any of his tools be able to take a grip on it?

From his belt he now drew out a device he used in probing coral formations where there was an extremely tight crevice to be entered and a large number of veils to be worked through at the end. With this implement he groped after the line. Seconds went by before the tool's serrated jaws, their size and shape self-adjusting to give the best and most sensitive grip possible, closed on the line. The sensors in the jaws brought back to Timmins' fingertips a twang like that of a tightwire being walked on, a tightwire wrapped in a hundred layers of silk.

He knew the lifeline was too strong and elastic for him to be able to cut or break it even if he had wanted to. Still, by diving the girl had placed herself at something of a disadvantage. He might be able to stretch the line enough to threaten her effectively. Also, she would not be able to deconvolve herself fully back to her own time as long as he could hold it tightly.

Gripping it as firmly as he could, he took a breath. Then he challenged her, in measured, shouted syllables, trying to force the question through all the veils her diver's gear had stretched: "What-do-you-want?"

As if he had jabbed her with a spear, the young woman spun to face him. After an undecided second in which she did not know what to do with the weapon cradled in her arms, she raised it halfway and fired from less than five meters' range. Again Timmins knew the red-white flash, momentarily dazzling but bringing no pain or injury.

Her shot hit the ground near his feet, and he stepped away through falling, intangible clods of modern land before the wash of heat could start. The girl herself was more violently affected by the blast than he was. At point-blank range it threw her staggering backward despite her armor's protection.

Even as he involuntarily cringed at the explosion, Timmins kept his grip upon the line. As the girl fell back, the line stretched and she felt the pull. She quickly recovered her balance and sprang toward Timmins. She swung her nuclear torch like a club. One end of it passed right through him without effective contact.

"Why-do-you-want-to-kill-me?" Coldbloodedly he barked the question out; some part of his mind already held the certain answer.

Now the girl had given up the fight, or was pretending that she had. She held her head at an odd angle,

easing the strain that he was putting on her with the line. The rod trailed in one of her hands as Timmins pulled her toward him like a reeled-in fish. As she came within a meter of him, the mirror-opacity of her faceplate dissolved for his eyes. Her face was still veil-distorted and hard for him to see, but what he had already decided about her motive was confirmed.

Instead of normal whites or pupils, her eyes held miniature digital clockfaces, glowing green. The numbers were too blurred by veils for him to be able to read the racing seconds, but they told him that this girl was the Ticktocks' agent, sent to murder him.

Once similar green numbers had whirled in Timmins' own eyes, as they did in the eyes of all the faithful of the cult. The image of Time was kept before them wherever they might look. Synchronized digits ticked subliminally into their ears, awake or asleep. Once Timmins had heard them, too. It was now about fifteen years-oh lovely, luxurious imprecision!-since he had had all the miniaturized hardware taken out of his head, the idea of Time as a deity gone already from his mind. Since fifteen years had passed he had begun to hope-foolishly, he now realized-that the Ticktock leaders might have forgiven his apostasy, or anyway that they might be willing to let the matter drop.

The girl abruptly gave up her pretense of giving up, and with her fancy bludgeon flailed at his arms where they controlled her lifeline. These blows were no more successful than the last.

"Entropist!" she shouted at him now, meanwhile trying hard to yank her line free. "Recidivist!" And there were more words, too garbled for him to understand.

"So?" he bellowed back, throat muscles taut and strained. "What-harm-to-you?" Obviously he and his attacker were not going to be able to carry on any very intelligent or subtle debate. Probably she could not hear him even as well as he heard her. His old ears were far more practiced than her young ones could be.

Not that she appeared willing to listen. She just kept on shouting, and now and then some of her words drifted through to him: "...not for the timeless like you... any share in the building of the universe. Or in its..."He could recognize the rhetoric of the cult.

"What do I care for all that?" Timmins shouted, more to himself than to her. Long ago he had given up the idea that he himself was going to have any noticeable effect upon the universe one way or another.

He gave the tool in his hands a shake. "Girl, I might just decide to stretch this fine cable of yours out to a light-second or so in length. Then how are you going to get enough air through it, no matter how fast your molecular pumps may spin?"

Whether she understood what he had said or not, she paused in her tirade, for the first time appearing to listen.

He wasn't sure himself how seriously he meant his threat, or whether he could carry it out. He must be somewhat serious about it, for here were his fingers making the tool whirr, at a rate that must be stretching a small segment of her lifeline for kilometers. "Who-sent-you?" he roared, now wanting names. He was not just going to let attempted murder pass.

The girl shouted right back at him, but only hate not information. "Re-cid-iv-ist! All clocks are broken for you-" She seemed to be not at all impressed by what he was doing to her line. Maybe she was ready to die. Or maybe she took the failure of her attack on him as proof that his attack on her must come to nothing also; in this she was probably right. Most likely the line would slide out of his grip before he could

do her any harm.

He stopped stretching it. As his first anger was easing, it occured to him that he might try to use her to pass on his warning to the tourists. Probably she could do it, because she must have contacts future-wards. The orders to eliminate Chang Timmins must have come to Azlaroc through visitors; the headquarters of the cult was elsewhere.

But Timmins dismissed the idea of trying to use the girl almost as soon as he had thought of it. In the first place she wasn't trying to listen to anything he said; second, he probably wouldn't be able to get such a complex chunk of information through to her if she were listening. Third, if by some miracle she did manage to grasp what he wanted, she would no doubt make great efforts to achieve the exact opposite of whatever it was. He was the deadly enemy, the despicable recidivist.

He felt his anger with the girl receding farther, even as he understood its pointlessness. He even smiled a little, with the realization that none of the Ticktocks anywhere were ever likely to be able to do anything to him. Remorseless and clever though they might be, the veils, as certainly as death itself, were carrying him beyond their reach.

Unless, of course, they should be able to recruit an agent much closer to his year than this girl was.

Abruptly, Timmins let her lifeline go and turned away. He hooked the tool back onto his belt. Behind him, her screaming denunciation faded rapidly, became completely inaudible as he walked toward his tractor. Now he could feel a tremor in the land beneath his feet; probably the blasts had triggered some kind of tectonic activity, and all the modern land in the vicinity was affected. It must be an immense volume as some of the vibrations came through the veils even as far as the land of Timmins' era.

When he reached the tractor he paused, leaning on it. His fury was completely gone. The efforts at violence, both his and the girl's, had left him feeling drained. He wondered if she would fire at him again. He decided to ignore it if she did.

It took Timmins a few moments to recall what he was doing out here near the old city. Then he began to gather the tools he thought he might need to finish digging out the station.

By all the veils! Maybe he was deviant, to be putting himself to all this trouble for people he would never be able to know, or even to see or talk to. And think of this: among the visitors he was trying to save from permanent stranding there must be some of the fanatical Ticktock leaders. Probably a couple of the Calends or Chronons, who had come to Azlaroc to see their death sentence finally executed upon Chang Timmins. Why shouldn't he let those evil ones be caught here? Then in time they might even begin to understand what Timmins knew of the nature of the being they worshipped.

But no, the life of a settler here, even an involuntary one, was too good for the likes of them.

Forcing himself to concentrate on the practical job of digging out the communications station, Timmins took his selected tools and climbed the purple slope once more. Before he dug he had another careful look around. As far as he could tell the girl had gone.

On the morning of day V minus 15, Hagen was up early. He left their rented suite before Ailanna was quite awake. She was usually a late riser. Today, she remained curled up in bed, muttering at him drowsily when he informed her that he was going out. Well, she would find plenty of new things on Azlaroc with which to occupy herself. And here as anywhere else she could find plenty of things to complain about, if she was in the mood.

He breakfasted in a small restaurant, telling himself to eat slowly, move slowly, take things calmly. He now had all the time in the world. When he had finished in the restaurant he began in earnest upon his private search, the reason for his coming back to Azlaroc. It took him a quarter of a day to find her.

Mira.

He came upon her in a place he knew she frequented, or rather he knew that she had frequented it and liked it sixty-five years earlier. He overtook her in one of the lower-level subterranean corridors leading to a huge reservoir-pool in which real water-diving, swimming, and other splashy sports were practiced. He had seen Mira and was approaching her from the rear when she suddenly stopped and turned, as if some extra sense had given her a signal.

"I knew you would be back sometime, Hagen," she said as he came up.

"Mira." Then he fell silent, not yet touching her, for a time before he added: "You are still as beautiful as ever."

They both smiled at that, knowing here her aging was enormously retarded, that in that sense very little time had passed for her. "I knew that, of course," Hagen went on, "but it is marvelous to see it for myself." He was wearing diver's gear for his search of course, and it in effect brought them five times closer than sixty-five years. Only thirteen years! It was almost as if he were really in her world again. The two of them would be able to touch hands, or kiss, or embrace in the old old way that men and women still used as they had in the time when the race was born of women's bodies. But at the same time it was impossible to forget that the silken and impenetrable veils of sixty-five years would always lie between them, and never again on this world or any other could they touch.

"I knew you would come back," Mira repeated. "But why did you stay away so long?"

"A few years make little difference in how close I can come to you."

She put out her hands and stroked his bare powerful arms. She was wearing the pleated garments in fashion the last time he had seen her. He could feel the touch of her fingers as if through layers of the finest ancient silk. Her voice was silken too, just as he remembered it.

Mira said: "But each year made a difference to me. I thought you were trying to forget me. Remember the vows about eternity that we once made?"

"I thought I might forget them, but I did not. I found I couldn't."

Sixty-five years ago, Hagen and Mira had quarreled, while visiting Azlaroc as tourists. Angry, Hagen had gone offworld without telling her; when the alarms sounded," giving warning that the year's veil was falling early, she had been sure that he was still somewhere on the surface. She had remained on Azlaroc herself, vainly searching for him. By the time he came back, meaning to patch up the quarrel, the veil had fallen already.

He could not see that anything about her was changed. Yet seeing her again was somehow different than he had expected it would be.

Reaction to his coming back was growing in her. "Hagen, Hagen, it is you. Really you."

With embarrassment he asked: “Can you forgive me for what happened?”

“Of course I can, darling. Come, walk with me. Tell me of yourself and what you’ve done.”

“I... later I will try to tell you.” They started walking, in the same direction as when he overtook her. How could anyone relate in a moment or two the experience of six and a half decades? “What have you done here, Mira? How is it with you?”

“How would it be?” She gestured in an old, remembered way, with a little, sensuous, unconscious movement of her shoulder. “You lived here with me; you know how it is.”

“I lived here only a very short time.”

“But there are no physical changes worth mentioning. The air my yeargroup breathes and the food and water we consume are recycled forever. Even the particles of land formed in my year are special to us. And the changes that do happen-how can I tell you about those, in a moment? We do still change and grow, though not in body. We explore the infinite possibilities of each other and of our world. It is the only way we can survive. There are only eleven hundred and six in my yeargroup, and we have at least as much room here as do the billions living out their common lives on the surface of some planet.”

Hagen took her hand as they walked along. He said: “I feared that perhaps you had forgotten me.”

“Can I forget where I am, and how I came to be here?” Mira’s eyes grew very wide and luminous, though they were not artificially enlarged like Ailanna’s. There was a compressed fierceness to Mira’s lips. “There was a time when I raged at you, Hagen, but no longer. There is no point.”

They walked on a little while in silence. He could not notice many changes in the city around them. She held his fingers tenderly, and her gaze softened as she looked at him.

Hagen said: “You are going to have to teach me how to be a settler here. How to-“

She stopped in her tracks. “Then you are here to stay.”

“I didn’t tell you that?” He smiled broadly, unleashing a surprise. Something about the whole scene felt strange, unreal to him. “Yes, you’ll have to teach me a great deal. Unless you are now too deeply committed to someone else?”

“No.”

Holding her hand, he pulled her along with him again. “You must teach me how to put up with gawking tourists... and with the physical restrictions on not entering new rooms and passages here in the city, when more are dug out in the future...are you willing to teach me how to be a settler?”

“I would be. I am.”

Now he wanted to talk and talk with her. “Do you never want to burrow into these new places, make them your own?” There, for example, was a new little tourists’ shortcut to some sight or other, cut at right angles away from the passage they were walking in. Although he could go through there if he wanted to, Mira could never walk that way. Not ever.

“We could do that,” she answered. “But why? There’s so much room for us already, more than we’ll

ever need. It would just be an act of aggression against the later settlers and the visitors. Like following someone just to be following them." She smiled at the thought. "I suppose they could dive against us and retaliate, somehow disarranging our lives."

He drew a deep breath. "Do I disarrange your life seriously, Mira, by diving to you?"

"Hagen!" She shook her head reprovingly. "Of course you do. How can you ask?" She pretended to look at him more closely. "Is it really you who has come back, of someone else, with outlandish eyebrows?" Then the wild, daring look he knew and loved came over her, and suddenly the scores of years were gone. "Come to the pool and beach, and we'll soon see who you really are!"

He ran in laughing pursuit as Mira turned and fled. She led the way to the vast underground grotto of blackness and fire, where she threw off her garments and plunged into the pool. He followed, lightly burdened by his diver's gear.

It was an old, running, diving, swimming game between them, and he had not forgotten how to play. With the gear on, Hagen did not need to come to the surface of the pool to breathe, nor was he bothered by the water's chill. Still, Mira beat him, flashing and gliding and splashing away. He was both out-maneuvered and outsped.

Laughing, she swam back to where he had already collapsed in gasps and laughter on the black and golden beach under the artificial suns that usually looked more natural than the bland, low sky above the surface.

"Hagen, have you aged that much? Even wearing diver's gear I could beat you today."

Was he really that much older? Lungs and heart should not wear out so fast, nor had they, he believed. But something else in him had aged and changed. "You have practiced much more than I," he grumbled.

"But you were always the better diver," she argued softly, swimming near, then coming out of the water. Some of the droplets that wet her emerging body were water of her own year, under the silken veils of time that gauzed her skin; other drops, the water of later years, some of the present where Hagen lived, clung on outside the veils. "And the stronger swimmer. You will soon be beating me again, if you come back."

"I am back already, Mira. Back to stay. You are three times as beautiful as I remembered you."

Mira came to him and he pulled her down on the beach to embrace her with great joy. Why, he thought, oh why did I ever leave?

Why indeed?

He became aware of a woman in diver's gear swimming nearby. By her attitude and the shape of her body he recognized Ailanna. She was watching him and Mira, had perhaps been watching and listening to them for some time. He turned to speak to Ailanna, to offer some explanation and introduction, but she submerged in the water and was gone. Mira, when he turned back, gave no sign of having noticed the other woman's presence.

On the morning of V minus 15, Leodas Ditmars woke at the time he had set for himself the night before, and ordered breakfast in his room. When the machines had served him, he went to keep his appointment at Bellow's suite. The agent opened the door for him almost at once, putting out a hand to keep Ditmars

standing in the small elegant entry hall.

Bellow was perturbed about something. “Have you heard?” he asked Ditmars quickly, in a low voice.

“Heard what?” Taking what seemed to be his cue, Ditmars responded in a near-whisper. “No, I’ve heard nothing that would affect the job.”

Two of Bellow’s fingers were clutching as if unconsciously at Ditmars’ shirt. “It was in the regular news sheet this morning. Only a small item, not featured. A report of vandalism in the Old Cemetery last night, by persons unknown. It must be some of Ramachandra’s people.”

“They got the book?”

“No, no.” Bellow’s answer was reflexive, but then he blinked; he hadn’t really thought of that possibility before. “At least I don’t think they would have been concerned about the book, and there was nothing in the news sheet about it. No, what they did was haul away a massive statue, a memorial that Ramachandra had erected years ago, just opposite Milady Rosalys’ conditivium. The statue was on a plot leased by Ramachandra, so there was nothing my client could do about it at the time... I’ll bet Person Ramachandra used some massive bribery yesterday, and got the fence around the cemetery turned off long enough so that his people could get in there with an airlifter and out again.”

“No doubt it could have been managed that way.” Ditmars still spoke very quietly, though he didn’t know why. He was thinking that he didn’t want to get inadvertently into a position of opposing a man like Ramachandra. Not that Ditmars would always refuse to oppose the powerful, but first he wanted to be very well informed, and secondly very well paid. “But I wonder-“

“What?” Bellow whispered.

“Why should that statue have been taken just now? For that matter, why should Ramachandra want it back at all?”

Bellow silently gestured his inability to answer either question. Then he turned away, motioning Ditmars to follow him.

In the same room where Ditmars and Bellow had talked two days ago, one of the oldest-looking men that Ditmars had seen for several decades was sitting slouched in a deep chair. He made no move to rise as Ditmars entered. Ross Gabriel’s long face was savagely marked with lines that none of the pictures of eight years ago had shown. He was recognizable to Ditmars only because the professional thief had been expecting to meet the popoet here.

Gabriel’s long frame was curved down into the chair almost fetally. He was as still as a sleeper but his gray eyes were steady and wide awake when he lifted his blond-gray head to stare at Ditmars. The deliberately cultivated aging of the face-evidently now coming to be the preferred fashion for men on many worlds-somehow suited Gabriel, giving or enhancing a haunted look of tragic suffering that the old photographs had not shown. A loose, shawl-like upper garment in rainbow colors prevented Ditmars from seeing whether Gabriel’s body matched his ravaged face or not.

“Ross, this is our newest employee, Person Leodas Ditmars.” Bellow performed the introduction in a politely soothing voice, as if he feared the two of them might flare up spontaneously when brought into contact. “Person Ditmars, Person Gabriel here is quite interested in hearing whatever you may have to report so far. Including any light you may be able to shed on the removal of the statuary last night.”

"About that I know nothing, I'm afraid," Ditmars said, and paused. Gabriel was still silently staring at him, not offensively, rather, like some old old man no longer much interested in anything. Was it real, irreparable age? Ditmars thought not, for Gabriel's jaw was firm, his earlobes still short, and the skin of his throat looked tight and smooth.

Ditmars drew in a breath and then delivered a business-like report. He detailed his scouting expedition of the previous day and outlined his plans for getting through the fence. The other two men listened, Gabriel mournful and wordless, Bellow eager, prompting with sharp little questions every now and then.

As soon as Ditmars had finished, the agent leaned forward in his chair. "I take it, then, that you can guarantee to accomplish this mission as we direct? So neither the cemetery authorities or anyone else will know about it?"

" 'Guarantee' is quite a large word, Person Bellow. I prefer not to use it. I do expect to be able to do the job just as you want it done. I've been able to accomplish some much more difficult things successfully."

"Very good!" said Bellow heartily. "We know your reputation, and I expect that'll be good enough for us." Smiling, he looked toward his client. But Gabriel's sad, implacable muteness did not crack. There was a brief silence that Ditmars broke with a throatclearing. "Then, Bellow, I'd like to get some details on the layout inside the conditivium. If I should have to make a new way in, it'll be very helpful to know just where the casket or sarcophagus or any other interior furnishings are. Also an exact location of the old entrance or entrances, which may be completely blocked by now."

Bellow signified agreement. "I can provide all that information for you," he assured Ditmars in his soothing voice.

"Good. Then as soon as I have the book, I can bring it straight here; or to some other meeting place if you prefer. I can leave the photography to you, or take care of that myself also. Whichever you prefer."

Gabriel blinked, and spoke at last. "Photography?" He croaked the one-word question like some ancient who had never before heard of the process. Ditmars found himself wondering what one of the most beautiful women of the Galaxy had ever seen in this sad, inert figure. Of course in eight years a lot could happen to a man to change him.

"Well," Ditmars reminded them patiently, seeing that Bellow also looked a little puzzled, "you won't be able to take the book itself offworld with you. It has eight veils around it now."

Gabriel raised his gray, ample eyebrows and let them fall. "Of course." He seemed about to add something, then abandoned the idea. His gaze roamed the room's walls restlessly.

"If you prefer," said Ditmars, talking to both of them, "I can photograph the book right there inside the conditivium and then just leave it there. How many pages has it?"

Gabriel got up quickly from his chair, a movement as surprising as an invalid's bounding from a bed. Half a dozen long-legged paces carried him across the room and then part way back, where he stopped to throw himself down on a couch. His face was sadder than ever, his body once more apparently in a state of near-collapse.

"No," he said, and his voice was much louder and firmer than before. "Take no pictures there. Only

retrieve the book and bring it here to me. Also, I'll want you to leave a proper replacement there in-the tomb."

"As you wish," agreed Ditmars, after a pause in which he worried at something in that final sentence which he felt he did not quite understand.

"Bellow will instruct you on all details." The popoet jerked his tall body up from the couch and stalked from the room without looking again at either of the others. As he went out, his shawl swirled about thin legs still hard and hale. Doors sounded as he passed, sighing open, sliding shut. In a few seconds there followed a muffled sound of water gushing.

"He finds that frequent baths are soothing," Bellow remarked. He pulled a pack of chewing pods from a pocket, and offered them to Ditmars, who refused. Bellow popped one into his own mouth. Around his clenched teeth he went on: "My client's concern is that there be no pictures taken of the body."

"I do what I'm hired for. I'm not being hired for that." All the same, Ditmars wondered idly just what some of the professional publicity-mongers on some of the crowded worlds might now be willing to pay for pictures of the famous corpse. As he had never dabbled in their field, never tried to cater to the public's craving for a constant diet of the names and faces of the celebrities, the potential profits were hard for him to estimate. Maybe such photos would still be worth a small fortune, eight years after the woman's death. But probably, he thought, any new pictures would be hard to sell, because the corpse probably looked no different than it had at interment. What could the caption-writers say about a masterpiece of the embalmer's art, a triumph of plastic and preservatives?

"How soon will you be ready to go in?" asked Bellow, now appearing more relaxed than Ditmars had seen him previously.

"I think tomorrow. Today I want to go out there and take another look around the place, see if last night's incursion had any effect on the security arrangements."

"That would seem prudent," Bellow agreed.

Now he was thinking something over, and when he had it settled to his own satisfaction he said: "In any future reports you make, preliminary or final, it will be well if there are no-no painful details of any kind."

"Painful details? You're afraid the client is easily upset?"

"Exactly. I've had a great deal of difficulty in getting him to see the reasonableness of this operation, and I don't want him changing his mind at this late date. If he were to receive the wrong kind of shock, he's capable of tearing up the book without opening it when we brought it to him. Just throwing it away." Bellow nodded solemnly. "Psychologically he's very sensitive, physically much stronger than he looks. I've seen him tear up books before"

Ditmars was frowning slightly. "The wrong kind of shock, did you say?"

Bellow looked at him as if from a height. "I mean anything morbid, or ghastly. Surely you must understand."

"Well..." There was still a spot of uncertainty. "Of course I'm not going to rush up to Gabriel and say 'Great Galaxy, man, a groundquake has tipped your late wife out of her coffin. Sorry about the gooey spots of embalming fluid on the book...' Is that the sort of morbid, ghastly detail you're saying I must

never mention?"

"Yes, obviously, that sort of thing." Bellow crunched an end of the pod inside his age-seamed jaws, and paused for taking thought. "And more. You should say nothing about conditions inside the place of interment. If something there should look wrong say nothing about it, at least not to Person Gabriel. Speak to me. If on the other hand all seems well there is no need to mention that, either."

The more the spot of uncertainty was rubbed at the more stubbornly visible it was.

"All right," agreed Ditmars. "I mean to do nothing in the tomb but what I'm paid to do. I'll follow your orders and say not a word to Gabriel about anything I find in there."

"Excellent."

"But I have the feeling there's something specific worrying you, and if it's something that can affect the job, it's very much my business." His eyes probed Bellow's.

Bellow looked away. 'There is the, ah, appearance of the remains to be considered. I don't suppose that will affect your performance of the job in any way."

"I don't know why it should. You believe the tomb may already have been broken into, robbed or desecrated in some way, is that it?"

"Well, there may have been-some disturbance, yes. There are reasons-reasons why I think it possible."

"What reasons?"

The last remnant of the chewing pod was ground to juice. "No reasons that should affect either your safety or your efficiency on the job."

After a long pause, Ditmars said: "All right. If I do have any difficulties, I'll report to you alone."

"Fine. Though there will be no embalming fluid for you to worry about. Person Gabriel has on several occasions written and spoken against the custom of making the remains of any loved one into a museum piece. Anyway, the nature of Milady Rosalys' final illness was considered by him to militate against any sort of preservative treatment."

"Oh? My brief research didn't extend to the manner of her death."

"Nor is there any reason why it should have done. All that is quite immaterial to our task at hand."

"No doubt." Ditmars got up to go. "Ah, just one more point today. Exactly what did Person Gabriel mean about leaving a proper replacement for the book?"

"He meant you are to leave another book. I will give it to you before you make your final trip to the cemetery. Tomorrow, you think it will be?"

"Yes. I'd like half my fee in advance tomorrow, before I start."

Bellow agreed, and Ditmars could think of no other intelligent questions to ask. On his way out of the suite, that last picture of Rosalys, appealing to the world for help, was still before him.

Day V minus 14

Ramachandra had the money and the connections available to hire the best machines and the best workers of his own yeargroup and all other groups chronologically near enough to make collaboration practicable. Two suits of special armor, experimental models under construction in one of his factories, were finished and hurried through their preliminary tests before another day had passed. The attempt to escape from Azlaroc was to be launched before this year's veil fell, because Callisto's calculations indicated that the chances of success would be at least marginally improved by doing so.

As for herself, she insisted that a ship be kept waiting at all times, ready to carry her out of the next veil's path should it come prematurely. None of the settlers Sorokin knew thought there was the slightest chance of veilfall for another six or eight days at least. But Callisto had a horror of being trapped.

The two men in armor, traveling close together, would represent a mass enormously greater than that of the recorder that had evidently become separated from its robot escort early in its journey. So the trip, if Ramachandra and Sorokin could complete it at all, should take them only hours or days at most, rather than the year that had passed between the little machine's descent into the trench and its re-emergence on the ridge. Callisto advised that they travel with additional mass, preferably inert foreign matter of some kind, to try to speed their passage further.

Their suits of armor were not meant to help them survive the neutron star; against its powers they could hope for no aid save what might be offered by the veils themselves. The first purpose of the armor was of course to preserve them during their passage through Azlaroc's solid underground, keep them uncrushed and supplied with air and water while the inner layers of the world hugged them with a force of a few thousand tons per square centimeter. After that the suits would have to see them through the transitional space. And should they survive the neutron star and somehow free themselves of veils, they were expected to emerge into ordinary space at some planetary distance between Azlaroc and the pulsar. Out there the armor would have to be proof against terrible onslaughts of radiation. Its gravitic dampers might have to balance enormous tidal stresses from the pulsar and the black hole. Finally, each suit must be able to act as a miniature spaceship to get its occupant safely down on Azlaroc, where he would stand free as a tourist atop all veils. All these requirements for the suits made their construction difficult, but not unreasonably so, for men had voyaged in space for thousands of years and they had the knowledge gained in all that time to draw upon.

As in most of his business affairs, Ramachandra did his best to maintain secrecy. He said he wanted no gaping crowds following him across the desert to behold his immersion in the trench. Callisto was to announce the adventurers' departure a few hours after it had been accomplished, and within a day the ships routinely passing in and out of the Azlaroc system would be alerted to listen and look for the suits' signals in free space. Things would be easier for the men if they were picked up there instead of having to get back down to the habitable surface on their own.

Personally, Sorokin also preferred that the attempt be kept a secret. Among the people he knew on Azlaroc, there was no one whom he felt compelled to notify of what he was about to do. As for the people he had known outside, on other worlds... he had better stay dead to them until his freedom was achieved.

Late in the day, Ramachandra and Sorokin, all their hasty preparations finished, left the city. They headed out across the desert in a flying machine. Already packed into the vehicle when Sorokin boarded it, besides their bulky suits of armor and a few other necessities, was a shape covered by a cloth, a shape big as a dining table but with an irregular top surface. Ramachandra said nothing about the thing and

Sorokin did not ask.

The dustless and-in this region-almost trackless plain unrolled behind them at thousands of kilometers per hour as their flyer rapidly built up speed. Its airfoils glowed with heat, reshaping themselves to deaden the gigantic Shockwave the flyer dragged in the narrow space between the land and sky. Meanwhile the air of ancient yeargroups, explorers and early settlers came sleeting through their bodies and their machines like harmless radiation. Callisto had insisted on remaining in the city, where she could stay only a minute from her spaceship. That the best forecasts gave fourteen more days before veilfall made no difference to her; she refused to take the slightest chance of being marooned here. She remained in television contact with Ramachandra and Sorokin as they flew, nonetheless, briefing them on the results of last-minute tests of the armor, and telling of her latest calculations.

The three principal bodies in the Azlaroc system were fast approaching the same relative positions they had held when the surviving recorder was carried down into the subduction trench by a robot.

"And let me remind you to send some dead mass of a few hundred kilograms immediately ahead of you," Callisto continued. "It will be an important factor in speeding up your passage. Did you provide yourselves with something?"

"I did." Ramachandra glanced once over his shoulder, back into the full cabin. Then he peered forward again. "It won't be long now. I think I see blacksky ahead."

Sorokin could also see it. He knew they would not be going that far and he felt a ridiculously strong sense of relief that they would not need to go under blacksky to reach the subduction trench. He supposed it would have made no difference whatsoever to Ramachandra if they had. Why should blacksky matter to a man who was willing to try the surface of the neutron star?

Ramachandra landed the flyer neatly within a few meters of the trench, which appeared just as it had in the hologram, a purple-bottomed zigzag across a land of orange and mauve. With the help of powered hand-lifters he and Sorokin soon emptied their vehicle's cabin of all their gear.

Sorokin could now see that the great, covered shape was basically a single slab of stone, textured, beautiful material from somewhere out in the broad cosmos.

It was white stone, marbled with subtle veins and streaks of various shades of brown. When Ramachandra casually pulled the cover aside, Sorokin saw that the stone was carved in the form of a gisant, a larger-than-life mortuary sculpture. It depicted a man and woman supine in death, their lightly draped bodies both of heroic mold. The man was. Ramachandra. The woman was idealistically beautiful. Sorokin thought he recognized Milady Rosalys who had died so terribly a few years ago, though he had never seen her in the flesh.

Ramachandra treated the statuary like any other mass of a few hundred kilograms, about to be used as ballast. With Sorokin's help he positioned it right on the lip of the purple-floored subduction trench. As soon as the mass of stone was settled on the ground it began to creep perceptibly toward the place where it was going to disappear.

"Now let's get the suits on," Ramachandra said. His tone made it a command. He was watching his partner closely now, as if expecting some last-minute reluctance. But Sorokin was moving to get ready.

"So, you're using that," Callisto's voice said from the portable television screen. Her eyes appeared to be turned toward the gisant.

Ramachandra had his armor standing on its legs, its back open, as he started to climb in. "Any reason why we shouldn't?"

"From my scientific point of view? No."

The magnate's face vanished, reappearing behind his thick faceplate. Sorokin, suiting himself too, was almost keeping up. Ramachandra said, "All right, Callisto, I'm just going to leave the flyer sitting here. After you've made the announcement of our departure, you can send someone to pick it up."

"I'll see that it's taken care of. Person Ramachandra, you now have about three minutes to get into the trench."

"Sorokin, ready?"

"I'm in my suit." He was twisting his body in the confined space, reaching awkwardly behind himself to dog shut the entrance hatch. Although the suits were gigantic, with servo-powered mechanical limbs, internal space for the wearer, or occupant, was relatively small.

The men checked each other's armor from outside, and then it was indubitably time to go. By now the huge sculpture had tipped up on end, going right into the trench. The man and woman were going down side by side, headfirst, looking ludicrous rather than heroic with their giant marble feet sticking up into the air. As Sorokin watched, the gisant accelerated in its downward passage, a doomed ship sinking into water.

Looking at each other steadily, the two men marched to the trench and stepped into it with their mechanical legs.

"Do you feel fear, wanderer?" Ramachandra's voice sounded small inside Sorokin's helmet.

"No more than you do, man of power."

"I think I have guessed right about you, Sorokin. You are going toward the same goal I am, but for different reasons."

"According to our agreement, my pay continues until this is over."

It was the first time Sorokin had heard his new employer laugh. "Very well. Until you are back on the surface of Azlaroc, one way or another Agreed?"

"Agreed."

"See to it, Callisto."

"Very well, Person Ramachandra."

The stone carving was now completely gone. The soft-looking lips of the trench made a heavy, grating sound as they sagged closed again above it. Ramachandra's suit was already submerged in the land to its knees; Sorokin was deeper. He had no unusual sensations so far, but it was disconcerting and at the same time rather elating to realize that he was going to lead the way.

Now the level of the trench's bottom had reached the crotch of Sorokin's suit. The last moment in which he might have changed his mind and scrambled out had probably gone by. It was all right with him. For now his suit was capable of protecting him; beyond that he did not try to think.

Now he was sinking faster.

Ramachandra, apparently irritated at being forced into the role of follower, looked down at him. "Sorokin, I would suggest you dose yourself with Chronotran before imprisonment in the rock"-it wasn't really rock, though, and Sorokin found grim satisfaction thinking he had caught his employer in an error brought on by nervousness-"has bored you seriously. The experts say the drug is more effective when taken before the time of real need."

"I'll take some soon then. Thank you for the suggestion. See you down below. Or above."

If either Ramachandra or Callisto had any more advice for him just then, he could not hear it. The purplish bottom of the trench flowed up with uneven sluggishness across his faceplate, and he was going down.

Not until a moment later, when it came to Sorokin that this was just the absolute kind of blackness he would have experienced out at the nadir of blacksky, did fear begin to fasten a real grip on him.

Chronotran. It did not kill fear, but it gave one control over the subjective sense of time; moments of joy or tranquility might be tremendously prolonged, while periods of pain or terror or dreary boredom could be as drastically compressed. With a curling of his limbs Sorokin brought himself entirely within-the central chamber of his suit and took some of the drug.

Not since the last general Council meeting-it was disquieting to try to remember exactly how long ago that was-had Chang Timmins been inside the open-air amphitheater where the meetings were always held.

The bowl amid the hills was a natural formation, although it looked quite artificial. Yeargroup One had chosen this place to meet because of its perfect shape and acoustics. Besides, it was only a couple of kilometers from the city they had expected to build. Looking at the meeting place now, though, Timmins could see it might equally well have been chosen because it was easily defensible. He wondered if such an idea had been in the backs of their minds in those days; it would have fit in with their housebuilding plans.

In several places the steep, jagged landforms around the natural bowl reached high enough to almost skim the sky. No one had ever bothered to improve the single entrance path. It was a climbing, twisting, difficult way, and Timmins had never seen the land vehicle that would be able to negotiate it. This well-worn trail, threatened by landslips in a couple of places, wound its way among several small atolls of razor coral, a variety whose almost invisibly thin stalagmite growths waited to slice the unprotected flesh or clothing of anyone unwary enough to blunder into it.

Today as he clambered over the trail's last rise to come into view of the great oval hollow, Timmins immediately spotted Tana Duvoisin's red hair. It stood out like a signal amid the middle ranks of the waiting, seated hundreds. That young man at her side looked like-yes, it was Roger, with Chang's dark hair but his mother"s handsome face. Roger was almost twenty now, and looked very mature. Chang had last seen his son about a quarter of a year ago, but it was much longer than that since Tana and he had met. As soon as the day's business allowed, Timmins promised himself, he would make a point of talking to them both.

The natural step-benches of the amphitheater were filled to about half their capacity. There were perhaps four hundred people in the enclosure, most of them sitting on the benches, others standing in groups, conversing, or walking about. A majority of the assembled explorers were still wearing rather drab-looking, utilitarian clothes much like what they had arrived in, although a sizable minority had adopted brighter fashions of one era or another. What struck Timmins most forcibly, what must have struck them all as the gathering formed, was that all its members were in crystal-clear visual and auditory focus for one another. This in itself always made a Council a memorable experience, and probably brought some people to attend who otherwise would not have bothered.

There had been not quite five hundred people in the group of explorers originally marooned on Azlaroc. A score or so had died of one cause or another in the intervening centuries, and some of the survivors for one reason or another were not here today, although there were more people present than Timmins had expected. Standing alone for a moment before he walked down to join the other people of his group, Timmins realized that a new factor was now definitely altering it-a new generation, of which Roger had been one of the first born, was now reaching adulthood.

In the early years of Azlaroc, recovering from the shock of finding themselves trapped, the explorers had for the most part reacted quite aggressively. Defying the powers they could not overcome, they had determined to make their lives here as normal as possible. That, for many of them, had implied having children-not at once in this strange new world, but someday.

Then they had enthusiastically laid out their new city, marking rough sketches of it on the land, setting aside spaces for school and playground, spaces that would be needed someday, when conditions allowed, when things were somehow better, when the future was more certain.

But as then decades passed and then the centuries, it began to seem that future events could never break them free. The conviction became general, and firmly held, that none of them, that no one, should ever bear children beneath the veils of Azlaroc. The belief came into being that to create a human life in these conditions would be a crime; a belief very little talked about, but seemingly shared by all.

And then, no more than about twenty years ago, with no trace of warning that Chang Timmins could now remember, that conviction changed. Something had happened to the explorers; the whole group of them, or at least a representative cross-section, had undergone some change that made it suddenly thinkable to have children. Pregnancies began to appear among the women, deliberate pregnancies that had to be carried on in the ancient way for several months, until the artifical wombs never needed before could be fabricated and thoroughly tested. And, as Timmins remembered, this great change had come about with a minimum of open debate as to whether it was right or not. It was as if something had been programmed into the members of the group, like puberty, and when the time was ripe the change burst out.

At the time he had suspected that this sudden interest in reproduction might be a sort of fad, like the fads in clothing and tents and music that came and went among the explorers. Yet Tana had been among the first to want to conceive, and neither she nor Chang Timmins were usually faddish.

No one year had seen a great number of pregnancies; and they were still happening, which would have to be some kind of an endurance record for a fad. Also, the results were a little too profound.

There was a small stage and a speakers' platform at one end of the amphitheater, and some people standing there had seen Timmins and were beckoning him down. He inventoried the audience as he descended, and to his surprise he saw at least a dozen of the new generation present. A few were about

Roger's age, and another handful were only a couple of years younger. Now that he came to count them up, there had been more children born than he imagined. There were probably more kids outside, too young to sit through a meeting, than there were in here. A couple of adults had probably stayed out there-what was the word again?-babysitting.

In the past few years he had almost forgotten, all over again, how living with children altered life.

Anton Tok-soz, who had been president of the council at its last meeting, and was therefore by the rules the presiding officer for the opening of this one, put out a hand in greeting as Timmins approached the speakers' platform. Tok-soz's stout frame was draped in a toga-like garment that gave him impressive dignity. There was a small electronic tally-indicator before him on the lectern; he had probably been counting the house, though it was pretty obvious that a majority of the group were present, certainly enough for a quorum according to the rules. Once Timmins, too, had thought it important to keep all the rules in mind. Once the council had taken itself quite seriously. But for a long time now, very little had been needed in the way of governing.

Exchanging greetings with Tok-soz, and then standing beside him, Timmins looked out upon the familiar faces, the changed faces, and the faces that he had not known he had forgotten till this new meeting reminded him of their existence. It was encouraging to note that only a few out of the whole group looked openly angry at him for having called this meeting.

And the new, young faces, scattered here and there, caught at his attention again. Were these offspring, now grown to adulthood or very near it, automatically full members of the yeargroup, with voting rights? Timmins supposed they ought to be.

But at exactly what age? As far as he knew, their status had never been made clear officially.

Later would be time enough to go into that. Now he turned to the man beside him. "Anton, are we ready?"

"In a minute or two, Chang. I want to give the latecomers a little longer."

"Anton... why did we, after all, begin having children here?"

Tok-soz, though he was not-as far as Timmins knew-a father himself, had perhaps been thinking along the same lines, for he answered at once. "I suppose we began to need new faces, new voices, and new thoughts."

"It was really a selfish thing, then."

"I'm afraid so." Tok-soz started to turn away, perhaps to address the audience, and then quickly turned back, remembering. "Oh, not in all cases, of course. You and Tana have a son, as I seem to recall now that I've put my big foot in my mouth."

Timmins made a brushing gesture of dismissal. He hadn't been thinking in personal terms, especially, and anyway it was no news to him that he could be selfish. But he thought more than that was involved. "Forget it, Anton."

Before turning on the sound system, Tok-soz had one more aside. "Chang, I'm just going to run through the formal opening, and them immediately turn things over to you."

"Thanks. That'll be fine." Tok-soz's brief speech gave him a moment or two to marshal his thoughts, then he was stepping up to the lectern as the president stepped back. Without thinking, as he had done when entering the amphitheater, Timmins glanced automatically toward Tana Duvoisin before he began to speak, as if they were still close mates. Her gaze was expectant and abstract as it met his.

He looked down, at a small light that meant power was on the invisible microphone, a nexus warped into space immediately above the lectern. Then he began to speak.

"Good day, and I hope I'm being a little premature when I wish a good year '431 to you all. I'm going to get right to business." No one objected to " that. "When I called for this meeting, I had one item of urgent business to bring up. Now I find there are two things I think you all should know about, and on which we may need some debate."

Though almost his entire audience must surely know by now what the first item was, he gave it to them again: the visitors of '430 were threatened by the same fate that had befallen the explorers.

Before Timmins had finished this opening statement, Kosta Wurtman was standing, asking for the floor. When Timmins had aimed the microphone in his direction, Wurtman said, "I've been thinking it over, Chang, and you're right. We ought to pass up some warning to them, if we can."

"Thanks, Kosta. I can report, by the way, that I finally got Station One of your old communications system dug out-and you, too, were right. It didn't work, or at least no one futureward seemed to be listening. Yes?"

Timmins had swiveled the mike toward the slender, young-looking man who had just risen, before realizing that this was one of the new generation.

The youth turned, speaking more to the ranked seats than to the platform. "Some of you won't recognize me, probably-my name is Raphael Hadamard-the Captain was my father." Captain Hadamard had been in command of the landing expedition of almost five hundred people when it was trapped; a few years later he had died, trying to blast his scoutship up and out, against the veils. The young man now speaking must have been conceived through artificial insemination with the captain's frozen sperm-some woman of the group had eventually decided that she wanted to bear a Hadamard.

Raphael had paused awkwardly; although he seemed bold enough, he was obviously not an accomplished public speaker. Now he seemed to consider and reject, one after another, several ways of going on. At last he confronted Timmins and burst out: "You're very concerned about the mass trapping of some tourists we don't even know-what about us? I mean we who were born here, born into a trap?"

A woman stood up, and Timmins saw in a moment that she too was of the new generation. It was not that the young dressed differently, or that the old people looked wrinkled or gray or worn; all of them had been vigorous when they worked for Interstellar Authority as explorers, and they still were. But the difference between generations was as easy to see as it was hard to define.

"Yes, what about us?" this girl demanded. "Before we worry over the fate of the visitors we'll never see, what about us, who are supposed to be members of this yeargroup?"

Timmins was still trying to prepare an answer, when he realized that his son Roger was on his feet and talking, not waiting for any formal recognition. Letting parliamentary procedure go, Timmins swiveled the mike around again. Roger's voice suddenly came out loud: "-whatever has happened to us, visitors still ought to have the right to decide whether they want to stay here or not. It won't help us a bit to take that

right away from them."

Timmins was not quite fast enough to pick up the girl's quick, sharp reply.

By now, several of the older generation were calling for the floor. Others, out of practice on the rules or just not giving a damn, had started arguing loudly with each other across the rows of seats. At least a dozen people were talking all at once. Timmins called for order, but too late. Now it was going to be a job to get any kind of regular procedure re-established.

Eventually he did. Then he recognized a couple of the old folk whom he thought he could depend upon. They earned his confidence, with short, soothing speeches about how any problems the young people might be having could certainly be taken up and dealt with, but all in good time, all in good time.

Then Timmins turned the floor over to another young girl, who had not been soothed in the least. But what she had to say surprised him.

"The claim has been made here that our freedom's lost." The girl's voice was dynamic; listening, one thought of ancient trumpets sounding. It would be much more effective in time, when she had learned to keep the trumpets in reserve. "Well, I say our freedom's not lost, it's guaranteed! If we cannot pass through the barrier of the veils in one direction, neither can the rest of the galaxy pass through it in the other, to infringe upon our world. Our world is going to remain ours, till the end of time."

A young man took the floor, sputtering with scorn. "The galactic world that's been taken away from us is just a little larger than the one that we've been stuck with, or haven't you noticed that?"

The trumpet-voiced girl was not used to energetic opposition, perhaps. "Oh? For-for every point in the entire universe outside our veils, another mathematical point can be described right here on Azlaroc, right in our world of Yeargroup One."

The eyes of the young man gleamed in triumph. "Did you ever try to live on a mathematical point?"

Chaos threatened once more. Timmins made a gavel of his fist, and thundered with it into the knotted space before the lectern. People in the front rows held their ears, but he regained control.

Quite a number of the older generation were amused, enjoying the scrap. Another sizable proportion looked thoughtful and troubled. All of the young folk seemed upset, though just who was on which side was not immediately apparent. It seemed that most of them were trying to talk at the same time.

When Timmins had once more achieved an uneasy silence, he let it hold for a few moments, and then said: "Before we get too deeply involved in an argument over the first item on our agenda, I feel I must at least tell you what the second item is. An attempt has recently been made upon my life."

That, as he had expected, got him a firm grip on everyone's attention. He went on, "I believe this assault qualifies as important public business for the group, if for no other reason than that next time one of you may be mistaken for me. Of course I'm not sure there will be a next time, nor does it seem to me likely that my enemies will be able to do any of us real damage. But the intent is certainly there and so I feel I must warn you."

"Who is it, Chang?"

"Not someone from this group?"

A dozen horrified people were bombarding him with variations of the same question. He raised a hand for quiet. "When I was starting to work on Kosta's old communications setup, I was fired at by a young woman. She was a settler, of course, though not of any nearby yeargroup. She had to wear diver's gear even to get a good look at me."

"She was young, you say?"

"Yes. Maybe second-generation, or later, within her group. Some groups did start having children before we did, I believe."

Several voices confirmed that this was so. Others, in a rising chorus, demanded to know why the girl had done it.

Timmins gaveled the air again, this time more gently. When all could hear him, he explained, "She was a member of the cult called the Knowers of Time, more informally known to most outsiders as the Ticktocks. And I'm sure she was merely acting on the orders of its leaders, who don't live on Azlaroc. As many of you know, I am a former follower of that religion myself."

His eyes once more, almost against his will, brushed Tana's as he continued. "Today may be the first time some of you have seen me without the numbers spinning in my eyes. All members in good standing of the Knowers are required to wear the numbers of an accurate timer there, so that time itself may be ever before them and with them and in their thoughts." The phrase from the old catechism came out neatly.

Roger was on his feet again. "Why did you drop out of the cult?" the young man called to his father, as if the yeargroup were all one big kindly family, and this meeting therefore a seemly place for such a private question.

Not that Timmins really minded answering, before a crowd or not. "I dropped out simply because I realized at last that I could not know time. I think the members of the cult delude themselves when they claim special insight into it." He added, speaking to his whole audience: "To my knowledge, I am the only member of this yeargroup who ever belonged to the Ticktocks. I think they have only a few million members on all the inhabited worlds combined."

At his elbow, speaking so as to be heard by the entire assembly, Tok-soz asked: "Chang, is it germane to ask just why they want to kill you?"

"I see no reason to keep it a secret. The numbers fell from my eyes, as I like to put it, about fifteen or sixteen years ago." Again there was a certain blasphemous inner satisfaction in this cultivated vagueness about a date he certainly could have remembered precisely if he had tried. The ones who had sent the would-be killer would want to kill him all over again if they could hear him now.

He continued, addressing the whole group: "This made me, in their eyes, not only a heretic but a recidivist. Because once before, long before I joined the Azlaroc expedition, I had lapsed from faith. Darkened my numbers, as they sometimes put it. That previous time-I-well, for one reason and another I repented and I was received back into the light of knowledge." Timmins could smile easily; he felt as if he were talking about someone else. "But, dim your numbers a second time, and they get fierce. The leaders of the cult, the Calends and the Chronons, do."

"Fierce enough to kill?" one of the young people asked from the audience. The tone of the question was

skeptical to say the least.

Timmins sighed. “I can lead you to the place where the girl shot at me, and show you the craters, if you’d be willing to accept those as evidence.” Looking around, he could see that the people who had known him for four hundred years were willing to take his word.

Tok-soz was murmuring in his ear. “I thought this whole thing might take five minutes, but no such luck. Mind if I move up and make like I’m president?”

“I’m just glad I’m not.”

When Timmins had moved back a step, remaining on the platform to answer questions, Tok-soz ruled that it was time for the assembly to get back to the first point of business. He put down attempts at digression, called for a vote, and soon had it electronically established that the vast majority of the yeargroup were in favor of making a strong effort to warn the tourists that veilfall was probably coming early.

The president then asked: “Can any of you so far report success in passing Timmins’ warning along? Who’s been able to speak to any settlers?” The members of Yeargroup One still considered themselves explorers, not settling immigrants. It was a distinction few other people on Azlaroc ever made.

Several people were signalling that they had something to report. Four of these, as it turned out, had already made contact with different members of the yeargroup of the oldest settlers, that of year ‘27. And three of the four were reasonably sure that their contacts were going to make real efforts to pass the warning on.

An older-generation woman, whose name Timmins could not at once remember, stood up to question him.

“Exactly what do these Knowers of Time, these Ticktocks-whatever you call them-what do they believe?”

“Has this any relevance to the item of business under discussion?” Tok-soz queried sharply.

“I think it may,” the woman said.

Timmins gave the equivalent of a shrug. His questioner was standing near Tana, who doubtless could have answered this question as well as he, after all the time that they had lived together.

“They believe,” he replied, “that time rules space, energy, and matter, the triad of subordinate components that with time form the entire universe. All four are bound together, of course, yet time is the only one into which none of the others can be completely translated. Despite its supremacy, they believe that time is knowable. Time is God. And it is, therefore, the duty of every human being to devote his or her life to its contemplation and study. All this is somewhat oversimplified, of course, but-“

“And what about eternity?”

“There is none, in their view. Only endless duration, eternal time. I will not argue the distinction with you, but I understand that most mathematical philosophers these days think it’s a valid one. Anyway, what connection has all this with the business at hand?”

The woman said: “I was trying to get at the moral beliefs of these Knowers of Time. It had occurred to me that this young woman, your assailant, must represent the end link of a ready-made chain of communication between our year and the year ‘430, since you say orders to kill you must have come to her from visitors. And I suppose some report from her will go back to them?”

“I suppose it will. Yes, I had the same idea, of using her, while she was still in sight. But even getting her to listen seemed hopeless... nor do I know how we can find her again. She must have discovered somehow that I was in the city, and then followed me out to this area. There’s no telling how long it took her to locate me.”

The woman sat down, and Tok-soz stepped forward again. He began to assign people to look systematically for specific members of yeargroup ‘27, and other people to try for ‘37 acquaintances. Farther futureward than that it became impractical to try, though occasional contacts were made by chance with the ‘49 yeargroup. If the warning could be started along a hundred channels at once, or even on a score of channels, its chances of reaching ‘430 folk before veilfall would be much improved.

The young people had been generally quiet for a while. Those called on by Tok-soz to help in the search for ‘27 and ‘37 people accepted their assignments with apparent enthusiasm. A couple of people got up and trotted out of the amphitheater so they could begin at once. But now one of the young men who had spoken earlier was on his feet again.

“What about facing up to some of these other questions now?” he demanded when the microphone was aimed his way.

Tok-soz was genuinely puzzled for a moment. “Other questions such as what?”

“E-everything!” A young girl jumped to her feet, her multitude of protests stumbling over each other to be heard. “For one thing, are we never to have finer air to breathe than the foul stuff our five-hundred-year-old machines spew out? I have seen the old chemical analyses of the first artificial atmosphere your generation made. I have re-created some of that mixture in a laboratory. It smells better and it is better than this gas we’re breathing now, this old, tired stuff—“

“That’s preposterous!” An elder had got angry enough to interrupt. “We may have accumulated a few harmless trace elements over the years, that’s all.”

Tok-soz expertly placated first one and then the other of the pair. But then Timmins, growing more and more interested in hearing what the young had to say, recognized another of them.

A tall, broad-shouldered boy stood up. He nervously did not know what to do with his hands. He might be sixteen years old.

“Well, the water. You know, I hear we’ve come close to having real water shortages once or twice. Our population’s increasing now, but-but everything just seems to go on as if it were not. Everyone says that someday all the new needs will be taken care of. Well, I got a computer projection that says some rationing of water will be necessary in ten years if there’s no improvement in the machinery.”

Wurtman got to his feet. But he was seconding, not objecting. “The kid’s got a point. Something will have to be done, eventually. Why not now, before things get uncomfortable, or even dangerous? And why shouldn’t we have more reservoirs, for possible emergencies, and just for fun? Maybe even a great pool or lake, out around here somewhere, like the city’s. There’s no technical reason, is there, why we can’t extract a lot more water from the matter of our year?”

Immediately there arose several cries of disapproval. A number of Wurtman's and Timmins' generation were automatically agin it all.

"The city's pool is open to us any time, if it's water sports you want. There's a vast amount of water of our year, existing there."

Another man wanted to answer. "But we do not exist there. Very few members of this yeargroup want to spend a lot of time walking through the tourists and having them chase us with their cameras."

There's a man, thought Timmins, who hasn't been to town for a good long while. It had been almost a century since the tourists gave up trying to photograph the explorers, who faded a little farther from the galactic present with every veil that fell.

Still, tourists remained generally unpopular with most of the explorers. Some of them didn't like settlers very well either. Now a woman got up to say, "They crowd our world faster than the veils can carry us into the past, away from them. Now the water in the city, like the air, is getting thick with these newcomers' bodies. There's a real fog of them for us to move through, and I for one find that each decade, each year even, it grows more offensive."

Her opinion was widely echoed.

Roger was up again. His open face showed his worry plainly, and it was not water on his mind. "Dad, I'm still trying to understand why those people want to kill you. Suppose you were dead. Would the Calends and the Chronons think then that time was ruling the universe any more firmly than before? I mean... what do they hope to gain by it?"

Timmins sighed inaudibly. He guessed that age nineteen on Azlaroc must be a whole lot younger than nineteen in the complex society of any other human-settled world.

He smiled at Roger. "All beside the point, son. It's not usually what people believe that makes them willing to kill others. I think it's rather what they doubt that has that effect."

"Do you miss the great world outside of this one, Mira?" After lunch today, with his beloved on his arm, Hagen was walking toward the Hanging Gardens. These were land formations named after some legendary wonder of old Earth. Azlarocean coral grew in these new hanging gardens, along with other, rarer native plants; some out world flora had been transplanted here also. Constant care by machinery and people kept most of the transplants flourishing. The Gardens were one of the things that Hagen had somehow never found time to see the last time he had come to this world as a visitor.

Mira looked up at him, and squeezed his arm, smiling affectionately. She said: "I suppose I drove you away to it with my lamenting for it. No, I really do not miss it now. This world is large enough, and grows no smaller for me. Your great world but there must grow smaller for you as you age, despite all its galaxies and space. Is it only fear of time and age and death that has brought you back to me, Hagen?"

Seeking the answer inside himself required a little time. "No," he said at last, feeling that his reply was perfectly honest. The contrast between this honesty and some of the things he had said since he had returned as well as before they had parted showed up things for what they were. Whom had he been trying to fool?

Who was it that men always tried to fool?

As they rounded a dull land formation the Hanging Gardens burst into view. Half a kilometer ahead a step-pyramid festooned with wonders rose level upon level to brush the sky in a burst of radiance.

But neither Hagen nor Mira were looking that way.

"And was it," Mira asked, "really my lamenting that drove you off? I lament no longer for my life."

"Nor for the veil that fell between us?"

The true answer was there in her grave eyes, if he could read it through the stretching, subtle, impenetrable veils.

Ditmars was packing extra equipment into his camera bag, and feeling eager-or was it anxious?-to finish the job as soon as possible. His preparations were interrupted by a call on his room's communicator.

The face of Bellow on the small screen looked eager and energetic also. Maybe the business agent had toned out some of his smaller facial wrinkles.

"Busy this morning, Ditmars?"

"Fairly."

"I'd like to stop over for a quick visit."

"Come ahead."

Bellow arrived in about five minutes. Invited in, he threw himself down in a chair with the relaxed air of a man about to start a vacation. He asked: "You're intending to retrieve the book today?"

"Yes, if there are no unforeseen obstacles."

"Fine. I'll have cameras all ready in my room for the photography." Bellow dug into his shoulder bag and brought out a small translucent cube. "This is a sound recording."

"I can see that."

"Person Gabriel's instructions are that you set it to play, inside the conditivium. On one of the shelves would be a good place for it, I suppose. And here's the book you are to leave, in place of the one you must remove." It was a small thick volume, with an elegant blank gray cover. Holding it out in his well-kept hand, Bellow met the eyes of the professional thief. "Poets are not as other men, Ditmars."

"Oh?"

"Please humor him in this, and humor me also, though I'm no artist. Will taking these things along make your task notably more difficult?"

"I suppose not."

"This volume is a duplicate in size, shape, and appearance of the one you are going to recover; I need not caution you not to get them confused. Place this against her cheek, beneath her hair. That's where

you should find the book you are going to bring back." Bellow paused, looking into space. "If there should be any-"

"If there should be any difficulties, I'll bring them to you alone."

"Yes, that's it."

Ditmars accepted the book and riffled through its pages. Many were blank, but quite a few were covered with verse in what at first glance appeared to be handwriting. Taking a closer look, Ditmars recognized a sophisticated printing process.

"It contains some of his, Person Gabriel's, later works," Bellow offered, noticing Ditmars' puzzlement.

"Of which he has many copies elsewhere."

"Of course."

"So, unlike his gesture of eight years ago, putting this book into the grave with her is no sacrifice for him at all."

Bellow was silent.

"I can understand him changing his mind about that first one, wanting it back for financial reasons. But this one. Is it meant to be just an ornament to impress future generations of grave robbers? No, I'm damned if I understand this book at all."

"There is no reason why you should." The older man sighed. "I do not always understand Person Gabriel's motives myself, and I have been with him fifteen years."

Ditmars looked up. "Then you knew her."

"Oh yes." The tone conveyed nothing.

"What was she really like?" Though even as he asked the question he realized its futility.

Bellow took it seriously, though. "Many ask that. What can I say? You've read some of the stories, I suppose, but they tell nothing." The gray-haired man paused, thinking; there was some kind of a point he wanted to make. "Milady Rosalys always struck me as a...a lonely woman. I knew that would seem a strange word to her. She was very, very seldom alone. In fact, she had a horror of being unaccompanied. But..."

Bellow let his speech trail off, then gestured his inability to say what he meant. He indicated the book and the small cube in Ditmars' hands. "I hope you will leave those as we want them."

"I will." He thought he might. He really didn't know.

His visitor sighed again as he rose to his feet, looking considerably less jaunty than when he had entered the apartment. "I-we-will be anxiously waiting to hear from you."

Again Ditmars left his vehicle a hundred meters or so from the cemetery, parked where it should be almost certain to remain unnoticed while he carried out his business. Then he walked casually over to the

fence.

As he was approaching the barrier, he felt a tremor go through the ground beneath his feet accompanied by a muffled roaring behind him. He turned quickly to glance back and upward. There the crest of West Ridge seemed to loom above him, straight as an ocean horizon. During his research he had come across predictions that soon the whole gigantic West Ridge formation might be in danger of collapsing, of being shaken out like a wrinkle from a rug. Fortunately the land movement would take place in the direction away from the city and not toward it. The landflow in the Old Cemetery was evidence for this conclusion. Likely the collapse would come near veilfall when stresses in the system peaked.

Ditmars proceeded, walking. The collapse of West Ridge was not a present concern. There had been no warning issued yet for people to stay clear of the ridge. In fact, he could see a couple of tourists' vehicles crawling along its crest right now. And the next veilfall was not due for another fourteen days, by which time Ditmars expected to be long gone.

Reaching the glowing fence, he walked along it until he came to an area that he had earlier decided was best protected from casual observation of any place along cemetery's perimeter. Three house-sized cylindrical landforms bulked right at his back, making a good screen in that direction; directly in front of him there rose the cemetery's central hill, cutting him off from the view of anyone on its farther side.

He reached into the camera bag and quickly got to work. The fence gave him no more and no less trouble than he had anticipated. After about four minutes its glowing strands, where they passed in front of Ditmars, were subtly altered in appearance. He nodded with satisfaction, and pushed a tool right through one line of force with no apparent damage. He tried a hand with the same result, then stepped boldly through. As he had expected, the passage produced no sensation.

Once inside the fence he stowed his tools before walking briskly up the terraced side of the central, fort-like hill. It lifted its clustered tombs and monuments beneath a faded patch of sky. Many of the structures rose higher than his head. Once among them Ditmars felt almost completely safe from being seen.

On the ground between the manmade structures, and often sprouting right from their sides and roofs, coral grew. When he had been here two days ago the coral had been bright, the trunks and branches making a rainbow of clear colors. Today the colors were muted or completely gone. The branches were gray or brown, the trunks the same in deeper shades, some were even streaked with ebony. Curiously, Ditmars touched several branches as he passed. They felt quite smooth and artificial, and when he let his fingers linger on one it began to feel cool as if chilled water were being pumped through it inside. Warmth was being sucked from his fingers into the coral.

The library had provided him with some of the essential facts about the plants; among other things, how their yearly changes in transparency and color were related to their strange reproductive cycle. This darkening in the days before veilfall meant that the plants were absorbing as much radiant energy as possible, storing it up, charging themselves for the violent broadcast of quantum-spores that was soon to come. That explosive seeding generally began just hours before the falling of a veil, reached a peak of intensity within a few minutes, and then gradually fell off, persisting until after the veil had fallen and the new year had begun. Quantum-spores, behaving like radiation rather than like matter, could pierce six or eight veils before their energy was exhausted or their genetic information too badly scrambled. After traversing six or eight veils they had lost enough energy so that the next solid matter they encountered stopped them; if it was suitable matter, a new coral plant began to grow from it at the point of impact.

Just how the native lifeforms could predict veilfall no one knew. Often they were more accurate than the

computers in the sophisticated space stations kept in orbit around Azlaroc as an alarm system for the benefit of visitors. Anyway, as veilfall was supposedly still fourteen days away-Ditmars had checked, and the conclusion of the year had never been known to sneak up on the world this early-the danger of spore-radiation from these plants should be vanishingly small.

He stopped, looking at the scar on the raw ground where the missing monument, no doubt, had recently been removed. By airlifter, probably, as Bellow had suggested, for Ditmars could see no tracks of men or machines about.

Beside the scar, half-buried, Milady Rosalys' tomb-pardon me, Person Bellow, her conditivium-waited. Ditmars smiled for an instant as he squatted down beside the smooth, bright masonry. If Rosalys had seemed lonely to Bellow, how had the agent seemed to her?

The construction of the tomb wall was unlike anything he had seen elsewhere. This showed how richly mankind could have built on Azlaroc had they chosen to make the effort. The wall was an amalgam of native and imported matter, blocks of various kinds of normal, off world stone patterned with chunks of Azlarocean land of subtly different colors. The labor must have been immensely difficult. Even this small building must have cost a fortune. When this was built, a few short years ago, Ross Gabriel must have been able to afford his own space yacht, perhaps several of them.

Ditmars walked completely around the tomb. It had a vaulted roof that would be too tricky to get in through. As his distant observations had indicated, the sole original entrance had been quite blocked up by the movement of the land.

Now Ditmars got out a tool and had a try at digging the land out from under the lintel of the doorway. As soon as he had thrust the implement into the ground, a slow and somehow profound throbbing came back into his hands along its metal grip as if he were taking some giant's pulse. He squatted there for a little while, listening and feeling. He pushed the tool handle this way and that. He timed the beat. He was certain it was the pulsar's rhythm that he heard and felt, as if it could be located in the core of Azlaroc instead of at an almost interstellar distance.

Well, he would get nowhere without being willing to take some risk. He applied low power to the tool and instantly a symmetrical pattern of shatter-marks spread in radii for many meters across the ground. The pulsar's voice was suddenly loud. No excavated matter came up as it should have done, but the cracks in the ground widened alarmingly.

Less than two seconds after turning it on, Ditmars cut power to the tool. Twenty meters away a mausoleum made from a native landform changed shape suddenly, half a wall of it sliding into a hole in the ground that had not been there a few seconds earlier. The pulsar's notes turned basso, and reluctantly died away.

Dangerous land movement, the signs had said. Ditmars sat there considering, sweating a little as he watched the tool's unheld handle continue its deliberate vibration. The land was still again, but one crack nearby was half a meter wide, and he could see no bottom to it.

So, it looked as if he was going to have to cut his way in through the wall, someplace where there was still space enough to make a door above ground level. If the ground had risen inside the tomb as well-he would see about that when he got in.

A good deal of coral was growing on this side of the tomb, around and above the almost-buried entrance. Pulling his digging tool gingerly out of the cracked ground, Ditmars packed it away and walked

round to the other side. Here, as he had already noticed, the wall was practically free of coral and the land had not risen quite so high. Mentally he checked Bellow's plan of the interior of the structure. Yes, he should be able to break in on this side without threatening Milady Rosalys.

Attacking the wall, Ditmars' tools worked almost normally. He cut around the brick-sized chunks of local matter, lifting them out whole and stacking them in order on a sheet of plastic he spread on the ground. The imported stone of the wall opened up silently, in neat knife-blade cuts, before his power implements. The more he saw of the wall, the more he appreciated the builders' skills.

Bellow had not been able to offer a good guess as to its thickness, which turned out to be about twenty centimeters. As soon as Ditmars had a head-sized hole cut through, he paused to take a look inside. The air inside was fresh-there were probably small ventilating channels concealed somewhere-but it was very dark. Indeed, Ditmars' first impression was that darkness flowed almost palpably out of the interior. When he shone his electric torch around inside, the opening seemed to swallow its brightest beam almost without a trace.

Even with the torch, he was able to see only the mere suggestion of vague, shadowed shapes within. At least the floor was a good distance down, the rising land had not filled the interior. He made his hole a little bigger and tried again. Now he could see that there was a lot of coral growing in the tomb, which must be what was making it so dark, by literally absorbing any light that came along.

Ditmars didn't know quite what interior design he had expected, but certainly he was looking for something impressive and extreme. And what he could see looked very commonplace, giving almost the impression of an ordinary room inside some quite ordinary house or apartment. Peering in carefully, he could make out, first of all, two large, straight-backed chairs. They were tall and elaborate and perhaps had had some ceremonial function as well as being decorative. Besides the chairs there were a small table, a couple of large vases standing on the floor, and some empty shelves built in along one wall-Bellow had mentioned those. Bulking in the center of the single chamber was a bed-sized shape that must, according to Bellow's sketch, be where the body and the book were laid. This shape was surrounded by growing coral, and visible only as a mound of shadows.

As he cut out his doorway, Ditmars continued to stack the removed chunks of wall in order at his feet. When he was ready to depart he would rebuild the wall, sealing the blocks back into their original places. A passerby would not be able to tell that someone had broken in.

When the opening was big enough for him to slide through it comfortably, he put his tools back into the bag again. He entered the hole, dropping lightly to the tomb's paved floor, a level considerably lower than that of the outside ground. As Ditmars' eyes grew accustomed to the dimness, he could see that the coral was almost everywhere. It had interpenetrated the walls in a hundred places, as if the amalgam of native and foreign matter offered it an especially fertile soil.

For some reason the stuff was growing most thickly near the body itself. Nourished by a decomposing corpse? Ditmars doubted that. As he understood the workings of the native life forms, they got their energy by absorbing radiation. These inside the tomb had grown branches out through its walls and roof in search of that, and their parts inside were already a starved, stark black. The fierce light of the torch falling on them was absorbed almost entirely so that he could not see even the shape of the coral itself in any detail. No more could he see the exact shape of what the coral shadowed.

Once, with the idea of forestalling any possible difficulties caused by a final barrier, he had asked Bellow what sort of a coffin or container the body was in. The agent had answered with vague assurances that he would have no problem getting at the body once he had come this far.

Bellow had been right. Standing beside the central mound of shadows, he put his hand in among the coral branches and saw it disappear in darkness, even while the torch in his other hand was aimed that way. When he tried thrusting, the torch itself completely into the shadows, its light vanished, only the glowing oval of his new doorway illuminated the scene. Holding the torch there in the heart of darkness, he aimed its beam directly back at his own eyes. Its lens was a barely visible amber circle.

Muttering something, Ditmars brought the torch out and turned it off. He was going to have to examine the coffin-or whatever-by touch. Using his left hand, he began. Under an impalpable blanket of dustless, stainless soot, his fingers first brushed and then closed upon a vertical carven hardness, like the post or headboard of an elaborate bed. He pushed his arm in deeper, between two stalks of coral and touched cloth. There was no coffin or sarcophagus, then, only an open catafalque or bier.

Feeling his way slowly along the cloth, Ditmars caught himself grimacing in apprehension. He was beginning to fear something, and did not know what he feared, and was not going to take the time to stop and think it out. He forced himself to draw a deep breath in and let it flow easily from his lungs to relax his muscles.

Now his fingers had come to-bone? No, something much too angular for bone. It was a coral branch, that must be it. There was a growing coolness when his fingers paused.

He pulled his hand out, with the feeling that he'd just received a real warning of some kind. However irrational this feeling was, he thought he'd better trust it when it became so strong. With his torch tuned to a tight beam, he tried again to bore a hole with it into the darkness around the supposed headboard. With persistent effort, repeatedly changing both the angle of his vision and that of the light beam, he at last managed to discern a shape. It took him a few moments longer to realize that what he had discovered were the corpse's feet, draped in some kind of cerements, where he had been looking for the skull.

Now the nagging feeling of being warned, of something wrong, began to crystallize itself-as guilt. It was an emotion that for a long time had been unfamiliar to Ditmars. And he thought it rather ironic that on this job, where for once his legal position was almost faultless, the pangs should come. What was he doing wrong here? Simple trespass. He could hardly be charged with anything worse than that.

But of course it was not the law that he cared about, consciously or in his undermind. He was feeling guilty because he didn't want to play this shabby trick on Rosalys.

It was necessary to fight down an irrational urge to pack up and get out and get off world. He had said he'd do this job, and so he would. Ditmars moved to the other end of the shadowed catafalque and tried again with his light. Here, though, the darkness was if anything more intense, and trying to see was hopeless.

Again he had to pause to try to settle his nerves, and this time more than a deep breath was needed to do the job. For a few seconds he assumed conscious control of much of his autonomic nervous system, easing his own heartbeat, lowering his blood pressure, regulating other processes. Autohypnotically he worked to drive an idea down into the lower levels of his mind: This is not a particularly dangerous job, there is no need to feel fear. And another idea to go with it: The woman is dead, there is no need for guilt.

The only answer floating upward from his undermind was an image of Rosalys as the old pictures had shown her-a young woman of passing beauty crying out with her great need.

After consideration Ditmars put the dead woman's image out of his conscious thought, and ran his hand

down into the midst of mounded shadows at the head of the catafalque. Here was another carven board, and here some coral rods, thin branches. These were quite thin, and therefore, Ditmars supposed, of fairly recent growth. One rod broke, like fragile porcelain, as his hand pushed past it-the breaking was a shock, somehow he had been expecting the plants to have much greater strength.

Now, affording him another shock, something quite yielding came beneath his fingers. It felt not at all like the skullbone or parchment skin that he had been expecting. In a moment Ditmars realized that this was nothing but Milady Rosalys' long hair. And underneath it something-something smooth and cool, broad as a cheek but too flat to be a cheek of either flesh or bone. Then his fingers found a square corner, and he knew that he had come at last upon the book, resting there spine upward.

To get the volume free required a gentle tug as if some fragile fingers were holding it where it was. As the book pulled free once more there came a tiny breaking sound and feeling, as of thin coral snapped. Ditmars made a choked sound.

Then the book was out, free in his hands. He exclaimed in sheer surprise; he could not see the book he was holding. Cupped in his hands was a small clot of the tomb's most central darkness. It overflowed his fingers waveringly, blotting out part of the space around it, like the photographic negative of a small blazing fire. Yet the book felt solid and normal, he could open it and turn the invisible pages with no trouble. He put it down on the small ornamental table and tried fruitlessly to put that flame of darkness out with his bright torch.

Well, back in the city there would be still brighter lights and more technology available. Ditmars opened his tool bag and got out a plastic wrap and swathed his trophy in it. Then he took from the bag the book he had been instructed to leave here as a substitute. He weighed this replacement volume a few times in one hand, and then with something like surprise he watched his fingers toss it, clop, into a corner of the chamber's coral-riddled floor.

"No, Milady," Ditmars said aloud, "I don't know why I should help them play that mean little trick on you."

Next there was the recording cube. With curiosity Ditmars got it out of his bag, turned it on and set it on one of the built-in shelves along the wall. Gabriel's voice, set so low that it was barely audible, began to croon what must be one of his own hackneyed verses.

Oh, my dear, my thoughts are near you, though I am far away

If you miss me, one day I'll be, beside you here to stay ...

The voice sang a few more lines and then stopped. Evidently some intervals of silence had been mercifully programmed in.

Ditmars stowed the retrieved book, in its plastic wrapper, into the bag which he swung over his shoulder. He looked around for any clues to his presence besides the cube and the discarded book then moved toward his private exit.

He had gripped the edge of the hole and pulled himself up, and got his head and one shoulder out of the tomb when a steel hand clamped down immovably upon the shoulder-strap that held his bag and stopped him like a prison gate. Experience served Ditmars well, suppressing any violent reaction. Almost calmly he looked around. There was no grasping hand, steel or otherwise, in sight. With one hand he felt behind him. It was only that the bag had become snagged on something... except it hadn't.

He started out... and couldn't get through the hole.

So wait for me, my dear, sang Gabriel in soft insanity. This is no time to fear ...

Ditmars dropped back into the tomb. Nothing was holding him, nothing was caught on him or the bag. He felt all around the opening, flashed his inadequate light everywhere. There was nothing that could possibly snag him or his equipment. He started out again, bag on shoulder.

Only to be stopped in the same place, by the same invisible detent.

He had to go through a few more seconds of mental paralysis before understanding came. It was the book, of course. In making his doorway he had knocked down this year's wall, which was the only one that he could see and reach. The wall of eight years ago was still in place, complex as ever with all its melded materials, and every atom of it bearing at least eight veils. There were eight veils or more stopping every atom of the book.

Ditmars, with all his modern gear, would be able to pass freely in and out through the doorway he had made, but he could not take the old book through, not in a million years.

With a sigh, he tossed his bag down on the little table and brought out the volume wrapped in plastic. One theoretical solution would be to hire someone from the yeargroup eight years back to make the hole in the wall all over again. That solution Ditmars rejected outright-it would involve too many complications for a stranger on this world like himself.

He was irritated with himself for not having foreseen this difficulty. Of course neither Bellow nor Gabriel, offworlders also, had anticipated it, but that was no excuse for Ditmars; such things were his business. In his irritation he walked over to the shelves and switched off Gabriel's recorded maunderings. "Don't tell me you like that," he muttered, looking toward the dark catafalque. "Not really."

There was a second solution he could try: to somehow get the book out of the tomb through the original entrance. He would try once more to open it; maybe working from inside would make it feasible.

There was no handle on the inside of the door, and nothing he could do to open it barehanded. Ditmars' first attempt to use a tool against it produced an audible shudder that seemed to race through not only the tomb but the whole cemetery round. Glancing quickly out into the light through his new private doorway, Ditmars could see a short spire above a neighboring tomb shake like a treetop in the wind. At the same time there came a distant, crumbling roar, as of a mass of falling masonry. He cut power on his tool at once, and yanked it from the door. For six or eight loud beats within the tomb, the pulsar sounded like the heart of some enormous and inhuman creature thrown into a sudden fright.

Solution number two was out. He was going to have to do some thinking.

He looked at the little book, a flame of dancing darkness. His camera was very good, and it just might be able to read writing where his eyes could not. Normally he would not have disobeyed his employers' orders against taking photographs inside the tomb, but the circumstances were not as anyone had foreseen them.

The book opened easily, and its pages turned neatly, though they remained mere smears of black. On the little table he spread the volume open, and on either side of it arranged torch and camera, crouching on their adjustable mounts to stare at it. But the test squares of plastic that the camera presently began to

grind out were devoid of information. His lenses could see no more than the same blackness that met his vision. Focused full on the spread pages, the light beam vanished into their optical soot. Somehow the coral cells must have grown right into the ink and paper. Scraping gently did nothing to remove the black, and Ditmars was afraid to scrape hard lest he destroy what he was being paid to save.

He could return with a more intense light. But already the book's pages were growing very warm to the touch, heated by the energy his little torch was pumping into them. This book, like its intended substitute, was doubtless of real paper, and it might well burn if it was heated overmuch.

At the moment Ditmars could think of only one more thing to try. And in a minute or two he had assured himself that the darkness extended right across the radiation spectrum, or at any rate those portions of the spectrum that it might be feasible to use for making photographs of the book. Infrared lenses, for example, showed him no more of its pages than did his unaided eyes. The coral cells were grabbing all the energy that came in, perhaps letting out a little, very grudgingly and only as conducted heat.

Ditmars sighed, reached for his communicator, and called up Bellow. Sometimes a temporary retreat from a job was the only realistic course. When the agent answered, Ditmars out of habit spoke guardedly, though he had no reason to think anyone would be making the effort to listen in.

"This is the field expedition. It looks like we're not going to be able to wind the job up today after all." He wasn't ready to admit that the setback could be more than temporary. With a little leisure to study the problem he would think of something; he had beaten tougher obstacles than this one in the past.

While listening to Bellow's anxious, querulous reply, Ditmars walked over to the catafalque and reached into the dark to put the original book back where he had found it. His arm went shoulder-deep in blackness once again. He left the volume resting gently there on something, without making any effort to place it exactly against the cheek or into the hand. That little snap, when he had pulled it out, was still reverberating in his nerves. That snap had shaken him even more than the phantom grasp at his shoulder when he had tried to leave the tomb.

Ditmars was still more shaken by the realization that he would rather have broken his own finger than one of these deserted bones.

Day V minus 13

It seemed to Sorokin that the blackness around his suit, and the sense of overwhelming opposing pressure whenever he tried to move its servo-powered limbs, lasted only a few minutes. Never mind that the figures on his trip recorder added up to more than a standard day, or that his body went several times through the routines of eating and drinking and elimination. Almost before enough subjective time had passed to let him anticipate a change, change was upon him in the form of the same bands of blue-white radiance that he had seen in the hologram. A glance at his instruments showed him that both the pressure and the radiation flux outside his suit had climbed enormously. He was surprised to see that the temperature, so far at least, was going down.

Wanting to be ready for action should it be required, he gave himself the antidote for Chronotran. Shortly afterward he caught sight of the gisant moving ahead of him through blue-white space, gliding in the direction from which the transverse bands of light seemed to flow. Spinning very slowly as it moved, the statue trailed something like a Shockwave, within the boundaries of which his suit of armor rode. There was no sign of Ramachandra's suit, and when Sorokin tried to use his communicator it was dead.

Working with the legs and arms of his suit again, he found he could maneuver like a swimmer in thick

water amid this medium of light. Turning his suit with paddling motions, he at last saw another like it come tumbling slowly after his from the direction in which the bands of light marched off to disappear. One thing that surprised Sorokin was that here he continued to maintain an "up" and a "down," not only as a matter of visual orientation, but as awareness of physical force within his suit. "Down" was permanently toward its feet, as if it were equipped with an artificial gravity of its own like a large spaceship. Ramachandra had instructed him thoroughly in the suit's systems, and no artificial gravity had been mentioned. It must therefore be some effect of the environment.

The speeding bluish stripes of light that formed his visual world were now repeating the sequence of narrowing and widening that Sorokin had witnessed in the hologram. What appeared to be different layers of stripes made moire patterns that had not been visible in the recording-patterns that jarred and jumped with each pervasive heart-throb of the pulsar. With unexpected suddenness the singular contraction came, to pinch his whole world down to a mere point of light...

"By all the veils!"

Sorokin was standing upon the starry universe of bluish arcs, and holding the neutron star above his head. Then he realized that he had come out onto the star's surface upside down, while the gravity inside his suit maintained its orientation toward its feet. He moved his arms and legs and slowly tipped the world around him until his feet were down.

Wrapped and shielded within all forty million veils of Azlaroc, he stood untouched, unharmed, upon the spinning pulsar's surface. In a moment he understood that he had been brought to one of the poles of its rotation, for the star-circles lay all parallel to the horizon.

A few paces away, the gisant drifted almost buoyantly, only one corner of it dragging along the mirror surface of the star that was a neutron solid with billions of times the rigidity of steel. The surface seemed as smooth as machined steel all the way out to the horizon. The highest mountain on this star should be just big enough for a man to stub his toe on it and trip. To climb that mountain, to move the mass of a human body upward a few centimeters in this gravity, should take a lifetime's effort from a long-lived Azlarocean settler.

Not that a human should be standing here at all. If the tidal forces did not shred him into atoms, and the gravity haul his particles indistinguishably into the proton mass, then the electrical forces generated within the spinning, superfluid core should blast him outward as a cloud of X-rays, melded with the pulsar's searchlight beam of radiation as focused by its incredible magnetic field.

Ramachandra was coming toward him over the surface now, suit enclosed in a vaguely visible, transparent bubble, walking like a man underwater or in low gravity. Inside his suit he was no doubt working with the instruments that were supposed to find the fold in their year-veil. Ramachandra's lips were moving, but no sound or signal came through the multiplex communication system to Sorokin.

"I can't hear you," he said, when Ramachandra looked at him. Then he lip-read the other's answer: Nor I you.

Ramachandra turned away, then, and approached the sculpture, which, as Sorokin now saw, was also enclosed in an almost imperceptible bubble of force. When Ramachandra reached out one of his suit's metal hands toward the carven woman, the entire gisant and its bubble instantaneously disappeared at the first touch. A part of Ramachandra's suit-hand vanished at the same moment, and from the metal stump there sprang a sudden glow, more intense than any of the flares that occasionally appeared on the surrounding surface of the star. The brightness of the flaring metal, which was probably undergoing some

thermonuclear reaction, slowly declined.

Now bearing a coruscating firework in one hand, Ramachandra turned imperturbably back to Sorokin. Don't try to touch helmets for communication, he mouthed.

"I won't. What are your plans now?"

The fold isn't here, so I'm going on. The black hole should be rising soon, and I intend to follow the veils' lines of force in its direction. It seems the suit's drive can easily carry me. Whatever kind of a balance of forces we're riding here...

Nearby, the star flared, brighter than before. Then again far off, and once more farther still, and yet again, beyond the near horizon. A shudder of the starscape came and went; Sorokin saw it but could feel nothing. Perhaps a quake had brought a pebble-high mountain down, and speeded up the pulsar's rotation by some fraction of a microsecond.

"I'm not going on, Ramachandra. Not into a black hole. Even if we can survive here..." Sorokin ended with a gesture of hopeless pessimism.

I know you're not. My second reason for bringing you along. All I ask is that you take back word of what you see me do. You need only wait here a few more minutes and the forces that brought us here will bear you back again, to somewhere on Azlaroc. If you're lucky you'll survive, in one piece. Ramachandra smiled. And collect your pay.

Sorokin could think of nothing to say. Suddenly an impassable gulf had opened between him and the other man.

Ramachandra was consulting his instruments, inside his suit. Black hole's rising now. He nodded in the direction over Sorokin's shoulder, and Sorokin turned.

Some relatively slow tilting of the pulsar's axis of spin was bringing the black hole over the horizon, beyond which Azlaroc itself remained invisible. Sorokin found that the ultimate abyss offered almost nothing at all to see. There was only a small place in the sky where momentary squiggles disrupted the blue arcs of the stars.

If Ramachandra had said anything else to him, Sorokin had missed it. He stood watching as the other man's suit, moving with only its own power to tip the balance of unimaginable forces, rose past him...

No, there were some last words coming after all, for Ramachandra delayed enough to turn. If I go into it ... for good ...

"Yes?"

Well, I'll be joined by quite a crowd eventually. That's all. The holes are going to coalesce and eat the rest of the universe, you know. In a few billion years.

Ramachandra's suit was soon out of sight amid the starstreaks of the sky.

Four minutes later, with the black hole at Sorokin's zenith, the return tide came for him, and bore him back into the striped space of blue light that bent abnormally between the worlds. He had already dosed himself with Chronotran.

On the morning of V minus thirteen-Chang Timmins hoped there really were thirteen days left before veilfall, but he remained grimly convinced that '430 was going to be a truncated year-he was busy looking for settlers old enough for him to have a chance of talking to them. In Tok-soz's intensely organized division of the task, Timmins had been assigned a territory near the city-the real city, not the explorers' old mirage-and there Timmins was doggedly patrolling in his tractor, looking for people whom he might hail individually even while his radio continued to broadcast its recorded warning.

He had managed to make good personal contact with two old settlers, and had reason to think he might have managed to force a few words through to a third, when a message from Tok-soz came in on an alternate channel of his communicator.

"Chang? I've just heard from some '37 people, over near our old site. Not more than a kilometer or two from where you were attacked the other day."

"What's up?"

"Well, the '37s say they've caught a young woman, 'prowling,' as they put it. She was armed with a nuclear torch. They say she had a tractor parked nearby, but she was just walking about alone, wearing diver's gear."

"What yeargroup is she?"

"She won't say. They guess maybe about '150. I think you'd better knock off your patrol over there and come and take a look. They're holding her, somehow, but they say trying to move her would be a problem."

Timmins could well believe that, with more than a century between the captors and the prisoner. Probably they had got some kind of grip on her lifeline.

"I'm on my way," he radioed. "But it'll take me half a day to get there."

"Negative. I've just been talking to your son, and Roger's there in the city now, at my instructions, unearthing a flying machine we can use. If you'll just stay put a few minutes, he'll come pick you up."

"That'll be fine." Trust Tok-soz to think ahead, foresee situations where the speed of a flyer would be useful. "I don't suppose the girl will give her name, either?"

"That's right, she won't. Want me to put her picture on for you?"

Tok-soz put it on the screen, but the blurred image that came through to Timmins might have been that of almost any diver. Timmins was silently wondering what was going to happen if the '37s had in fact kidnapped the wrong girl, when with a wingless rush the flyer swooped low over his head. A few moments later it had set down on the land nearby.

Three minutes later Chang Timmins was looking down at the speed-blurred desert from an altitude of about forty meters. The city and West Ridge were already far behind, and the site of the explorers' abandoned city was, at this speed, only about an hour ahead.

Roger had remained in the pilot's seat, though the flight was virtually automatic.

"Dad," he asked, once they were well under way, "if you can identify the girl, what next?"

"I expect I'll be able to tell if it's the same girl." He was thinking of the green numbers in the eyes. "If not, I guess we all apologize and hope for the best. If she is... well, all I know is how it used to work, whenever some serious problem came up between people of different groups. Then the plaintiff-that's the person with a charge to make-would file charges before the council of the defendant's yeargroup, and a hearing or trial, would be held according to that yeargroup's rules. Laws and rules didn't vary a whole lot from one group to the next. Of course way back then there weren't so many groups as there are now, and practically all of them could talk to one another, at least with a minimum of intermediary help."

"Was there a lot of conflict in the early days?" Roger sounded anxious about it, as if he were hearing of some recent peril that the whole world had narrowly escaped. It was his way.

"No, all these legalities were mostly theoretical. There was little need for them in practice. Serious problems or disputes between people of different groups were rare. Now the law experts in our group are going to have a hard time finding a good precedent for an attempted murder, I'd bet. Actually..." Timmins fell silent, watching the sky whip past.

"What?"

"Actually the people I'd like to see charged and convicted are the ones who gave the girl her orders, who came to Azlaroc to try to get me killed. Once we had a Visitors' Court on this world. It went into operation whenever tourists or other visitors generated any business for it, which on the average was several times a year. It was operated always by the most recent group of settlers." Timmins threw up his hands. "But how things are being done in '430, or even who the latest group of settlers are, I have no way of telling." He turned and grinned sourly at Roger for a moment. "Maybe the Ticktocks have taken over this world, or the whole Galaxy."

"Dad..."

Roger displayed unhappy alarm, if only at the deviant notions of his father, who now hastened to be reassuring. "Oh, no, they haven't really. That's one thing I do feel certain of."

The horizon opened perpetually before the speeding flyer, and landscape and skyscape flickered past. A few minutes before they arrived at their destination Timmins moved to call Tok-soz. Contact established, Roger set the aircraft to home on a radio signal provided from the ground. Their flight curved in over the flat segment of plain on which the explorers' abandoned city lay. The starkness of the plain was only accentuated by a few ruined walls, a couple of small coral atolls, and a knot of a dozen or so people who stood looking up, their several tractors parked nearby.

Roger brought the flyer down-unskillfully, but the machine was quite forgiving-and stopped near the standing ground vehicles. Ahead in the distance, Chang Timmins could see the purple slope, scarred where he had finally dug out the useless communications station. Closer at hand, he could now see that both the tractors and the waiting people fell into two distinct classes of visual clarity. One his own year-group, perfectly distinct, and the other moderately blurred. The folk of '37 were shimmering angels in the gauzy fashions of their year.

As Timmins climbed down from the flyer he could see, in the midst of the composite gathering, one figure still more unclear, garbed in diver's gear and sitting on the ground.

No one spoke as he and Roger approached. When they had got within a few paces, Timmins made out

how the girl's lifeline had been twisted into some kind of knot around a single gnarled stump of ancient coral. She would not be able to move more than a pace or two in any direction. But it was taking the continuous efforts of three people of '37, all gripping her lifeline with different tools, to hold the knot in place. If the girl were to jump up and struggle, Timmins thought, they would never be able to hold her. For the present, at least, she seemed resigned.

He walked right into the middle of the group, put a hand under the girl's masked chin, and tried to lift her head gently. She did not resist, but still his fingers only interpenetrated her mask, leaving them with a peculiar, bone-deep feeling for a moment. Then her head did turn up, under her own control, and yes, there was the green glow in her eyes..

Although the blurring of the veils made it impossible for Timmins to read the spinning emerald digits, he knew what their configuration would be. In the right eye, the standard years and months and days would be displayed, elapsed duration since she had received her numbers, been counted and computed among Time's own elect. In the left eye, the hours, minutes, seconds, turning in three parallel tracks. The numbers were all small and transparent and in a short while one got used to wearing them and saw the world through them as well as ever. Or so one thought, until they were removed again...

The attitude of the girl's body, slumping against the stump of coral, showed dejection, Timmins thought, as well as a certain bitterness and defiance. The same girl, yes. He could recognize her youthful body language even more certainly than he could the numbers.

Timmins demanded: "Were you out to kill me again?"

He had spoken loudly and clearly and thought the words must have got through to her, but she made no answer.

He straightened up and turned to the others. "It's her, all right. I don't think that's the weapon she was carrying the first time, though." He had just caught sight of the nuclear torch, a shimmering rod left leaning against one of the tractors. This was thinner than the weapon he remembered, and had more small bulges on it.

"Maybe an improved model," said Tok-soz, who looked even bulkier in his coveralls of today than he had wearing a toga. "It's a '98 model, I believe, and pretty powerful. One of the '37 people here managed to get a good enough grip on it to fire it at the land. Quite a crater. When we tried it on some spare tractor parts from our year, though, it did them no damage."

Timmins wondered to himself exactly what charges he would press against the girl, assuming she was somehow brought before a tribunal of some kind. Attempted murder? Assault with a deadly weapon? The trouble with that was, the weapons just weren't deadly, not to the man she bore them against.

Looking at the quiet figure of the girl again Timmins felt a sudden certainty that she had known all along that she could never kill him.

He shouted at her: "What is your yeargroup?"

"We've tried questioning," grumbled one of the '37 men, somewhat wearily.

There was still no answer from the girl.

"I would guess she's about' 134," Tok-soz rumbled.

"I think you're right." Then Timmins turned to the folk of '37, who had got and were holding a better grip on the prisoner than anyone of the explorers' yeargroup could have managed-and who, correspondingly, must have put themselves in some real danger from her weapon. To them he said: "Thank you. Did she shoot at you?"

"No," one of the gauze-garbed women answered. "Just tried to run off when we hailed her. What are we going to do with her now?"

"I don't know," said Timmins, and looked at Tok-soz, who gestured his own uncertainty. "The question certainly deserves a council session-but can we hold her until one's convened?"

Tok-soz shook his head, and let himself down on one knee at the girl's side. "Why were you trying to kill this man?" he demanded of her, his voice courteous enough though very loud. There was a practiced clarity in his speech that would push his words through more veils than Timmins could manage; Tok-soz had considerable experience in dealing with other yeargroups.

The girl tried to jump up, but was pulled back to a sitting position by her trapped lifeline. She was yelling something at them all, but the words were too garbled for any of the explorers to understand. Seeing their blank looks, one of the '37 men offered a restatement: "She says Timmins is a 'deviant'-also that he's a 'relativist', if I heard right. Whatever that may be."

Timmins nodded at the familar Ticktock jargon.

Her head sinking again, her voice now much quieter, the girl added a few words.

"She says she's glad now that you weren't killed."

"Huh!" commented another '37 woman, coming up with tools in hand to take her turn at wrestling with the lifeline. "No doubt she is, now that she's been caught."

Timmins found himself feeling apologetic and almost guilty, as if some deliberate wrongdoing of his had put these people to all this trouble. "Would you ask her, please, if she understood all along that nothing she did could really harm me?"

The question was relayed to the girl. Timmins, bending closer to try to catch the answer that never came, noticed a change inside her faceplate. There was a new and more subtle shimmer of light, and the green glow of her eye-digits was almost gone. It took him a moment more to understand that her lids were squeezing shut on tears.

As he straightened up, a flash of red hair caught the corner of his eye, and he turned to see Tana Duvoisin, who had just swung herself down from a newly arrived tractor.

Tana spoke anxiously to Roger, who had walked out a little way to meet his mother. As she approached the group she called out, "Chang, you're all right?" Her relief was evident. "I heard they tried again."

"Well, not exactly. This is the girl. She seems to have been out looking for me again when our '37 friends here picked her up." Timmins was silent for a moment, looking out onto the plain, past Tana. Then he took her by the arm and put his other hand on Roger's shoulder. "I'd like both of you to take a very short walk with me. There's a bit of coral just over there that I've got to have a look at."

Tok-soz was staring at him. “Can’t it wait, Chang? We’ve got to decide this promptly, about the girl.”

“I’m going to have to look at that coral before I know whether it can wait or not.” Something about the one small atoll, about a hundred meters off across the plain, had caught Timmins’ attention when he was landing in the flyer. Now the utter blackness of it nagged him. “It’ll only take a couple of minutes, Anton.”

Tok-soz nodded. As the three walked away, the yeargroup president was on his personal radio broadcasting a call for an immediate council session.

Between the two people whom he thought most of in the world, Timmins walked for a little way in silence. He kept his eyes fixed on the atoll ahead. Its many branches, wildly angled, were so black that its presence seemed to eat a hole in the visual field despite the fact that today was only V minus thirteen. This was not the particular type of coral that ordinarily darkened early.

Walking, Timmins glanced back once, at the sound of a new tractor approaching. He beheld the parked vehicles and the people all diminished, as if they had simply shrunk while the vast featureless plain that held them had never moved beneath his striding feet. The newly arrived tractor was of the explorers’ yeargroup, and it had brought four or five young people who exchanged longrange waves with Roger before they went to join the gathering around the captive girl.

“You know, I feel sorry for that girl,” Timmins heard himself admit. It came out without thought, and sounded mawkish in his own ears.

His son asked, “Because she still believes in the Ticktocks?”

“No. Well, that too, I suppose. That she can alter if she doesn’t like it, as I did.” He met Roger’s apprehensive eyes. “But whatever she does, she can’t attain the normal life that a citizen of the Galaxy is supposed to have. Her parents have denied her that forever. I think all of us who have become parents here on Azlaroc owe our offpsring an apology.”

Perhaps he had been hoping for forgiveness. Those hopes were dashed when the persistent worry faded on Roger’s young face and was replaced by something that looked startlingly like condescension.

“Dad.” Now his surprising son was actually shaking his head at him in a superior way. “Dad, haven’t you ever heard of interior space?”

It was not exactly a new concept. Timmins glanced at Tana, on his right, who had argued it with him fairly briskly once or twice. That had been back around the time Roger was born. They had stood together before the wombtank, watching their child move and grimace in the fluid behind the glass, debating whether they had been right to perpetrate this world upon another human life. Then neither of them had been sure. And now Tana, too, was watching their son in gentle puzzlement.

Timmins answered him: “I’ve heard something along those lines, yes. What’s your view?”

“Well, I live now in inner space,” Roger continued.” So do most of my friends, the people of my generation.”

“You live-?”

“All I mean is that it’s the quality of consciousness that matters, not the distance that a person can drive, or fly, or translate his body in a starship. Of course I don’t know what goes on in her yeargroup,” and

Roger jerked his head back toward the unhappy girl, "but I think she must be a real misfit of some kind."

Tana was still looking questioningly past Timmins toward her son. "Roger, tell us more about how you conceive this 'inner space.' From what I've heard you say before, your ideas about it are more elaborately worked out than mine."

Roger continued as they proceeded toward the ominous coral, "I don't see why people here on Azlaroc are always mourning after the physical space. All right, so you can't go out to the stars any more. So what? There were many generations of great people on Earth who never could do that."

Tana was about to say something when Roger spoke again. "You know, when we turn inward here we're not looking for more space. I think we're sheltering from an excess. You know the size of the average yeargroup is less than a thousand people? That's not even a hundred thousand all together.

Here on Azlaroc people are rattling around as thinly spaced as-as atoms in that interstellar medium you used to fly through. Besides, half of us can hardly see or hear the other half, even when we're standing next to each other."

With dogmatic firmness he waved a hand around an empty horizon. "Too much space. What we need is a high rate of population growth if we're going to establish an optimum human lifestyle. History shows it. There's going to be a third generation soon, in our yeargroup at least.

"There is?" Timmins didn't know whether to be dumfounded or amused. The whole question was so obviously out of his hands that mere worry would have seemed irrelevant.

"Of course." Open-faced, open-spirited Roger had no doubts. The truth of everything he was saying ought to be obvious to his parents, and it would be as soon as they took the time to think about it a little.

Tana put in, carefully: "On most worlds, when people worry about population, it's that it'll grow too much."

"This isn"t most worlds," said Roger blithely. On that point his parents, exchanging looks, were hardly going to argue with him. "Overcrowding's hardly our problem here. When there are maybe ten million people in our yeargroup, then it'll be time for us to start thinking of overcrowding."

You mean, thought Timmins, it'll be time for your swarming great-great-grandchildren to start, and you hope they see it that way. You and I, a couple of forgotten old gaffers if we're still alive, will not be able to do much...

Ten million folk per yeargroup, hey? Well, he could think of no physical reason why not. The old dream of the explorers seemed to be alive and well again. Maybe they would name their city this time... but this time it would be the dream of new minds, not of old.

Again he exchanged a complex look with Tana.

And now the outward leg of their short hike was finished, and it was time to think of coral, nothing else. Warning the others to move a few meters back, Timmins went into the atoll.

All of these stalks were already utterly black. He edged forward cautiously. Here there was hardly room for a man's body to pass. He tried to make as little disturbance as possible. If he was reading the plants correctly, the time for the broadcast of quantum-spores was no more than a day or so away. At this

stage the least shock could trigger a dangerous bombardment-

Timmins caught his breath and froze, one slow-stepping foot suspended in midair. Then immediately he reversed his movement, started backing out. Half a dozen meters ahead of him, where the coral stalks grew thickest in the atoll's center, he had seen the unmistakable glow of blooming. It was a small radiance, hardly begun, still confined to the bases of the thickest stalks. But there was no doubt of what it meant.

He came grim-faced out of the atoll, caught a surprised Tana and Roger each by an arm and pulled them with him as he started running. The land here was flat as a racetrack and Timmins set a good fast pace toward Tok-soz and the others waiting with their prisoner.

Prisoner? No time to worry about that now.

Running lithely beside him, Tana touched his arm as she asked, "When is it going to fall?"

"A matter of hours."

Roger muttered something. Then the young man lengthened his stride, accelerating with what seemed effortless energy. Quickly he sped ahead of his parents. They were still thirty meters away when he plunged in among the people gathered around the prisoner.

By the time Chang Timmins and Tana had made their way into the center of the knot of people Roger was already talking to the girl, telling her about the imminence of veilfall. His voice, when he wanted to make it so, was at least as penetrating as that of the president.

After a brief hesitation, the girl answered. Timmins could not make out what she was saying, but he could see that his son understood. He and the girl were contemporaries, despite the more than a hundred veils between them; it occurred to Timmins that sometimes even veils could be less important than generations.

"Roger. Tell her-tell her to never mind about what she tried to do to me. We can let her go. Just make her realize how important it is that we get our message through to the tourists."

"I think she realizes that already."

"Whoever passed her orders down to her-can she get that person to pass the warning up?"

"I'll see."

Timmins watched Roger reach out and take the girl by the hand as they talked. The fingers interpenetrated to some extent, then came to rest, at home in union. Now she was leaning forward, listening willingly.

Leodas Ditmars spent much of the morning of day V minus thirteen in conference with Bellow and Ross Gabriel, again in the same luxurious suite Gabriel and his agent now seemed to be sharing.

The conference had begun with Ditmars making his report. Gabriel was much disturbed by the news that photography had been attempted in the tomb against his orders.

The glare he fixed on Ditmars looked half fearful, half angry. "What's your name again? Never mind.

You're off the job, as of today."

"That's your privilege," Ditmars answered calmly. "As long as I get paid my expenses up to date." Inside, he felt a churning mixture of responses he could not sort out.

Bellow, agitated, jumped in at once. "Ross. We've gone this far with this man and time is short. To hire someone else and start all over would take-"

Gabriel turned his wild look on him. "He didn't follow orders. I said there were to be no pictures made in there."

Ditmars protested, making his voice almost lazy. "I was only trying to get out the information you want so badly."

"I can't stand this." Gabriel's chin sank, and he stared at the large, bony hands clenched in his lap.

"We'll make it work, Ross. We'll find a way."

Bellow threw a look at Ditmars, appealing for some sort of help, and then pulled his own chair closer to his client's "Leodas, there's no way even in theory to get the book out of that place, right?"

"Right." Ditmars had already, privately, ruled out getting help from people of the yeargroup eight years back.

"Then," Bellow pressed on, with an air of logic, "there has to be some way to get the poems out without the book. And that, practically speaking, means making photographs."

Gabriel threw his head back to gaze at the ceiling.

"I've been thinking the problem over," Ditmars offered, "and I think there is a way it can be done. I'm ready to try it but it'll have to be done quickly." There was an element of danger involved that he didn't mention. It was part of the job and he wasn't going to attempt to raise his fee. "This way might just make it possible to get a picture of some small object, like the book."

"There!" Bellow grabbed up the ball and ran for the goal. "Do you hear that, Ross? Pictures only of the book itself. We've gone this far with Ditmars, I say we let him try."

"No, Marty." Gabriel's voice was losing strength. He was now looking into the distance, through the room's walls, at something remote and horrible that no one else could see.

Bellow's voice got tougher. "Why not?"

Gabriel was silent.

Again the agent turned placating. He was working like a man using a wrecking bar against a wall: first push, then pull. "Nothing matters now, Ross, but retrieving the work. The world needs it."

That brought the popoet back. "The world needs it like-" A flick of his eyes toward the outsider in the room and Gabriel broke his sentence off. Again he looked down at his limp pale hands. "The truth is, I can't write much more. I need the money." He raised his gaze toward his unmoving distant horror. "I've been thinking of undergoing memory stimulation, getting the stuff back that way."

Bellow, genuinely horrified, drew back a little. “Ross!” It was almost a whisper.

Gabriel gazed at him. “But I can’t,” he added simply.

Taking command, or trying to, Bellow got to his feet. “It’s decided then.”

“It is not. No pictures.”

“Ross, I can’t help you, Ditmars here can’t, no one can, if you won’t let yourself be helped!”

The argument soon degenerated into a dreary bitching back and forth while Ditmars sat on his high stool feeling like some kind of silent referee. No doubt they were both quietly glad that he was there, to keep the fight from getting out of hand. There was the dark accusation from Bellow that Ross had been squandering his substance, money and time on women who were not worthy of him. The popoet shot back that Marty was the one who had screwed up the corporation’s finances to begin with, and as for the rest it was none of an agent’s damn business what his client did.

Ditmars had almost begun to think himself forgotten when Gabriel suddenly swung round on him again. “Are you sure you’ve taken no pictures so far?”

Ditmars could be very patient. “If I’d been able to take pictures in there, I’d have the job all done for you now. I tried to photograph the book, as I’ve explained. Nothing else.” He shrugged. “There’s nothing else in there that anyone would want a picture of, as far as I can see.” While this came close to violating Bellow’s injunction against discussion of the tomb’s interior, Ditmars was thinking that if he played his cards right, he might get these two angry enough at him to unite to let him go ahead and finish the job. He did want to go back and finish the job, he realized now. At least he wanted to go back...

They looked at him for a little while, then resumed their bickering. He went on sitting on his high stool, making a chewing pod last a good long time.

“What is your plan for getting pictures?” Bellow finally demanded of him.

He had been starting to think they’d never ask. “It depends on the coral blooming,” Ditmars explained. “You know, that’s what they call the stage when the plants cease to absorb energy and begin to radiate. Blooming comes an hour or so before the spores are shot out. When the plants bloom, they glow, right across the spectrum. It’s supposed to be a beautiful sight.

“The coral cells embedded in the book should be radiating light then, too, instead of absorbing it. I should be able to take pictures of the pages by that light. If I work fast, I can get out before the spores are released and with enough time before veilfall for all of us to get to the port and away.”

According to the sources Ditmars had consulted, exposure to intensive spore-radiation had a wide range of effects, all more or less nasty, on human beings. The bombardment might be annoying, or dangerous, or even certainly lethal in any of several ways, some of them particularly horrible. Much depended upon the exact type of coral involved, how many spores entered the victim’s body, and several other factors. Ditmars hadn’t bothered with all the gory details; the essential point was that he must get out of the tomb and several meters away from any coral before the time of this year’s broadcast came. He saw no reason why he should not be able to finish his work and do so, although it might be close.

When Ditmars had finished his brief explanation, Gabriel turned his eyes to Bellow. “Blooming,” the

popoet said, in a voice grown deathly weary. “Isn’t that when-“

“Ross, what does it matter?” Bellow, gradually consolidating the upper hand in the argument, sounded implacably patient and tireless.

“What does it matter.” Gabriel repeated the words dully. He stood up, looking at the wall or maybe just at nothing. The distant horror might now have come into the room, becoming none the less horrible, but grown familiar. “What I want you two to do is save my life,” he said. “What I don’t want, ever, is to hear how it was done.”

He turned away and walked out of the room. Doors slid shut in his wake, and moments later there came the sound of streaming water in a shower.

Bellow slumped in his chair for a moment, letting the long strain show. In a moment he bounced up, actually rubbing his hands together.

“Person Ditmars, I know where the best offworlders’ lunch on Azlaroc is served. Come along and be my guest.”

Ditmars indicated with a small head movement that he was still thinking abut their illustrious employer.

“Ross will be all right now. He’s given in for good. I know the signs.”

After a lunch almost as good as Bellow seemed to think it was, the two of them went along to Ditmars’ room, where they would be able to work out the details of the plan in privacy. It was quickly agreed that today was not too soon to start. As soon as Ditmars could finish his preparations Bellow would drive him to the Old Cemetery. From then on Bellow would hold himself in readiness to come back and get him-and the photos-as soon as Ditmars called to be picked up.

It was Ditmars’ plan to set up a regular camp for himself inside the tomb and to stay there as many days as necessary. In that way he would be sure not to miss the first precious minutes of blooming, with their clear safe light. There was absolutely no way to tell ahead of time just when blooming would start and therefore no alternative to waiting for it on the scene.

Ditmars had already been shopping. Now he assembled in a pack everything he planned to take along to see him through as much as twelve days of isolation. There was concentrated food, some extra clothing, a condensing-canteen to pull enough water out of the air to keep him going comfortably, even a folding waste-disposal. It was an article of faith with Ditmars to get the best tools available for any job, store and carry them neatly, and maintain them in perfect working order.

More relaxed and happier than Ditmars had seen him yet, Bellow was on the verge of whistling to himself as he drove his passenger to the top of West Ridge. Ditmars would make the short walk down to the Old Cemetery from there, taking advantage of the chance to look over the whole area once more.

Pack on his back, canteen at hip, he set off after a last word to the jovial Bellow. Behind him he heard the tractor turn away and start down the opposite slope toward the city. Walking his own path toward the cemetery, Ditmars’ sharp eyes could see nothing changed about the fence, nothing different in the landscape-except today, for the first time, there was not a single tourist or even a vehicle in sight. When the hum of Bellow’s tractor died off in the distance, it left Ditmars alone in a great silence, pocked by the faint squeaking crunch of his stylish boots on the peculiar land. Well, he had made sure that there had been no official warnings issued- yet-against travel in this area.

The walk to the fence was hardly long enough to give his legs a stretch. He guessed that the ridge he was descending was actually less than a hundred meters high; maybe it was the low sky that made it loom up like a real mountain. Just above the long apex of West Ridge, the sky today was marked by a straight, thin line of dimness, the same shade as the patch of gloom that still rode just above the middle of the cemetery. Something about the Azlarocean sky, thought Ditmars, made any hint of darkness in it ominous. Some of the guidebooks had mentioned blacksky, and he was rather regretful that he was not going to have the time to spare to take a look at that.

When he came to the fence, he followed it along uneventfully to the spot where he had broken through it on his previous visit. To repeat the detuning and get through today took him less than a minute. Once inside the barrier, Ditmars walked directly toward the central hill of the cemetery, noting with satisfaction that his boots left only the faintest occasional mark on this hard surface.

Reaching the tomb, he quickly tapped loose the blocks closing his private entrance. This time he carried the blocks inside with him. The tomb's interior was as dark as before, and the air inside still seemed perfectly fresh. Ditmars took a small adjustable lamp out of his pack and with it lighted his way over to the little black table, where he set the lamp down. The chamber was now adequately if not comfortably lighted, though everything in it-except himself and the things he had brought-was still swathed in coral black.

Ditmars got to work and lightly sealed up his doorway from inside. Then he went back to the table and turned off his lamp. This was by way of a test; he wished to establish a standard of perfect blackness, so that later, when the first forelightenings of blooming came, he would be able to recognize them immediately.

There were no visible chinks in roof or walls through which the light of the sky might enter. The darkness therefore should have been absolute, but it was not. When Ditmars' eyes had had a minute or two to grow accustomed to the gloom, he found that he could see.

Just as in a faint photograph made by emitted heatwaves, each object native to the tomb was now quickening, very slightly, with an optical life of its own. The effect was minimal, so small that at first he doubted its reality. But after waiting a minute longer he was sure. He could see the edge of the small black table near him, just there, and that was where the edge was, when he sent his own invisible finger out to probe for it. Now he spread the fingers of his hand, and could see them in black silhouette against the table that was no longer ebon but a gray-light ghost, faint as a dying afterimage but indubitably visible.

And now Ditmars could distinguish the headboard from the footboard of the bier, which looked not much different from an ordinary bed. The shape that lay on it was still effectively invisible.

Ditmars made no move to turn his lamp back on, or to begin unpacking the rest of his gear. If this was really the start of blooming that he saw, there would be no need to set up camp. He was very lucky to have come so early. Indeed, it seemed that this was blooming, for now he could see a core of cold fire in the heart of each of the thicker coral trunks.

He felt a vague disappointment, and was surprised to realize that he had been looking forward to spending some time in here.

His eyes told him that the brightening continued steadily. But it was very slow. From the time he turned off his lamp, almost an hour had passed until he could begin to see Rosalys' face.

Some of the many coral pedicles around her were as thick as Ditmars' wrist, others as thin as thread. Now that the light was growing there were not enough of them to hide her. He told himself there must be something illusory in what he saw...

Abruptly the pace of brightening quickened; or else Ditmars' vision was reaching a new accomodation with the low level of light.

He shook his head. Bellow had told him there had been no embalming. Was this some sort of natural mummification then? But the body, what little of it he could see, did not appear shrunken or wasted.

He was looking at a woman who lay supine upon a bedlike surface, a surface soft enough to give a few centimeters beneath her body's weight. A woman, not a skeleton or mummy. The drapery was so casually arranged that it might have been a sheet, rumpled by sleep or love; it was a satiny fabric that looked as if it might be scarlet when the light grew bright enough to give it color. It covered Rosalys' feet and legs and torso, while her shoulders and arms were left completely bare, as if she might be nude beneath the sheet. Her brown hair was piled with seeming naturalness upon a pillow of some marvelously soft and snowy stuff. Her left arm lay bent loosely at her side, a great ring with a blue stone on the ring finger. The other hand was raised beside her cheek, where it had held the book.

Her chin was raised. Her face-

Ditmars moved closer. He pulled at coral stalks and broke them down to clear the way. He stared in fascination. He was not looking at a skull. Certainly this was death not sleep, but the death might have happened eight minutes ago instead of half a million times that long.

Embalmed or not, how could they ever have put her here-like that?

Rosalys' eyes were partially open, broad crescents of white eyeball showing. In the preserved skin and muscles around the eyes, tension spoke of a terrible fear that death had not been able to relax. Grooves were drawn deep in the stretched cheeks to frame the distorted, half-open mouth, its pearly teeth now dry as dust, choked with a frozen cry of that same terror. It made her look like an artifact, like a plastic dummy lighted from within, that the inside of her mouth should be as bright with coral-light as were her cheeks and forehead.

How could they have left her so?

The look of fright was heightened by the backward tilt of the head upon the pillow, and the neck muscles standing rigid beneath the youthful skin. The position of the right hand, near the cheek, also added to the effect. Now that the book was gone, those small fingers seemed to be clutching at the air in agony. The slackness of the rest of the body now seemed an attitude of despair.

The book lay where Ditmars had blindly dropped it, between Milady's chin and breasts, where it rested half on drapery, half on skin.

He broke two more glowing branches and stood beside her, the edge of the bier nudging him at belt level. He saw now with relief that none of Rosalys' fingers had been broken off after all. What had snapped when he brought out the book was evidently one of the smaller coral rods, a segment of which now lay in her right palm.

Ditmars would have liked to reach out and touch her cheek, touch her hand-but if he did his fingers would carry away with them the unwanted feeling of cold death.

Maybe, just before he left, business complete, he'd dare to touch her somewhere, somehow.

And suddenly his hand shot out and held her bare arm-cold death, but not the stiffness he'd expected from the look of her face and neck. Rigor mortis, of course, should be long gone, whatever had preserved her.

It had now definitely grown light enough for photographs, and his time was limited, for whenever blooming came, veilfall was not likely to be far behind. This year's veil must be coming sooner than anyone had thought. Ditmars reached out again, and took the book, this time not touching skin. Now he could see that this book did look almost exactly like the one he had earlier tossed away into a corner-where, a glance assured him, it was still lying, a dull modern blot upon a glowing, uneven floor.

The volume he had just lifted from Rosalys' bosom was bound in rich gray leather, and as in its intended duplicate, the cover was blank. He took it to the little ebon table, which must be naturally black as it was now much darker than anything else in sight. There he spread the creamy pages open; if previously they had been sheaves of darkness, they now spilled a soft and marvelous glow; blooming was quite as beautiful as all the reports had said.

Ditmars unfolded his camera stand above the book, and set the little instrument in place. Then he glanced back toward the catafalque. The coral had regained its many colors, the drapery was bright scarlet, the woman's body had almost the look of frightened life.

The book was beautifully made. As before, it lay obediently flat wherever it was opened. In the interest of thoroughness Ditmars first of all took a shot of the blank cover. Then one of the contents page, which was done in what looked like elegant hand-lettering; and then, next page, the flowing script of the dedication-to "beloved Rosalys," of course.

Then without pausing he went on to the contents. Mechanically he turned and photographed page after page, checking a test film every once in a while although there seemed no possibility now that the pictures would not come out.

Just as in the book that was to have been substituted for this one, most of the pages were blank. Still, he estimated there might well be a hundred shots to take. Periodic glances at his chronometer gave him no cause for alarm. He calculated that he could easily be finished here within an hour, and at the spaceport ten minutes after that, if Bellow was prompt. If Bellow was not prompt, Ditmars could get clear of the cemetery and then radio for help. Ships were always kept on hand he knew, up to the last minute before a falling veil struck surface, to ensure that everyone got offworld who wanted to.

Ditmars was not consciously reading any of the verses that his camera kept steadily tucking away inside its glass and metal guts, without a hint, so far, of indigestion. But he perforce looked at the pages, and some of their word content necessarily registered in eye and brain. And soon he had begun to mutter to himself.

"Bah. All my risk, my work, my time, just to preserve this? Banality is the kindest word I can apply... bower, hour, flower...why not rhyme sour and glower, at least? But no doubt these immortal words will sell."

He cast one glance toward that taut, terrified face whose imprisonment he had come to share. Then he made the camera work again, and turned the page, and said aloud: "You were well rid of him. I can't believe it possible that such a man... that he ever knew you."

Rosalys' frozen terror did not abate.

"And Ramachandra." Ditmars photographed another page without looking at it, and turned on to the next. "I wonder what he's really like. What did you and he-hello, what's this? Something, at last?"

Her seemed she scarce had been a day

One of God's choristers;

The wonder was not yet quite gone

From that still look of hers;

Albeit, to them she left, her day

Had counted as ten years.

"A quantum jump above the rest of his glop, certainly. I wonder if he's lifted this piece from someone? One of the ancient masters on Earth, no doubt. So it's a translation of course. But still there's power here. Not awesome, I'd say, but respectable.

"And I wonder what milady would have thought, of having her dead finger-joints set to press such a stolen offering so tenderly to her cheek? If I were to steal for her, now, what treasures I would..."

He heard himself babbling and shut up and turned a page, to more of the same poem. It went on for more pages, in Gabriel's large, self-consciously elegant handwriting.

" 'God,' he uses, and not for any mere rhyme-need, either. At least that's how it came out in translation. Now is God 'in' again this decade, among the thinkers of the Galaxy? I wonder."

It was the rampart of God's house

That she was standing on;

By God built over the sheer depth

The which is space begun;

So high, that looking downward thence

She scarce could see the Sun.

Ditmars already had this pair of pages photographed. But now he frankly paused to read.

It lies in Heaven, across the flood

Of ether, as a bridge.

Beneath, the tides of day and night

With flame and darkness ridge

The void...

He looked up from the book, struck by something in the air, an event less than a sound but greater than the normal random murmuring of atmospheric molecules against eardrums. The something might have been an odd beat from the ubiquitous pulsar, though Ditmars didn't think so. It might have been, and probably was, the land slipping around the tomb or mounting in its slow, terrible wave against its sides. But Ditmars had imagined for just a moment that the almost-sound proceeded from where Rosalys lay, and in that moment he held his breath while his undermind waited willingly to have the universe of sanity and law melt like an Azlarocean landform when the world below it stirred.

The moment past, he almost smiled at himself, remembering hope and terror commingled. But yet he did not smile. The basic awe of death was one thing from its childhood that the grown race had not yet managed to lose. Looking at Rosalys' glowing clay again, Ditmars could detect no reason for the sound, if there had really been a sound. Certainly the corpse might easily have shifted a little, it and its bed might very well be settling, what with his poking about and the constant stresses and movements in the land beneath.

Where was he, in the book? Oh yes.

Around her, lovers, newly met

'Mid deathless love's acclaims

Spoke evermore among themselves

Their heart-remembered names;

And the souls mounting up to God

Went by her like thin flames.

And still she bowed herself and stooped

Out of the circling charm;

Until her bosom must have made

The bar she leaned on warm,

And the lilies lay as if asleep

Along her bended arm...

Now sound came again, but this time it was crude and unmistakably from outside, a noise that to Ditmars' imagination suggested landforms breaking up. It sounded loud, though muted by distance, and quite serious. But Ditmars' heart and hands, as usual, accepted sudden peril calmly. If it be now, then it is not to come. His hands worked faster with the camera, but with a care no less methodical. That he could so effectively divorce himself from danger was one important reason for his professional success.

Coolness was all very well, but was it quite sane of him to be stopping, even now, to read another verse?

"Yes, he lifted this poem from someone, there's no doubt about it. There's more here than he could ever-"

Ditmars was staggered, almost knocked from his feet despite fine reflexes. The black table tottered, and off slid the glowing book to thud amid the lambent coral roots that bound and gnarled the cracking floor. The camera, more scientifically stabilized, stayed on the table as all the furniture rocked back into place. The layers of Azlaroc were shifting, grumbling basso from one to another among themselves. The world around the Old Cemetery vibrated, quieted, shook again.

Was still.

He had just got the book back on the table, opened to the proper place-its pages were glowing brighter than ever-when the communicator built into his shoulder-pad bleeped at him and produced some words from Bellow.

"Ditmars, don't you have it yet?" The agent's voice was cracking like the landscape. "Time's almost up. There's been a warning broadcast, about the veil falling very early. Message coming through from the explorers themselves. If you've got it, get out of there at once. We're on our way to pick you up."

"I'm getting it. Don't bother me now." There wasn't much more in the book to get. Maybe it was just pride that kept him here at work. Why was he showing off, to please himself? Or-or as if he were some adolescent trying to impress a girl.

His fingers flew, readjusting the position of the shaken camera.

From the fixed place of Heaven she saw

Time like a pulse shake fierce

Through all the worlds. Her gaze still strove

Within the gulf to pierce

Its path...

"Help...me." The words were very clear, though they came in a voice that cracked, and was so low as

to be almost a whisper. Ditmars turned to see her trying to sit up. Her dried lips had split in half a dozen places from being forced to move, and bore an ooze of living, scarlet blood that glowed like every other surface of her body. Terror's ingrained lines had vanished from her young face, to be replaced by soft pain and bewilderment.

With her movement, trying to sit up, fine coral members were breaking everywhere around her, like tiny, glowing chimes. The red drapery had fallen free of one pale breast.

Equipment crashed from Ditmars' hands to bounce away unnoticed across the slowly buckling floor. The ebony table slammed over on its side unheeded. He took one step toward the woman, whose eyes were open, looking at him.

"Help-me," she begged again.

He took another step, then turned his head and roared down at his shoulder-pad communicator, "Bellow! What game is this?"

"Game? Game? What do you mean?" The agent's voice came back, wrapped in the tinny armor of its own concerns. "Have you got the material yet or not?"

"Damn both of you and the damned book! She lives! She lives!" In two more strides he reached the side of Rosalys and made his arm an arc supporting her cool shoulders. The coolness he had accepted earlier as the chill of death, but this was living flesh if he had ever touched it. Now with his free right hand, Ditmars flipped open his condensing-canteen and raised it to her lips. Might there be some water of her year in it for her? He didn't know just how the device worked...

Rosalys' hand came up to fasten tightly on his hand that held the drink for her. She gripped him harder than she had ever held that damned dead book.

Rosalys drank, breathed, and drank again. Her lips bled.

Scraps of a confused conversation were coming over the communicator. There was something like a background groan. Then Bellow's voice again. "Ditmars? She's not alive you know."

"I tell you, she is. I-"

"No, Ditmars. Listen carefully. The woman is dead, medically and legally deceased. These temporary recursions of consciousness and other functions are a concomitant of her disease, the quantum-spore infection she died of eight years ago. It was and remains incurable. There are coral reproductive bodies in all her body cells, and these coral bodies liquefy, if that's the proper word, at yearly intervals. At the time of coral blooming. Some years nothing much happens, I understand. On other occasions, though, the coral can produce these bizarre effects. I was hoping this year the, uh, effect would be inactive, or else that you'd complete your work and get out of there before anything-grotesque-took place. Ditmars, are you listening?"

"She's living."

"No she's not."

The woman they said was dead had had enough to drink for the moment and pushed his canteen away. She continued to grip his hand, though. Her eyes, Rosalys' eyes as he had seen them in the pictures,

turned up to Ditmars' face.

Bellow's voice said: "I tell you it's all been settled legally."

She asked "Who are you?" Her voice was much closer to normal than it had been to start with, but still ragged.

"I'm Leodas Ditmars."

Bellow's voice kept running on. It was beamed tightly toward Ditmars' ear from his shoulder, and would be inaudible to anyone else, even someone as close as the woman he was holding. "... and these periods of function can last no more than a minute or two at most. We know from observation of other cases that most years they won't occur at all. The medical authorities were in full agreement when it was petitioned that she be pronounced dead; hers is not viable human life by any definition I've ever heard."

Milady Rosalys sat up straighter in her bed, reflexively tugging her drapery up so that it clung across one shoulder. The fashion of the year she'd come to Azlaroc? She spoke to Ditmars as a great, courteous lady might address some paid attendant.

"Oh, help me, please-what is this place? I keep waking up here and sleeping again, waking up and sleeping."

"I'll help you." Ditmars let go her shoulders, put away his canteen, and shifted position so he could hold both her hands. Wonderingly, perhaps with a little reluctance to suffer such familiarity, she let him have them.

He spoke to his shoulder: "Do you read me? Is-is your client there with you?"

Silence stretched out. "We read you. Hurry up," came Bellow's muttered reply at last. Second after warped second of time went by, and there came no answer at all to Ditmars' question.

He shrugged and smiled and let them go. "I'm just someone who's been sent to stay with you," he said to Rosalys. He was thinking that his new door-way, that had been closed to the book, would for the same reason be closed to her body, alive or dead. "As long as you need me, I'm going to stay."

Milady Rosalys relaxed somewhat. "Good. Just please don't leave me alone again. This is not like that other hospital. Here I've been waking up and going to sleep again, and there are never any doctors or attendants around. Waking up and going to sleep, going to sleep and dreaming-" She shuddered, then managed a smile. All those bad dreams were behind her now.

"Don't worry about a thing." Ditmars could be very reassuring when he had the will and the time, both of which he certainly had now. "I have nothing more important to do than hold your hand."

Letting him keep one hand, she lay back on her luxurious pillow. "What did you say your name was?" Only a minute or two Bellow had said. He probably knew what he was talking about-probably had the right numbers. That's really never the same thing as knowing, seeing. Perhaps her alertness was already starting to fade again.

"My name's Leodas... Rosalys."

Now she didn't mind the familiarity. Now perhaps she understood more than Ditmars had thought.

Again the fear behind her eyes was growing full and bright.

"That's a good, strong name. Don't leave me here alone, Leodas. Don't you desert me, too."

"I won't."

"...Ditmars, we're right outside the cemetery fence now, in a hovercraft. In thirty seconds we can get to the spaceport from here. You can still make it. Leave the book there and we'll try again. The veil's falling now, it'll be on top of us in a matter of minutes."

Her eyes were still afraid. She couldn't hear the radio voice, but she must have seen something cross his face, for her other hand came to look for his again.

There was a prolonged loud roar outside, and Ditmars knew it came from crumpling land. He looked about. The camera had wound up on the floor this time. Where had he bought it and for how much? Expensive toy. Playtime's over, now.

He said: "Don't worry about all the noise, Rosalys. It's going to be all right." Comfortably, almost luxuriously, Ditmars changed position on the soft bed, until now he sat beside her like a lover.

Rosalys sighed, and like a comforted child slid deeper under her cover, her head going back almost to where it had originally rested. But her grip on his hand stayed fiercely tight.

"We're going, Ditmars... out of here..." Bellow's voice was only half-coherent.

"Leodas?... that's a good, strong name."

"I'm here with you. There's nothing to be afraid of." And Ditmars understood even as he spoke the words that they were true.

The red circles emblazoned on all the city's buried walls held narrow dagger-blades of warning. Urgent voices, amplified, thundered the alarm in every quarter of the city. Boomed it out across the golden, convoluted, quivering plain. The veil was falling, far earlier than anyone had thought it might. But warning had come, somehow, from the explorers themselves, and for the tourists there was still hope.

Low down across one flank of the wide gravity-inversion sky, a line of slow explosions raged already, advancing like a rank of silent summer thunderstorms. On the field of the spaceport the last evacuation ship lay like a thick pool of bright and melted-looking metal, with a hundred doors open for quick access, and a hundred machines carrying tourists and their baggage aboard.

Hagen, hurrying out onto the field, gestured to stop a hurrying machine. "My companion, the woman Ailanna. Is she aboard the ship?

"No list of names of those aboard has been compiled, man." The timbre of the metal voice was strong, and intended to sound reassuring, even when the words it spoke were likely to inspire fear.

Hagen looked round him at the surface of the city, the few lean towers and the multitude of burrowed entrances, like those of timid animals. Some people were running in the distance. Over the entire landscape more machines were racing on wheels and treads to reach the ship with freight or more likely with tourists who somehow had not gotten the warning till now. Perhaps some were intended settlers having a last minute change of mind or heart. Was not Ailanna looking frantically for him amid the

burrows of the city, looking in vain as the last moments fell? It was against logic and experience that she would do a thing like that, but Hagen could not escape the feeling that she was.

Nevertheless, the doors on the ship were closed or closing now.

"Take me aboard!" he barked at the machine.

"At once, man." And already they were flying across the plain.

A hovercraft flashed past them, skidded desperately to a stop almost against the ship, and like a double-barreled gun discharged two wrinkle-faced men, one tall and gaunt, one portly and gray-haired. These two scrambled, just ahead of Hagen, into the last hatch still open on the starship.

Inside a cabin crowded by disheveled tourists, Hagen looked out through a port as the vessel was hurled into and through the sky, then sent among the sideward modes of space, twisted out from under the falling veil before the veil could touch the ship and passengers and hold them down forever. There was a last glimpse of a yellow plain, that was the sky of Azlaroc seen from above, and then only strange flickers of light from the abnormal space they were traversing briefly, like a cloud.

"That was exciting!" Out of nowhere Ailanna threw herself against him, to squeeze him with a hug. "I was worried that you'd been left behind." She was ready now to forgive him a flirtation with a girl of sixty-five years ago.

It was pleasant that he was forgiven, and Hagen patted Ailanna's shoulder. But his eyes were still looking upward and outward, waiting for the stars.

Driving in their tractors toward the city and the spaceport, Timmins and the dozen or so other explorers who had come with him could see the newly-tumbled ruins of West Ridge, which lay like some computer's idea of a nest of snakes, across the place where the Old Cemetery had been yesterday. Some of the explorers feared for a time that the city and the spaceport might also lie under those great geometric coils which had not yet quite ceased to move.

And then the squadron of tractors topped a minor ridge, and the city was still there before them, unharmed. The veil was still falling toward it slowly, an incandescent transparent cape swirled by some wizardly titan above the sky.

The sky was become transparent, showing the veil's folds tall as the curtains of aurora on more Earthlike worlds. And showing-

"Roger, look!" Chang Timmins shot an arm behind him to grab at his son, wanting to make sure that Roger did riot miss the timeless seconds when the stars were visible above. Not merely scattered sparks, but the great immovable explosion of the Galactic core, ten thousand light-years off...

Roger, who had never had this chance before, made an inarticulate sound. At that moment, right before the falling veil, the last of the escaping star-ships mounted, engines ramming all-out, unimaginable power in full flight before the greater powers that threatened. The ship's escape looked madly daring though it only rode the course its cold computers planned.

The ship was gone to freedom. Then the stars were gone as the sky healed low and fresh and yellow as a flower. Perhaps in another fifty years or so a falling veil might again make them visible for a few moments.

The veil itself, fading anticlimactically into invisibility as it approached, came down in silence to enfold like tender death explorers and settlers already bound with the veils of other years.

Roger was still looking upward. Then he smiled at his father and sank back into his seat again.

Timmins, who had stopped the tractor, eased it forward. "Veil looked a little different from last year's, I think," he remarked to Tana, who was riding beside him. "A shade more colorful."

"Each one does look prettier than the last, I find." She was looking forward, toward the approaching city. "It'll be interesting to see what next year's is like."

"Make a date to watch it with you?"

Their eyes met. "We might work out something," she conceded.

From the seat behind them, Roger said: "Never mind the hand-holding, you people. I thought we were supposed to be looking for a veil-party."

From the seat beside Roger, the young girl who had come with him giggled mindlessly. It was really a marvelous sound, that adolescent giggle; Chang Timmins felt he hadn't heart its like for centuries. It was animal and human and complex beyond the power of man to measure. Timmins looked back and threw the girl a wink, that she accepted placidly enough; unlike her giggling, her eyes gave the impression of some instinctive wisdom.

"Yes, let's find one," Timmins said, making the tractor go a little faster. "It's been a while since I've attended a real veil-party in the city, but I imagine they still have them."

Tok-soz, occupying most of the third seat back, asked cheerfully, "Think we'll be welcome?"

Timmins smiled. "It's our world, I'd say. They're welcome. Anyway, they can hardly throw us out, can they?"

He stopped at the first tavern that they came to, a big surface structure erected centuries ago in isolation, that Timmins guessed might now stand somewhere near the modern city's edge. Parked around the tavern were a number of other vehicles, of all degrees of clarity to the eyes of an explorer. A sizable inter-group gathering of some kind was obviously in progress, and today only one kind of gathering was at all likely. In confirmation, the sounds of merriment came out to greet the newcomers, laughter and shouts loud and clear from their peers in time, a muffled roar from other groups.

Entering the old building, Tana on his arm, Timmins raised his free hand as if in blessing, and let his fingers glide through the figure of some late settler pausing in the doorway.

Sorokin leaned there for only a moment longer before he went on in. Veil-party time again, and one more draped upon them all. The thought made him feel no worse than numb.

He reached the bar, took up a drink from a labeled tray that waited there for Yeargroup '410, and looked at another drink beside it that a man he knew was never going to be able to taste.

Yes, he said to himself, I think he went on into it.

He emptied that first glass, and then elbowed back through the celebrating crowd and groped among the pods and smokes and drinks to find that second one, which he planned to consume more slowly. Somewhere in the vast background of the city the enormous air-machines were already buzzing into life, wasting no time in starting to construct the atmosphere and water of year ‘431. In a couple of days the first tourists would be arriving here to see the sights.

Yes, I think he went on into it. Unless, of course, he managed to find a folded edge of veil before he got that far.

At least he, Sorokin, was going to have a fine new tale to tell. His story would presumably be supported by the recorders in his suit, which he had left, still working beautifully, a little distance outside the tavern. His suit had brought him back the way he had gone out, digging and blasting its way up through a mad assortment of matter once he had reached the solid undergrbund of Azlaroc again.

A woman from some yeargroup near his own was standing nearby, looking at Sorokin. “You were with him,” she said. “With Ramachandra.” Others within earshot stopped their talk and song, and turned to face him silently.

Sorokin raised his glass a bit, as if to toast. “Yes. Actually this is my first stop, coming back. I thought I could use a drink.”

The woman said: “Then you don’t know?” The other people were still staring.

He started two questions and aborted both before they reached his lips. Then he said: “Ramachandra”s back.”

“Since late yesterday.” But the woman’s manner said that there was much more to be told.

A man offered: “Callisto and her group won’t let out much information but it’s known that they dug something out of the ridge about twenty-four hours ago. Supposedly it has somehow been identified as Ramachandra. His special suit, at least, presumably with him inside. Enlarged, somehow, and holding in one hand what looks like a small, bright light.”

“Dead?”

The woman made a gesture that was difficult to interpret. “They say there’s movement. Life, perhaps. But wrapped in a loop of something like twenty-four hundred veils.”

Sorokin said eventually: “He’ll go again.”