

Hocal nodded, and got down a large map, spreading it out on the table in front of him. It was ingeniously printed for the benefit of a color-blind race; it contained all the details in amazing black, white and gray contrasts. Yulin could interpret it, but he could not read the key or names. He would have to cure that, he decided.

Hocal pointed a stubby finger at one hex. "Here we are in Dasheen," he said.

Yulin looked. They were close to the Equatorial Barrier, something Hocal translated as Cotyl occupying two half-hexes at the Barrier; then Voxmir to the northwest-unfriendly and inhuman, Hocal assured him; Jaq to the southeast-volcanic and hot as hell, too hot for a Dasheen to survive; Frick to the southeast-they had crazy, fat flying disks with steam jets; and Qasada to the southwest-from the description a highly advanced technological civilization of giant rats.

"This is where the problem is," Hocal pointed again. Just below Qasada and to the southwest of Frick was Xoda, a land of great, fierce insects-and a module. "There's another in Palim, below it, Olborn, to the southwest, and, most important, only four hexes south, Gedemondas, about which little is known. The engines of the downed craft landed there, and they are, as you will appreciate, the big prize. I suspect we'll know a lot more about Gedemondas before this is finished."

Yulin nodded. "I'd think that one of the others- the rats, for example-might make a better run for it," he noted.

Hocal agreed. "They should, but that's a funny area. The races in there aren't that friendly, or, like the Palim, have been, like us, peaceful too long to think of conflict. No, the trouble comes from way over here."

He pointed again far to the west, well beyond the far coast of the Sea of Storms.

"This is Makiem, and up here is Cebu, and to the east is Agitar. Makiem is run by some clever and ruthless politicians and is a nontech hex, as we are. Cebu is semitech, and its people have the power of flight, which is particularly useful. Agitar is high-tech, and while we've been able to learn very little about it, they seem to have flying animals-which means their range isn't limited by their machines-and some natural abilities with electricity that transcend the Well limits. They have formed an alliance to get the ship parts."

"But they couldn't use them, even if they put them together, without a qualified pilot," Yulin objected. "That's not a simple rocket, you know."

"We are well aware of that," replied Hocal, looking directly at him. "The war was to be the topic, but, I suspect, with you on hand, the discussion will be even livelier."

The trip was easy and made in less than two days. They went in a comfortable coach pulled by six Dasheen cows from Hocal's herd, and they made better speed than Yulin would have believed.

Additionally, the tired pullers did everything for them, cooking delicious stews, rubbing them down, everything. Yulin loved being waited on; he saw how easy it would be to get spoiled here. The cows engaged mostly in small talk among themselves, occasionally playing childish sort of games with one another, but they carried out their jobs without complaint, as if this was what they were born to do and they were happy doing it. In deference to his host, Ben Yulin kept at a distance from them.

They arrived at Tahlur at midday to find most of the other members already there. They were taking nothing lightly, and grave discussions were already underway in the town's alehouses. As on the farm and road, the females did all the work-all the cooking, cleaning, serving, all the basic labors. Yulin couldn't do anything for himself. A cow was always there to get him a chair, to bring food or drink, to take him to a comfortable room in an inn, to prepare and clean everything. They even ran to open doors for the males.

Even though the service was easy to take, he wondered about it, about whether it was truly mental inferiority or just a rigid social system. They weren't automatons; they talked and

laughed sometimes and sulked sometimes and generally acted like people.

And there were the rings and collars. All the cows wore them-large rings welded in their huge noses, and brass collars welded around their necks, with small hooks on the back. They were distinctive; they bore the marks of the herd the cow was from. The females were even branded on the right rump, he found, with the herd-mark.

Did they ever get fed up and run away, he wondered. Was that why there were so many ways to identify them as being out of place?

The towns had guild-herds. There were guilds for the different classes of workers, and they lived in dorms through the town.

He worried about this a little more when he found out that the great quantities of milk the men consumed, gotten from the cows, was more than supplement. The males like himself could not manufacture their own calcium. They required almost a gallon of the calcium-rich milk a day to stay healthy, ward off arthritis, bone diseases, rotting teeth, and the like.

Without cows, the men would die. Slowly, and in great agony.

That was why they and their system were so well known in other hexes. Young bulls waiting for an opening often traveled, sometimes widely. They could exist on almost any native carbon-based grasses, and their own systems purified natural water, so few provisions were needed. But the men were so used to being waited on, and their bodies so desperately dependent on the cow's milk, that they had to take at least four cows with them. He could imagine the effect this would have on races that were unisexual, or where sexual discrimination was not present, or, worse, in a matrilineal society.

But there was little time for such speculation. He was too busy being passed around, introduced to the politicians, and discussing the crisis.

The council met the next day. In a communal society-money wasn't even used here, everyone drew his share-such bodies on a small scale were normal. They elected a chairman without much problem and proceeded to the business at hand.

Using maps, charts, and diagrams, the central bureaucracy explained the problem. There was a general sentiment to stay clear of it; it was none of Dasheen's business. Yulin they regarded as a complication; it was debated, much to his chagrin, whether or not to hide him away, imprison him for the war's duration, or perhaps kill him! None of these alternatives were seriously considered by the council as a whole, much to his relief, but he was aware of danger here. Those who proposed them were deadly serious, and some of these hotheads might easily take such solutions into their own hands.

On the third day of the conference little had been resolved, and Ben had the feeling that they just loved to argue; they would never come to any agreement unless forced to.

But on the third day a newcomer arrived who changed things. Its entrance was such that it panicked people on the streets, and the creature did little to reassure them after coming to ground. In the air it was magnificent and beautiful; a great butterfly with a two-meter wingspread, brilliantly orange and brown against a black body that still stood 150 centimeters when it landed in the street and stood on the rearmost four of its eight long tentacles. Its face was a large, black painted death's head, with great, eerie eyes that looked like pads recessed in the hard, dark skull.

The Yaxa, however, had been expected.

Its manner, its voice, was cold, hard, sharp, and cutting. It sent chills through those who heard it. Even Ben, who had to have a running translation, felt it. Unlike the others he'd met on the Well World-the Dasheen, Ortega, the Ambreza, even the plant-creature-this one was different. Not inhuman, unhuman, as alien as those paintwash creatures of the North.

The Yaxa had a proposition.

"First," it said, "let me summarize what the situation is to date. I have been able to keep in touch on my journey here as new developments broke, and things are breaking fast.

"One-the Makiem have effectively allied and coordinated with the Cebu and the Agitar. It is the most formidable combination of brains, opportunism, and ability this world has ever seen. Boidol will give them their part of the ship to avoid the fight. There has been no talking them out of it. The Djukasis will fight, but we have been unsuccessful in getting the Lata to come in on their side or anybody else's. The Djukasis will take their toll, but they cannot hope to defeat such an alliance. The Klusidians will neither yield nor fight, and you know what that means. The Zhonzorp would fight if they had a chance, but they're very much like the Makiem, mentally. They may join the alliance instead, if they're able. Their hatred of the Klusidians will keep them from giving the aid those people need."

The creature paused, adjusting the giant maps it was using to illustrate its talk.

"Olborn is a mystery. You know its reputation: nobody who goes in ever comes out, and they never man their embassy at Zone. A question mark, but I don't believe that any race, whatever its powers, can stop this march alone. If we're lucky, the Olbornians will slow them, as certainly the Alestoli will. But think of what two flying races could do with even something as basic as boiling oil. No, a sufficiently large force of them will reach Gedemondas, a hex that talks to no one, has no embassy, and contains too hostile an environment for much else. Even the Dillians on the other side, who share some mountains, have been unsuccessful in talking to them. They don't fight—they just vanish. And that leaves four mods and the engines in the hands of the Makiem-Cebu-Agitar alliance."

"But how will they ever get such large pieces of machinery back to their home hexes?" asked one councillor.

"The Agitar know their business," the Yaxa told him. "They will bring along a number of good engineers. They will disassemble things, put them through the Zone Gates if they can't haul them home, and then reassemble them in their own hex."

"They still couldn't fly it," another pointed out.

"Wrong again," replied the Yaxa. "The Makiem have had the kind of good fortune that makes one doubt free will. One of the pilot-qualified Entries, Antor Trelig, is a Makiem. He can and will fly that ship—and further, he can enter the computer complex and use it up on the satellite. You see? Our very existence is in jeopardy!"

That got to them. There was a rumble and roar, and it was several minutes before the chairman could calm them down. It was hard to tell, but the Yaxa seemed satisfied with his reception. It had come on a diplomatic mission; its object was to scare them to death.

"But what can we do?" asked one councillor. "Send our people into battle with swords and spears against the Qasada? They'd chew us to pieces!"

"They would indeed," the Yaxa agreed. "But you will have some time and some advantages. Yaxa and Lamotien have united. The Lamotien are probably the best friends and deadliest enemies on the Well World. The planet for which they were designed must be a living hell. They are metamorphs—they can assume any shape that they can see, limited only by the fact that they cannot change their mass. Even that is not a true drawback because they are small. They combine with one another to create larger organisms. Twenty could make a Dasheen so convincing you would be unable to tell the difference. And there are ten million or more Lamotien, in a high-tech hex. With them we will shortly secure the highly important bridge module of the downed ship from Teliagin. Then the Lamotien will turn into flyers, and we will fly to Nodi Island in the Sea of Storms and secure a second module. Then we shall cross the East Neck to Qasada. With Lamotien infiltration and technology, Yaxa flight and trained warriors, aided, perhaps, by bases and personnel in Dasheen, we can take the Qasada and the Xoda, our two major problems. Palim is still in doubt; they might just allow us through. That puts us in Gedemondas, a hex in which we Yaxa will be hard-pressed to operate, but one in which a Lamotien-supplemented Dasheen force will be highly effective. Need I tell you that this will give us the bridge and engines?" It turned, looked over the bovine faces assembled there. "And you have Ben Yulin, another pilot who also has access

to the satellite computer."

There was more uproar. How could the Yaxa have known? They groaned. This changed everything!

The Yaxa had no ability to smile. Even if it could, Ben Yulin thought such a gesture would shatter its face and personality. But there was evident confidence and satisfaction inside it for its presentation.

Chalk one up for Well World intrigues, anyway, Yulin thought. This world bristled with spies, plots, moves, and countermoves. The heretofore impossibility of war had diverted men of such minds to more devious means.

The debate droned on and on, but it was evident that the outcome had been decided, and a late-night formal vote made it official. Even Yulin spoke, assuring them that he could indeed pilot the ship if it had so much as one module between bridge and engines, and that he could, in fact, get into Obie. His emotions were excitement mixed with apprehension. On one hand, here was a chance, although a long shot, to gain complete mastery of New Pompeii, Obie included, and perhaps a key to the Well. On the other, he saw the dark threat of Antor Trelig in that same position. He did not paint Trelig's evil any too lightly; by the time he was through, the very mention of Trelig inspired dread.

On the brighter side, all personal animosities were off. He was one of their own now, suddenly. They would be the weakest member of the alliance militarily, but the other monstrous partners in this coalition would have to depend entirely on a Dasheen to get there and get into the computer.

He was taken around where former enemies who had suggested his imprisonment or death only a day before were now his blood brothers.

"He must have his own herd!" one big shot insisted, and they all agreed.

"Only a small one right now. Later-anything he wants!" another stipulated.

"How about one from each of the five service guilds in town?" a third suggested. "More practical than giving him farmhands!" So he got five daughters, one each from the Metalworkers, City Service, Cooks and Waiters, Builders, and Housekeeping guilds-a perfect practical balance of skills.

The Metalworkers also gave him his own brand, distinctive ring, and collar. His herd were all young, all virgins. He found that there was a lot of tradition and ceremony associated with unions.

For one thing, daughters had numbers instead of names until they were assigned to a herd, whether farm or guide. The male, who was always called Master, would name them in the ceremony, then consummate the union, which bound her to him. She would then be branded, ringed, and collared. The whole process took five days.

He loved every minute of it.

In the meantime, subcouncils met, Yaxa came and went, and a percentage of every herd in the country was conscripted for military training. This worried some of the men, who wondered what the effect would be when so many cows were taught the art of killing. But there was much at stake here. As for the Yaxa, they didn't seem to find anything but amusement in that worry.

The Yaxa, Ben learned, were female. After they mated, they ate their male mate. It was almost the reverse of Dasheen, and he couldn't help but wonder if Yaxa presence might give somebody ideas.

AGITAR

Although Renard didn't know it yet, the Well World must have a sense of humor. The shock of waking up in an alien land as something else was much greater for him; he did not really remember anything since waiting before a big plain for darkness so they could avoid the cyclopes.

He sat up and looked around. A nice looking place, he thought. Green trees here and there, nice fields growing various vegetables—even signs of hothouses and other modern conveniences. There was a small service road near him, obviously for farm vehicles going to the groves rather than for through traffic, yet it was macadam-paved. He was definitely in a rural area, but this was no primitive cyclops land.

Far off in the distance was what appeared to be the ghostly skyline of a city. It looked kind of strange, the buildings kind of twisted or pointed, but that was to be expected.

He had no doubt in his mind that he was still on this strange world where they had crashed. How he'd gotten here was a mystery; somebody must have brought him, that was for sure. Why couldn't he remember? The sponge?

A sudden realization shot through him. He felt good. Really good. Totally clear-headed. He found he could remember things he hadn't thought of in years—and felt no trace whatever of the sponge—longing or its effects. Almost wondrously he thought of Mavra Chang. She alone believed that somewhere on this world sponge addiction could be cured, and she was right. He knew it, deep inside. He was free!

But where?

He rose to his feet and found himself somewhat out of balance. He fell forward, breaking his fall with his hands.

It wasn't dizziness; it was balance. Something was wrong. He looked at the arm that had broken his fall. Short, stubby fingers with nails that looked more like claws. A deep-blue skin-

He rolled over and sat up again. He felt something funny when sitting this way, and reached behind him. It was like he was sitting on a rock.

No he wasn't. He was sitting on his short, stubby tail.

His what?

He looked down at himself. The skin was the deepest of blues, and thick and porous. At the waist a very thin curly body hair became suddenly tremendously thick. It was like sheep's wool, dense and curly. Except for being blue-black, his sexual organ looked fairly normal, which was a relief. He was no longer taking anything for granted. But his legs, very thick in the upper calf, were queerly shaped below, coming to a thin knee joint fairly high up, then going down to-

Sharp, shiny-black cloven hooves?

What the hell was going on here?

The hooves looked too small to support his thick body. That must have been why he'd fallen—no large foot support. But—how was he supposed to walk, then? Crawl on his hands and knees? Or did the knack come with practice?

For a brief moment he thought he'd become a cyclops. But, no, he had two eyes in the right places, and the feet and hair were definitely wrong, as was his odd complexion.

He felt his head, wonderingly. Sharp pointed ears close to the scalp, but at least where ears should be. Nose seemed a bit large but felt normal. Even the teeth seemed normal. He'd lost six at various points in his life and never had them put back; but they were all there now, although the front ones felt a hell of a lot sharper and maybe a little longer, top and bottom, than he remembered.

He had hair. He risked pulling a strand, and it was blue-black. It started in a V-shape in the center of his forehead, then spread out on both sides of the horns-

Horns?

Yes, they were there. Bony things, not long but sharp, and definitely a part of his skull.

Kind of a triangular face, terminating in a sharp, thick, pointed goatee.

All right, Renard, think it through logically, he told himself. But it just wouldn't wash. There was no logic to this. Only facts.

Fact: He'd awakened in some alien land, cured of sponge, anatomically totally male, clear-minded, and in the body of some alien creature.

Fact: He didn't know where the hell he was, what he was, or what was going on.

Well, he told himself, no matter what, the only way to find out was to find somebody and ask. There was that city out there in the distance. Even hazy smog from some factory or other.

He crawled on hands and knees over to a spindly tree a few meters away, and, grabbing it, managed to get to his feet. He was top-heavy, no doubt about it. And yet, when he calmed down and considered it, he realized that his sense of balance was tremendous. With a little practice, he could angle parts of his body differently, knowing somehow that certain combinations felt wrong, others right.

In about half an hour he managed to stand without holding on to the tree. He did it repeatedly, and the ability pleased him. He also found that the tail went flush into the rectal cavity, so, when sitting, he didn't have to be uncomfortable.

Walking, however, was a lot harder. After repeatedly falling down he crawled back to the tree, stood up, and resolved to succeed no matter what. He stepped out, going as fast as he could from a standing start. To his surprise, he stayed up, making the weight and balance compensations automatically. When he came to a halt, though, he almost always fell over again. More practice.

The Well World gave you the means of adaptation to your new form, although Renard didn't know that. As the afternoon progressed, he got the hang of it more easily than anyone should have.

This was, he decided, a fast-paced culture. The faster you went the better control you had. Still, he managed now to sort of half-run, and to stand still without falling on his face. It was enough. Subtleties could be gotten later. He could move on toward that city now.

He followed the farm road until it reached a dead end. He realized he'd made the wrong choice, and retraced. At the pace he ran, he arrived at a main road before he knew it. What a road! A highway, really. A highway without vehicles, but with lots of people.

And the road moved.

It was a giant moving walkway, and people holding onto moving handrails moved along in ten lanes in either direction. The middle two lanes were reserved for commercial traffic; large boxlike containers with odd symbols and sometimes graphics moved there on their own walkways, and he wondered how they got them off.

Two other things struck him immediately. One was that the people wore clothes, which caused him a real problem. The males wore shirts and sometimes light jackets, with briefs to cover the nether regions. The females-well, that was another thing. He had heard the term "opposite sex" for years, but this was the first time the difference was graphic.

Blue-skinned all, from the waist down the females appeared roughly human. Oh, they had the little tails, too, and their feet seemed to be a bit broader and more solid than human feet, but human enough. They mostly wore pants and sandals. But from the waist up-

They were goats.

Well, not exactly, he decided. The head was a rounded triangular shape with a long lower jaw running its length, and their noses were black and located at the end of the upper jaw. Their

ears were the same pointed type as his own, and their horns short and more rounded than the males. Over the entire upper torso was that thick, woolly blue hair that was his from the waist down; the female's arms looked like a goat's forelegs except that they terminated in long, thin, fragile-looking hands.

They all had what appeared to be very large human breasts, almost gargantuan, and covered with either brightly colored bras or tied halters. And he got erotic, sensations looking at them. Not just at the breasts, but at all of them. It amazed him. He began to realize just how much he had become this new creature.

The lack of clothing concerned him most; obviously if he stepped out into that traffic he'd cause a stir. Nowhere was there any evidence that nudity was normal or accepted.

He sat back down in what appeared to be a fruit grove to think. He was hungry; if he was going to skulk around or wait until dark to try and bargain for a pair of pants, he'd need something to sustain him. He eyed the large, orange fuzz-covered balls on the bushes around him. He'd seen peaches on New Pompeii; he knew they didn't grow on bushes like this, but he suspected that these were close enough, and very edible, since nobody would grow the things like this to poison anyone. He reached over and picked one.

There was a crackle and a pop, and he felt some sort of release inside him that seemed to flow into his hand. The peach crackled; it was cooked solid, and suddenly very hot. He dropped it with an oath. He felt a dull burning sensation in his hand, but it wasn't from whatever had cooked the fruit but rather from the fruit heating up.

What else? he wondered, both curious and anxious.

He carefully reached out to pick up another fruit off the bush. He felt the sensation rising within him, and fought it. It seemed to subside, go down. He picked the thing and ate it. It tasted good.

Trying to figure out what had happened, he reached over and probed the cooked peach; it was still warm. Somehow, he thought, my body contains hundreds, perhaps thousands of volts of electricity that can be discharged and renewed. He instinctively knew it, and the success he had in fighting the power the second time, when he expected it, showed that it could be contained or discharged at will.

He picked up another peach, put it down in front of him, and kind of let the sensation flow, touching the peach with his index finger. He felt the sensation rise, flow into his arm, down it, and there was a slight crackle and the peach started smouldering.

Where does that energy come from? he wondered. He considered the thick upper calves and thighs, and the tremendously dense hair there. That might well build up a static charge, he thought, particularly with all that running. A charge transferred to his body, to some sort of storage, discharging only when that body willed it.

I could possibly electrocute somebody by shaking hands with him! he thought in wonder.

He found he could feel the energy, even feel a slight loss after a discharge. It could be routed to any part of his upper body. Talk about a shocking embrace!

He was still experimenting when a sharp voice said behind him, "If you're all through trying to burn the field down, will you kindly get up and tell me why you're sitting in a fruit field, stark naked, frying peaches?"

He turned with a start. It was a male-whatever else he was. There was no mistaking his manner, the club and radio on his belt.

He was a cop.

They had radioed for a lock-up cart, and it arrived. They hustled him into it, and it rolled down the moving roadway smoothly, bumping only when it reached a junction point where two belts

met.

How you got off or on the roadway was simple. There was a small set of casterlike wheels attached to the underside, and they, in turn, were attached to a basic electric motor.

The cops provided their own electrical power.

They rolled to a halt inside the police garage and took him out. A female desk sergeant, her goatlike head impassive, punched information into a computer and asked him questions.

"Name?"

"Renard," he responded.

"Odd name," she commented. "Place and date of birth?"

"The city of Barentsk, on the planet Muscovy, August 12, 4412 N.D.," he answered honestly.

She stopped typing and looked at him. "You trying to be funny?" she asked. The two male cops flanking him didn't look amused.

"No," he told her, trying to sound sincere. "Honest. Look, I crashed here in a spaceship, somewhere in a place inhabited by giant cyclopes, and then I woke up here. I don't know anything more than you do."

She remained impassive, that rigid face incapable of showing emotion, but she said, "Less," cryptically, and punched something on the terminal. There was a flip-flop on the screen, and a new printout appeared, line-by-line. She nodded, looked at the two cops.

"He's an Entry, all right. One of the drug addicts."

"You sure," one of the cops responded. "He just looks like a Class-One nut to me."

Renard felt insulted, but decided not to press the matter.

"Look," the desk clerk said. "Take my word for it. Get some clothes for him from the lockup and then take him up to Lieutenant Ama's office. I'll call ahead."

They reluctantly agreed, using the age-old principle of uncertainty: when you're not positive of your own position, pass the buck. They gave him some uncomfortable, tight-fitting briefs of a bright-white color, and a white T-shirt that was too large and obviously had been worn by a legion of people before him. The bright-white was obvious: the contrast with his deep-blue complexion was spottable a kilometer away. Jail clothes.

Lieutenant Ama was a typical bored servant of the people who didn't like problems in his district. He also wouldn't answer questions of any kind, although he asked a number, obviously to make sure that Renard was indeed who he said he was. Nobody else would talk, either.

He sat there for hours. He knew what was happening—at least he hoped he knew. Ama was calling his superior, who was calling his superior, who was—and so forth, until somebody decided what to do with him.

Well, they fed him, anyway. They even showed him how you touched different points on the metal plate set in the wooden base to cook anything you liked how you liked it. He discovered that men were the cooks here. Women couldn't do it—didn't have the electrical capacity. They were, however, as immune to electrical shocks of any kind as the males. Renard wondered idly how you made love around here without burning the house down.

He slept in an unlocked cell, and by the middle of the second day he was wondering if he'd been forgotten.

He hadn't. A little into the afternoon, they came for him. Big guys—bigger than he was, anyway. It occurred to him that, since everything was to scale, he had no idea how big he was. Could be ten centimeters high or four meters high.

Another trip, much longer this time, and then into a huge building that was shaped like a pyramid but with minaretlike towers all around. Into another office, this one obviously a big shot's, and more questioning. They had no doubts he was who he said he was; the questions were quite different this time.

Most of them were about Antor Trelig.

He told them everything; he held nothing of his hatred back. He described the man who enslaved so many to terrible drugs, the depravities of New Pompeii, Trelig's mad ambitions. They took it all down.

And, finally, they answered some of his questions.

"Where am I?" he asked.

The interrogator, a slighter-built man who wore glasses, thought a moment. "You are hi Agitar, and you are an Agitar."

"I'm still on the planet where I crashed?"

Slowly, they told him the story of the Well World, the hexes, and some of the problems his arrival had caused.

"You can't pilot a spaceship, can you?" the interrogator asked hopefully.

"No," he admitted. "I was a teacher of classics and a librarian and sometimes a guard for Trelig's prisoners."

The man thought for a minute. "You must understand our position in relation to you. Agitar is an advanced, technologically based hex. There is nothing electrical, I believe, closed to us, stemming from research on our own bodies. Science is king here. Now we prepare for a war, a war for those spaceship parts your party brought down. And here you are-totally illiterate, possessing absolutely no skills of use to us. Now you are an Agitar for the rest of your life. You're young, strong, but little else. You must be fitted in here, and when we look at this compilation, the only usable quality you possess is a familiarity with weapons and the ability to shoot straight."

"Where are the others who came in with me?" he asked, not liking the direction of the conversation. "I would like to get in contact with the woman, Mavra Chang-"

"Forget it," the other told him. "She's in the hands of the Lata, and, although they've stayed neutral so far, they are almost certainly philosophically, maybe actually, in opposition to us." He sighed. "No, I think there's only one place you would fit in now, and it'll do you good, work you into Agitar society with discipline."

They drafted him into the army.

They gave him two weeks of strict, intense basic training. There was little time to think, and that was as it had been planned. Still, barracks life made him some friends and filled him in on the rest of what was going on. For one thing, he found out that Agitar was allied with Makiem, a hex whose dominant race were giant frogs, and Cebu, a race of flying reptiles of some sort.

He also learned that Antor Trelig was a Makiem.

That depressed him. The ultimate irony. To escape from New Pompeii, beat the sponge on a new and alien planet, and wind up back serving Antor Trelig again. Was the Well computer laughing?

The training was tough but fascinating, though. In hand-to-hand, an Agitar male would simply electrocute his opponent. Although the average energy stored in an Agitar male was several thousand volts-still enough to be lethal-it could potentially store up to sixty thousand volts! An incredible figure. Overload was impossible, but if you were fully charged, any additional

energy would be immediately released. The static electricity alone would never generate a terribly high voltage, but it was actually possible for an Agitar to absorb additional electricity from artificial sources or even things like lightning rods. They were totally immune to electrical shock; they could not electrocute one another, but they could actually transfer stored-up energy between themselves. There was a rather unpleasant class on how to absorb the energy from a dying or recently dead comrade.

Shooting was easy for him; the rifles were different from what he knew, as were the pistols, but all such weapons basically operate on the same principle: aim, push here, and the energy or projectile comes out there.

Somehow, one never unconsciously discharged, even while sleeping. He wondered about that, worried about the fact that the first time he had done so involuntarily, but they assured him that it rarely happened. But beds were made out of nonconductive, energy-absorbing materials, just in case.

He also learned, indirectly from his barracks-mates, about the opposite sex. They were smart; on the average, a little smarter than the men, some said. Sex was common and frequent; the Agitar were a horny bunch. But there was effective birth control, plus the Well monitor of the population, so nobody felt inhibited. Marriage was unknown. If you wanted a child, you just found a female that wanted one, too-or vice versa-and had one. If it was male, it was the father's total responsibility to raise it. The female might stay, might walk out. If it was female, the reverse was true.

There were women in the army, too. Because they could not hold a charge or discharge, they were never front-line troops, but they handled everything else. Most of the upper officers, including the bulk of the general staff, were women, as were most of the technicians.

The war was not popular. There was some childish enthusiasm born of never having actually seen what a war was like, yes; but most people didn't get overly enthusiastic about it. They saw war as a necessity. A nasty couple of races-the Yaxa and the Lamotien -were even now moving to get the ship parts as well, and they had Ben Yulin under their control to fly it. Better a fully charged Agitar at Antor Trelig's side walking into Obie than a bunch of terribly alien creeps under a not certainly controllable Ben Yulin.

After two weeks, they transferred him to Air. It wasn't a promotion, really; Air went in first, and took the brunt of front-line casualties. Renard almost gasped when he saw what Air meant. Not planes or sleek ships, no. They were horses. Large, great horses with tremendous swanlike wings along both sides of their sleek bodies. As a classicist, Renard recognized them as the embodiment of the legendary Pegasus, and they were truly grand. They came in all colors-brown, white, pink, blue, green. There was no end to the variety.

And they flew-tremendously, gracefully, with an Agitar on a saddle, his legs strapped in, on soaring wings. They were somewhat fragile, since they had hollow bones, and he never did quite understand why they flew, but they did and that was enough. They were also much smarter than horses. They responded to verbal commands, slight kicks, pulls on the reins- and they were easy to train, considering their riders had their own shock prods.

He was assigned one immediately. A beautiful, intelligent animal, green in color. The first time he went up, he had an instructor in front and all sorts of fancy instruments. But, the animals were easy to fly, and by the third day Renard was doing loops and swirls on Doma, the horse's name, as easily as if born to it. They were a natural pair, Agitar and pegasus; they blended together like one organism.

And there was the tast. It was a steel rod, about three meters long, coated with copper, with a sword-like copper hilt. With an Agitar male holding one, it was an electrical conductor of remarkable efficiency. It was also thin and fairly light for the well-muscled arms.

In a nontechnological hex, or even some others, the tast was an ultimate close-contact weapon, where pistol or rifle either could not be used or would not work.

At the end of three weeks they told his class that they weren't really ready, should need six more weeks, but that this was all the training they were going to get. As it was, they would have

to catch up to the war.

Renard decided one thing-had decided it long before, when he found out about Trelig.

He was not going to die in Trelig's service.

LATA

Another dizzying ride on the Krommians had taken Mavra to Lata itself.

It was a fairyland come to life. The Lata had no cities as such; they were spread out along wooded hills and forest glades. Small shop groups permitted the necessary trade and services, and there was a number of universities, research facilities for those so minded, and places for the artisans, for Lata were an inherently artistic race.

It was also the only asexual bisexual race she had ever seen. They all looked identical to her except for the colors; all like meter-high girls of nine or ten, and all spoke in lyrical, musical bells. It was an eerie feeling for her, who had always been so small in a world of giants, to suddenly be the tallest person around.

They were all born without sex; they matured after fifteen to twenty years into biological females, each capable of laying just one egg, which hatched on its own in a few days. Then, over a two-year period, they changed. Female organs vanished, and male organs grew in their place. They were then male for the rest of their lives.

She asked Vistaru why there were so many females if that was the case. The girl-even though mature, it was impossible to think of the Lata as other than girls-had laughed. "When you change, you get older," she'd replied.

Mavra ultimately found out that females aged at a rate only a fraction that of males; it would eventually catch up with you, of course, but most put it off as long as possible. Spend forty to fifty years as a ten-year-old flying pixie girl, then have your egg, then have another thirty years as a male, growing older inside.

That's why the males seemed to be the leaders here. They were older, and had more experience.

Mavra Chang felt more at ease now than at any other period she could remember in her life except those glorious years of marriage and partnership. There was no pressure here; the people were wonderful and warm. There were no threats, no natural enemies, and, as a high-tech hex, no want of material comfort, either, although they seemed to have made less use of their technical capabilities than other places she was told about. They didn't need it: they were happy.

The stingers, which could kill-they described the venoming process as something like an orgasm-were their extra edge against neighbors who might think the frail and tiny creatures easy prey. It totally paralyzed for a long period, depending on the victim's size and weight, and too much of it could kill. Less than a dozen races had proven immune to it, and the Lata hadn't had to test their power much in a long while.

As for Mavra herself, they made new clothing for her to her design, of black stretch cloth, and a heavy coat for cold weather wear. They also cleaned her belt, replaced the strap, and marveled at the compartments and gadgets it contained. The same with her boots; they were too worn to be useful, but the gadgets had survived, and a new pair was brighter, shinier, more flexible and comfortable-and even added a few more centimeters to her height.

They also untangled her hair, cut, combed, and trimmed it in Lata fashion, long and sleek on the top and sides, short in back. When they tested the venom in her nails, it fascinated them. Obie had made a biological adaptation of mechanical injectors; and the system was, said the medical people, amazing and complex. They got her to try the hypno load on a Lata volunteer, and, much to her surprise, the stuff that had failed on the cyclopes worked on the Lata.

She lived with them for several weeks; it was a peaceful time. The medical people fitted her with a translator, a tiny crystal from the North that was patched in at any one of several points inside her body in a painless, minor operation. This would allow her to understand, she was told, anyone on the Well World, and anyone on the Well World could understand her. The devices were not common or cheap; the operation had been mandated and paid for by Serge Ortega.

She was both delighted and disappointed: delighted in that she could now speak to and understand these wonderful people; disappointed in that their speech, when translated, lost its wonderful musicality. It sounded like plain old Confederation plain talk with bell-like undertones. Furthermore, the translator was in and of itself a reminder to her that she was not really a free woman, but a captive. These nice people were doing things in their own best political interest, not hers.

Vistaru explained the problem to her, now easier since she could speak in her own language and be understood. "You are a pilot," she pointed out. "The Yaxa-Lamotien-Dasheen alliance is on the move. So is the Makiem-Cebu-Agitar one. We don't want war. We want that ship destroyed. But we must have someone around who understands it, just in case-as long as the threat remains."

As long as the threat remains. Mavra wondered how long that would be.

The map told the story, along with daily war reports. The great sphinxes of Boidel had traded their module for peace, going as far as bringing it to the Agitar border. Gambling that the war would end in no profit for all concerned, they had elected to pass.

In the North, the great angry butterflies of the Yaxa had poured boiling oil on Teliagin villages and forests, and the Lamotien had spread panic as Teliagin cy-clopes suddenly came apart into fifty or more smaller creatures who disrupted everything from behind. The Teliagin, primitive and fearful, surrendered quickly. They allowed the Yaxa and Lamotien to drag the bridge module across the Lamotien border on great carts, eventually helping in the process. The Yaxa were already heading across the Sea of Storms on great wings, first to Nodi Island-a peaceful hex inhabited by a race described as resembling giant walking mushrooms-to receive a sea-landed module being brought to them by the dolphinlike Porigol next door. There, on the Nodi beaches, Lamotien technicians carefully disassembled the mod, and helpless Nodi allowed the parts to be shipped to Zone through their Zone Gate, and thence on to Lamotien. Qasada would be next for the Yaxa alliance.

In the South, Djukasis was giving fierce resistance, but it was only a matter of days, the reports said. The great bees' hives were being hit by the pterodactyl-like Cebu, while Agitar airmen on great Pegasi zapped the Djukasis from the air with their tasts.

Upset, Mavra asked repeatedly why the Lata would not go in to help the Djukasis, whom they liked and had been friends with for centuries. They always shook their heads and gave the same answer.

"If we hurt one army without hurting the other, the other has that much more chance of achieving its goals. We must remain neutral until there is some sort of action we could take that would end not one war, but all war."

In the meantime, Mavra Chang felt more and more a prisoner in a pixie paradise as events passed her by.

DJUKASIS

There was a storm coming. They could see it in the billowing black clouds, hear the distant thunder, and almost feel the glow of approaching lightning.

The Agitar commander looked at the scene and nodded approvingly. "A fine day to end this mess," she said to the field officers, the men who would lead. "There is much charging potential there."

"Enough to knock the mounts out from under us," muttered one officer glumly, wondering why commanders who never had to go into battle themselves were always so cheerfully optimistic when explaining what other lives should buy.

She sniffed. "No defeatism today, Captain! You know as well as I do that the last and your own bodies will absorb the force. The saddles are insulated. The beast is used to mild shocks. No, conditions favor us. The siege of the Djukasis Zone Gate complex is well along; knock out the rest of their aerial defenses today, and the froggies will easily take it over in the rain."

They went back to tell their men.

Renard, too, was watching the storm approach, with far different thoughts in mind. Over the past week he'd become a good fighter, but electrocuting those bees sickened him. He did it only because, if he did not, they would kill him with their projectile weapons and stingers, suicidally if need be. But, those bees were people defending their homes.

He was also scared. Those bees weren't fools; they had learned, too, that they could turn more quickly than a pegasus; hit the mount in the rear, out of reach of the Agitar rider, and the beast plunged to its own and its rider's death. That had almost happened to him twice now; it had happened to most of his friends already.

Captain Bir was sarcastic but professional. "The final assault this time, for sure, boys," he told them without any conviction whatsoever. "Same deal. We're supposed to go in just ahead of the storm. When it hits, you'll draw additional charges. Try and get in to the hive itself, give them all the juice you've got. Fry it. As soon as the storm hits, clear out when you've shot your wad. The froggies will drive in with the rain."

"But that'll leave them with no air support, sir," one of the men pointed out.

He shook his head. "That's D-Company's job. No, we get the easy part. Just go in ahead and kill everything we can, then get out of there." They chuckled mirthlessly, knowing that their job was the deadly part. "No," he concluded, "just remember that you'll have an easy retreat. They can't fly in the rain as we can. If it's good and hard, just let your mount bring you home."

Renard nodded with the rest, a plan forming in his mind. He'd seen earlier in the day at the captain's tent a map of the overall route of march. He'd remembered from the moment he'd heard it the official's statement that Mavra Chang was in a place called Lata. The captain had been arguing with another officer, and he'd pointed to the map on his tent wall, saying, "We can't flank that far north, Suo! That's Lata, neutral territory!"

And it had been northeast of their present position, about a day's flight. The pegasus wouldn't mind rain. It liked rain and storms, with the Agitar to draw the lightning from it. Water rolled off the animal with ease, not weighing it down at all. If that storm were fierce enough, and he had guts enough, he told himself, he was going to desert.

"Okay, boys! Let's mount up!" the captain called. One last battle, one more battle.

Here we go, all right, Renard thought grimly.

To the Makiem on the ground, and to the great, red-eyed flying triangles that were the Cebu, it was an awesome sight, even taking into account their different concepts of what was grand. The storm was close now; the sky was filled with great black-and-orange billowing clouds that rumbled and flashed, like lights flashing briefly, across the panorama.

Against that came the Agitar, tiny specks at first, then growing until they could be individually distinguished across the storm-tossed sky. Great horses of many colors, broad swanlike wings flapping gently in the rough air, in V-shaped formations--dozens of them in the leading wave, then dozens more behind, protecting the flanks.

They came in fairly low; the maximum altitude of the pegasus was between fifteen hundred and eighteen hundred meters, and they generally stayed lower than that as a safety margin--in this case much lower, due to the upper-air turbulence, perhaps no more than three hundred meters above

the ground troops.

Pterodactyl-like Cebu, red eyes blazing, moved off behind the Makiem ground troops to provide additional cover for the incoming Agitar. Each of the great giant reptiles wore a harness with twin harpoon tubes that could be aimed and triggered by a flick of the head, then dropped down to be reloaded from quivers strapped to their undersides.

The Makiem could almost feel the great beating of those wings as they passed just overhead, and some of the giant frogs cheered both in optimism and to release the tension from their own impending jump-off.

The enemy, its forces depleted by near-continuous battle, its reserves pulled in from North and South, waited until the last moment before challenging. Their only hope was to get inside the Cebu defensive screen and strike the great pegasi down by bullet or stinger, even though the latter method would mean their own deaths as well.

The Agitar were in sight of the objective now; the monstrous hive half above ground rose over thirty meters in the air. It had been badly damaged by cannon fire and past aerial attacks, but it had stood, torn though it was by great gaping holes and scars.

From its thousands of tiny black pockmarks there appeared to be some sort of reflection of the storm flashes, and it was—from the great, huge, multifaceted eyes of the defenders, who now rose in highly organized, tight-knit swarms to meet the coming foe. The two sides were joined in less than a minute.

The bees were huge, over a meter long, with menacing stingers to match. But the stingers were also an integral part of their backbone; to use it was to break it off—thus breaking its back and causing death. They depended first on their weapons-projectile-types, since theirs was a semitech hex, contained in large boxes located under the thorax, operated by one of the eight flexible, clawlike legs that furred black and gold creatures possessed. Spring-wound, they could fire ten rounds a second, with a two-hundred-shot cartridge.

Actually, the bees' greatest problem in aerial combat was their semi-automatic weapons; they had to be careful in the increasingly rough air to keep from shooting one another down as well.

The tactics were simple. The bees formed a solid wave; the front line waiting until it was in easy range of the Cebu screen and the first line of Agitar, then opening fire. When they were spent, they would drop down and slow, letting the oncoming swarm pass over them, so the next row was clear for a shot. If the progression went well, they could drop back to the hive for additional cartridges and rejoin the back row. But their forces were badly depleted; once the line had fired, it then became a series of free agent aerial soldiers, coming up from below.

The Cebu's harpoons were not as efficient as the Djukasis' machine guns; but, facing a swarm, they could hardly miss. Their objective was to knock holes in the formation, then get into the midst of the swarm, where great, sharp, teeth-filled beaks could rend and tear in quarters too close for the machine guns to do any good.

The rumble of the quickly oncoming storm and the tremendous air turbulence it created started to tell on both sides as they struggled for balance.

The bees' leading line of machine guns started, and some of the attackers were hit, falling from the sky, to be replaced by those from the second and third waves so the formations were maintained. The Djukasis' aim was off; they were having real problems remaining stable in the storm-tossed air, and some were partially spun around still firing, knocking holes in some of their own numbers.

The Cebu took advantage of this, rushing up into the holes, firing then—harpoons into soft Djukasis bodies, then spearing, ripping, and tearing through the ranks while trying to avoid the lethal stingers. Of the eighty-four Agitar in the leading combination, only seventeen still flew, yet the formations were tight and steady as the places of the fallen were taken by those behind. Despite the Cebu's effectiveness, some of the Djukasis were penetrating now.

Renard had just moved up into second wave position behind the leaders, and he didn't have time

to think. A great black-and-gold body suddenly swept up into his view on his left, and he swung his own harpoon projector over and fired without thinking. The missile struck the giant bee, and it went down without a sound.

There were more of them now; they were flying directly into the swarm, now too close for the Djukasis to use their machine guns but close enough for close-quarter combat.

Suddenly the Agitar drew their tasts and energized them. They did not have to spear the enemy, only touch him; that seemed easy to do; everywhere you swung the rods there seemed to be Djukasis.

But not enough Djukasis, not any more.

In past attacks over the previous three days, a new swarm had popped out of that hive at the last minute, and they had been unable to get directly into or on it. Now the situation had changed. On either side of the saddle sat canisters of a highly flammable liquid; now, for the first time, they were able to dump it onto the hive.

They made their passes and dumps; going back up into the still fierce aerial combat, then looped again. More horses, men, and pterodactyls fell from the sky, but ten suicidal defenders fell for every one of the attackers, and, unlike the attackers, they had no more reserves. The leading edge of the Agitar then moved in again, very low this time, so close they could see the impassive faces of the flightless workers peering out at the grim battle from the cells and doorways of the hive.

The Agitar tied thin copper wire to the hilts of their tasts and prepared to throw, being careful that they didn't get tangled as they moved away.

Firing was coming from the hive, but it was intermittent after the fuel dump; the burning smell and feel of the liquid had driven them back under where it had hit, and the stuff now pretty well saturated the top of the hive.

The copper wire unreeled, ten meters, twenty, as the leading second wave was covered by, but not followed in by, its backups. The Agitar were nearing the limits of the wire reel, and, when the mark was reached on the reel, they energized the wire with their hands.

Energy flowed along the wires; electricity followed its natural pathway in this semitech hex. Though only the Agitar would hold a charge here, it was enough.

Where the tasts had stuck in the hive in places that had been wetted down by the flammable liquids, and despite Djukasis efforts to get the tasts out and throw them to the ground, the energy charge struck.

It only took one.

The liquid burst into flame with a roar; a chemical fire that even the oncoming storm would be hard-pressed to slow.

The Makiem on the ground cheered as the blue-white flame and billowing smoke showed success, and they grasped their own weapons and prepared to charge, rain or no.

With sudden explosive fury, the storm hit, turning the field in front of the hive to a low-visibility quagmire in seconds. The Makiem, who liked rain and muddy weather, leaped for all they were worth.

As Renard turned from the hive, amazed at the fact that he and Doma were still untouched as it was, he felt the storm hit. For the first time he started to think, instead of act on instinct. If he just relaxed, he knew that Doma would fly back to the base camp; the horse had an unerring instinct for getting back to where she had started from. Looking around in the driving rain, he was just barely able to make out the Djukasis trying to get back to the hive but being knocked out of the air by the force of the rain. A Cebu almost panicked him, flying across directly in front, but it was on a different errand. The great flying reptiles weren't much better in the rain than the Djukasis, and were going to ground fast.

The water beaded and rolled off Doma's back. Yet there were severe updrafts and downdrafts that the great horse could not avoid, so it was a rocky ride, smoothed only slightly by the horse's apparent ability to see changes in air pressure. When Renard saw the direction Doma was taking, a million doubts assailed him. If he deserted, he would have to fly through the teeth of the storm, perhaps battle isolated back-country Djukasis on his way. And, once in Lata, he'd be a castout, a man who could never go home again.

But he felt little loyalty for the Agitar, although he liked them as individuals. He could not get away from the fact that, behind all of the terrible carnage he had witnessed and had been a part of, there was the grinning, self-satisfied egomania of Antor Trelig.

And Mavra Chang. Somehow, he knew, she had saved him, somehow her unwillingness to be defeated had kept him alive. For what? To be killed in the next battle, in the next hex, in Antor Trelig's cause?

No! his mind shouted to him. Never! He owed her, and, in a different way, he owed Antor Trelig something, too.

So he gently pulled and turned the great green pegasus to the right, far to the right, and headed into the fury about him.

SOUTH ZONE

The Czillian, Vardia, entered Ortega's increasingly cluttered offices, a mass of computer printouts and diagrams clutched in its two tentacles. Ortega was just switching off from an intercom communication and glanced up as the plant-creature entered.

"New data?" he asked, sounding more resigned than happy at the prospect.

Vardia nodded. "We have run the projections through the computers at the center. Things don't look good."

Ortega wasn't surprised. Nothing looked good any more. "What have you got?" he asked glumly.

The Czillian spread out the charts as well as some diagrams. Ortega couldn't read the normal Czillian originals, but the computers at the great university and research center in the plant hex had provided translations in Ulik. He studied them, expression becoming increasingly grim.

"Ship design certainly has changed in the past three hundred years," he commented.

"What did you expect?" the Czillian asked him curtly. "After all, there were periods in the past histories of many races when they went from primitive barbarism to space in less time than that."

Ortega nodded. "But it would help if I could understand more of the design theory," he said wistfully. It didn't really matter, though; the computers could follow it-and if the computers could follow it in Czill, then the computers of, say, Agitar or Lamotien or a half-dozen others could, too.

"They made the sectional cuts in just the right places," Vardia noted. "The pieces were barely large enough for the Zone Gates, but they all fit-and we could hardly stop them by rights anyway."

"Or force, either," he pointed out. "No wars in Zone, eh?" He looked again at the printout collection. "So the power plant is the only thing we couldn't manage here? They're sure now? Wonder why?"

"You know the answer," Vardia responded. "The plant is sealed and works off principles we don't know. We could create a power plant, of course, but almost certainly not with sufficient

Vardia looked at Olborn. "What do you know about the place?" it asked curiously.

The big snake-man shook his head. "Not much. No ambassador I ever knew about. Sealed itself off from the outside world. Anybody who tries to go in never comes out. They're mammals there, air's okay, and my stuff says that they're a semitech hex with light magic capabilities, whatever that means. You gotta watch those magic types. All sons of bitches or fanatics-if there's a difference. Even Zhonzorp goes around them, but I can't imagine the most powerful hex on this planet standing against the kind of combination roaring in there. A magic hex tends to rely on its magic too much for its defense; a good bullet stops a good spell every time when you're outnumbered four to one by now well-seasoned troops."

"So either one has a crack at being first to Gedemondas," the Czillian mused. "And what about them? Anything?"

Ortega shook his head. "Nothing. Very high mountains, cold, and snowy mostly. They live high up. They're big-Dillians have seen them, but only briefly. Big suckers, three meters, all covered in snow-white fur, almost invisible against a snow field. Big four-toed clawed feet. They shun all contact, but if you go in too far, they'll drop an avalanche on your head."

The relief map showed a mild plain at the Alestol-Palim-Gedemondas border, then tremendously high, faulted mountains, four to five thousand meters many of them. Rough, cold country.

"Any idea where in Gedemondas the engine module fell?" Vardia asked the snake-man.

Serge Ortega shook his head. "No, not really, and neither do they. Not on the plains area, though." He hesitated. "Wait a minute! Maybe I do!" He rummaged through a bunch of papers, cursing and fussing. Papers went everywhere, until he finally came across a tattered yellow sheet of lined notepad. "Here it is. The Agitar plotted the mass and shape of the mod from the pieces they already recovered, checked climatological data and such, and came up with the probable location. About sixty to a hundred kilometers inside the northeast border, give or take ten. In the mountains, but still a needle in a smaller haystack."

"How in the world did you get hold of-" the Czillian started, then decided questioning Ortega wasn't worth it. He'd only lie, anyway. "Then there's not only the possibility of a search, but, if they find it, there's a fifty-fifty chance that the Gedemondas will either let them take it out or try to destroy them. That's not a body to be deterred that easily in the latter case."

Ortega nodded. "They're funny people, but we just don't know. That's the problem. We need to know. We need to send somebody in there to try and talk to the Gedemondas, ahead of the armies, if possible. Maybe they'll run away, maybe they'll try to kill them, but we have to try. Warn them ahead of time. Offer to--"

Vardia turned and faced him. "To take the engines off their hands, perhaps?"

Ortega shrugged. "Or, failing that, to try and destroy them."

Vardia would have sighed if it could. Instead, the Czillian asked, "Who do you have in mind for this suicide mission to the frozen wastes? Count me out. I go dormant under two or three degrees centigrade."

He chuckled. "No, you had your fun once. Or one of you did, anyway. No, I don't like what I'm thinking, but it keeps coming up the same answer. There's only one person qualified to inspect the engines, decide if they can be moved, or, failing that, know how to destroy them beyond repairing."

Vardia nodded. "Mavra Chang. But you said she was too valuable to risk!"

"And so she is," Ortega admitted. "It's a calculated risk, I agree. But she's the only one who can do the technical end of the job for us. We'll try and minimize the risk, of course. Send some other people along with her for protection, not expose her to any needless risks."

"From what you've said of her, I doubt that sincerely," the Czillian replied skeptically.

"But, all right. It's come down to this. We have been passive observers, and we'll continue to be passive observers watching the Trelig or Yulin bunch blast off for the satellite unless we do something. I agree action is called for. I only wish we'd done something sooner."

"Sooner, none of us thought either side had a prayer of actually making it," Ortega reminded the plant-creature. "Now we know it's possible. It's now or never."

The Czillian turned. "I'll notify my population and our friends as discreetly as possible. You will assemble the personnel, I assume?"

Ortega smiled. "Of course-subject to Czillian Crisis Center's approval, of course."

"Of course," Vardia echoed, not at all certain it made any difference.

Ortega went back to his maps and was soon talking to himself. Xoda was out; the Yaxa would be there. That left Olborn. Damn! . . .

LATA

He'd taken two days to get to the Lata border, although Doma could have gotten him there in one. The great horse would never let on, but it was almost worn out, and Renard had set down as soon as they'd cleared the storm and he felt far enough away from the war to be safe.

He had no provisions, nor did this land provide any. Doma could eat the leaves of trees and the tops of tall grasses, though, and there was water, so he felt she could survive. Lata was the only idea in his mind; he would wait to eat there. Agitar were omnivores, too; if Mavra Chang could exist there, so could he.

He had a couple of close shaves before he made the border. Some of the hives had left skeleton guard forces, and he was occasionally called upon to fight, but such action was scattered and usually broke off when he turned to avoid combat. There were too few of them to get drawn far from the hives.

Still, he was feeling mentally and physically exhausted, drained. His internal charge was down to a mere pop, and he wondered if a certain amount of stored energy was necessary for his body. Probably; it filled some need in his now alien biochemistry or it wouldn't be there. He stopped several times to run and thereby get a little back into him, and it did help, although he was otherwise so physically washed out that the running, prancing, and turning soon had him winded.

But now here it was-the goal in sight from five hundred meters. He had not yet gotten over the incredible sight of a hex border. It shimmered a little from the effect of the two different atmospheric compositions -not terribly different, but enough, like some odd clear plastic curtain. At the border, the life and terrain, often weather, stopped and was replaced by a dramatically different scene. Only the landforms and water bodies were constant; rivers flowed through without notice, seas of one washed on beaches of another, and foothills like those below continued on unbroken.

Djukasis was a dry hex; the thunderstorm was a rarity this time of year, and yet such sudden and violent storms provided most of the hex's rainfall. The grass was yellowish, the trees tough and spindly.

Now, at the Lata border, there suddenly started a deep-green carpet of rich grass, and tall, thick trees with great green leaf-covered branches reaching up for the sky, broken here and there by pools, meadows, and rolling glens. There was no sign of roads and, in the bright sunlight, no sign of people, either.

He wished he knew what kind of people lived there.

About a thousand meters into the hex, when he was still feeling the effects of a quadrupling of the humidity and a ten-degree temperature rise at least, he found out.

Multicolored energy bursts outlined Doma, who reacted nervously but had no place to go but back.

They're shooting at me! he thought in panic, then realized that the bursts were intended to discourage, not kill. Not yet, anyway.

He took the hint and made a 180-degree turn, crossing back into Djukasis. The moisture-hungry air of the bee's home started to dry his perspiration-soaked upper torso under his combat jacket, which he hadn't yet shed.

He set Doma down as close to the border as possible and jumped off, looking warily just across the line, wondering who or what was looking back at him. He took off his uniform jacket and tossed it away, leaving just the standard military blue briefs. Taking Doma's reins, he cautiously proceeded back to the border, leading the horse on the ground.

This time, only ten or fifteen paces inside the border, he was challenged. The trouble was, it sounded like a lot of angry bells; he couldn't understand a word of it.

He stopped, looking out at the silent forest. The bells stopped, too, waiting. He pointed to himself. "Renard!" he shouted. "Entry!" That second word was different in most languages, though, he realized. It might not be understood here. "Mavra Chang!" he called out. "Mavra Chang!"

That set off more discussion. Finally, the universal rules set themselves in motion. When in doubt, pass the buck.

He put up his hands in what he hoped was a recognizable sign of surrender, hoping they, too, had hands and could understand his meaning.

They did. Suddenly a whole host of them erupted from the trees, armed with nasty-looking energy rifles. As a Djukasis veteran, he also immediately noticed the pretty but obvious stingers.

Pixies! he thought in surprise. Little flying girls. A high-tech hex, though; those rifles looked plenty effective, and whether that antiaircraft fire was automatic or them shooting, they could hit anything they wanted, of that he had no doubt.

They surrounded him, looked wonderingly at Doma, and made unmistakable gestures that he was to move ahead. He saw that they all wore goggles and seemed very uncomfortable. He suspected that they were nocturnal creatures. They led him to a clearing a few thousand meters farther on; one of them made a lot of sign-language gestures that gave no doubt as to their meaning. He was to stay there and make no move, and he would be covered, so no funny business, or else.

That suited him. He was used to waiting now. Doma grazed on the rich new grass, and he stretched out and went to sleep.

Vistaru came into Mavra Chang's ground-level quarters in a hurry.

"Mavra?"

She had been lying there on a specially constructed bed, looking over Well World maps and geographies, mostly children's picture books. You didn't learn a complex language in a few weeks, particularly one established for a vocal system you couldn't imitate.

"Yes, Vistaru?" she responded, weary and bored from doing nothing.

"Mavra, there is one of the creatures involved in the war who came in from the Djukasis border a few minutes ago. We just got a radio report."

The news was mildly interesting, but didn't change her situation at all. "So?"

"He came in on a huge flying horse! You won't believe it! Gigantic, pale green. And, Mavra-he

kept calling for you! Over and over! By name!"

She was on her feet in a moment. "What did this creature look like?"

The Lata shrugged. "An Agitar, they say. Bigger than Lata, smaller than you. All dark blue and fuzzy at the bottom."

She shook her head. "That's a new one on me. What do you think? A trick?"

"If it is, it's misfired," the Lata responded firmly. "Anything funny and he'll never leave Lata alive. They asked whether you'd talk to him."

"If I can," she replied, and walked out.

There was no problem getting her there quickly. Although the Lata flew and hence had no need for roads or aircraft, they did have to move freight and foodstuffs all over. They just diverted a large, crate-laden truck on government authority and much to the driver's disgust. Mavra Chang and three thousand crates of apples sped south to the border in a flatbed dual-rotor helicopter, skimming the treetops. The trip took about three hours, and the sun was into late afternoon when they arrived. With a straight axial tilt, all hexes had equal amounts of daylight, a little over fourteen standard hours each.

The pegasus was really as grand and beautiful as had been described, and its rider was as short, squat, and ugly.

"Cute little devil," Mavra muttered mostly to herself -and that's what the face looked like. An old Traditionist's view of the devil in dark-blue and black hair. The creature had awakened when the helicopter approached, and stood and walked around. The thick body and the terribly thin legs looked almost impossible; he moved as if on tiptoe, and reminded Mavra of a costumed ballet dancer.

Guards armed with energy pistols motioned him to a cleared area and flanked him on all sides. He wondered idly what bigwig had come to see this new intrusion, but then he looked again and there was no mistake.

"Mavra!" he cried, and started to move toward her. The guards were quick, no doubt about it. He stopped cold. He pointed to himself. "Renard, Mavra! Renard!"

She was more than surprised. Although she knew the system of the Well-it had been explained at length to her-this was the first time it really hit her in the face. She chuckled, then turned to Vistaru. "This translator -can I talk to him?"

She nodded. "You have a translator," the Lata reminded her.

"Renard?" she called out. "Is that really you?"

He beamed. "It's me, all right! A little changed, but still me inside! I traded sponge for goat!" he called back.

She laughed. Communication worked fine. He understood her Confederation, the translator took care of the Agitar.

"Are you sure it's really Renard?" one of the border guards asked her. "Somebody you know? A lot of folks have claimed to be a lot of other folks lately."

She nodded, thinking it over. Then she yelled, "Renard! They need proof that you're you. And, to tell the truth, so do I. And there's only one question I can think of that only our side would know, so forgive me." He nodded, and she went on. "Renard, who was the last old-type human being you made love to?"

He frowned, embarrassed by the question even as he saw the logic of it. Only Mavra, he himself, and the person involved would know the answer, and she would have no reason for deception. "Nikki Zinder," he replied.

She nodded. "It's Renard. Not only the answer but the way he made it sound so terrible convinces me. Let him come to me or me to him."

The guards still weren't all that certain. "But he's an Agitar!" one growled. "One of them."

"He's Renard, no matter what," she responded, and walked briskly out to him. The guards kept at the ready, but appeared resigned.

She was taller than he, now-maybe ten centimeters with her boots on, three or four without. He was ugly as sin and smelled like a goat, but she hugged him and kissed him lightly on the forehead, laughing.

"Renard! Let me look at you! They told me this would happen, but somehow I couldn't really believe it!"

He was slightly embarrassed again, from his strange new form and, oddly, because the Agitar part of his brain didn't really react to her as a woman, but as another, alien creature. He began to realize just how much he'd changed.

Mavra turned to Doma, who looked up as she cautiously approached. "He's beautiful!" she breathed. "Can I-touch him? Will he mind?"

"She," Renard corrected. "Her name is Doma. Let her look you over for a moment and then rub the spot between her ears when her head droops. She likes that."

Mavra did as instructed, and found the great pegasus friendly, curious, and responsive.

She walked around, looking at the saddle between the great, now-folded wings and the neck. It was a sophisticated device-altimeter, air-speed and ground-speed indicator, everything.

She turned to him. "You'll have to take me up on her sometime," she said longingly. "I'd love to see her fly. But, tell me everything that's happened, first."

"If you'll get me some food-any fruits or meats will do that you can eat," he replied lightly. "I'm starving to death!"

They sat there in the glen until the sun was down and the pixie people were out in force. He told her of waking up in Agitar, of Trelig, of being drafted, and of the war and his experiences. She sympathized, while secretly wishing to be in the thick of what he had escaped from, and told him a simplified version of how they'd been hypnotized to minimize the sponge effects, of their capture by the Teliagin, their Latan rescue, and how they'd gotten to Zone.

"What about Nikki?" he asked. "Do you know where she got to? I haven't really stopped thinking about her. She's so young and so nai've-tough to be out cold on this world. I know."

Mavra looked at her shadow, Vistaru, who'd joined them. Vistaru shook her head. "Nothing on either Zinder. That's curious. It's not impossible to remain undetected here, of course, but doing so is rare. The old politicians have somebody in their pocket in half the South." She spoke in Lata, and Mavra translated. "So we might lose track of one-but both? It's very strange. We would like to know where they are."

"It's as if the Well opened and swallowed them up."

Several days passed, happy ones for Renard, diverting ones for Mavra, whose boredom was at least slightly relieved by the man. He taught her to fly Doma; it was easy for her, she found, although some of the maneuvers required more muscle power than she could easily manage. She decided that she would never be mistress of that great horse, but it was still a great feeling to fly.

And then the Southern alliance reached Olborn. It was ahead of schedule by several days; Zhonzorp, whose people the books said looked like crocodiles standing erect and who wore turbans, cloaks, and all sorts of strangely exotic stuff, had been invaluable. A high-tech hex, it gained

the Sea of Storms. As you can see, the best route would be over Tuliga and Galidon to Palim, which has to be crossed sooner or later anyway. However, the Galidon are fierce carnivores and the atmosphere above the waters is not conducive to flying, so that's out. That means crossing Tuliga to this point here, landing in Olborn. The Tuliga are rather nasty giant sea slugs, but they shouldn't bother you if you don't bother them."

"Doma's good for about four hundred kilometers if pushed," Renard said, "but that's a good deal farther."

"It is," the ambassador agreed. "There are, however, a few small islands along the way, so you can set down to rest. On no account must you go into the water! It is also brackish, not good for drinking, but the islands are volcanic and should have small crater lakes. Pick your camp spot well."

"Anything living on the islands we should know about?" Mavra asked cautiously.

The ambassador shook his head. "Nothing but birds, perhaps a few crustaceans of no importance. No, the problem will be when you reach land again- with the Porigol supporting the Yaxa, there is simply no way around Olborn."

"But this Olborn-isn't it the next target of the Makiem, Cebu, and Agitar?" Renard asked worriedly. "Won't they be likely to confuse us with their enemy?"

"Truthfully, we haven't the slightest idea," the ambassador admitted. "They are in many ways as unknown as the Gedemondas. Catlike creatures, I understand, with semitech capabilities and, it says in the references, limited magic, although I don't quite know what that means. Even so, you need only cross it at the top. The attack from Zhonzorp to the extreme south might actually help you by drawing off whatever fighters and major power the Olbornians have."

"We hope," sighed the worried Renard. "Then what?"

"By air over Palim, as close to the border as you can in order to avoid as much as possible meeting the Yaxa alliance that might well be marching through at about the same time. Don't cut south into Alestol, though, whatever you have to do! They are fast-moving plants that can direct poisonous gases that have effects that are sometimes fatal and always bad. They are carnivores who could digest any of you. Leave them to the Makiem and their cohorts to deal with. You must get to Gedemondas ahead of the others at all costs! Our only hopes rest with you. Can you do it?"

Mavra Chang wanted action so badly she could taste it. "With a little luck, and occasional help, I've never failed a commission yet," she said confidently. "This is the sort of mission I've been waiting for!"

The ambassador looked at her warily. "This is not the Com," he reminded her. "The rules change quickly here."

THE TULIGA-GALIDON-OLBORN TRIANGLE, DUSK

Their crossing, while uneventful, took three precious days. They flew over choppy seas in Tuliga, and the wind was against them most of the way. On the few daylight hours of relative calm they were able to spot coral reefs teeming with great numbers of multicolored fish, and, then and there, shadowy black bulks of great size.

They kept at a safe altitude, not wanting to risk any chance that one of those dark shapes might somehow rise out of the water and bring them down. It was more peaceful when they reached the Galidon border, but the atmosphere looked a little strange over there, and they headed in toward the point of land that marked one of Olborn's six points on the Tuligan side.

Olborn itself seemed a welcome relief-solid-looking, mostly coastal plain, a little chilly, but they had brought protective clothing with them. Nothing in the place looked grim, foreboding, or threatening.

They waited until darkness fell before making a landfall on the beach. They had decided to camp there, within easy reach of a quick getaway and with the great Doma as concealed as she could be.

No roads had led down to the coast, they'd been certain of that. With watery neighbors like the Galidon, they didn't find this the least bit unusual.

It was a clear night; above, the spectacular sky of the Well World was displayed in all its glory, and, off to the north, a silvery disk covered part of the horizon.

It was the first time they had been in the right position with the right weather at the right moment to see New Pompeii. They stared at it in silence, thinking.

"So close, so damned close," Mavra Chang whispered under her breath. It looked like you could reach out and touch it. She thought of the poor people who had almost certainly died there by now, and of the kindly, near-human computer, Obie, who had helped her escape. She wanted to get back to that place, and she swore to herself that she would, someday.

They turned in. Although the Lata were nocturnal, the trip had been a long and tiring one, the daytime travel taking more out of them, and they, too, slept. A watch was established, of course.

Mavra had second watch; the Lata would take the later ones, when they'd be at their peak. She sat there, looking out at the slightly rough sea, hearing the roar of the surf, and watching the skies.

They were glorious skies, she thought. Her element, the place to which she'd been born, the place for which she's done everything, even sold herself, to attain. She looked at the others sleeping. The Lata were perfect here. Flying on those tiny wings would be fun, and there were no political or sexual pressures in their land to shape what happened. Even being short didn't matter; they all looked alike. But their world was 355 kilometers on each of its six sides. Such a minute place, a stiflingly small area when you looked at those skies.

Renard, too, was better off here. The Well World was certainly bigger than New Pompeii, and more stimulating than new Muscovy. He was a walking dead man in the old life; here he had some power, a future, and, if things worked out, could possibly rise high in Agitar if they lost the war. From what he'd said of the people's sentiments, a defeat would bring down the government, and one who helped end the war rather than press it would be more hero than, as he was now, traitor.

But not Mavra Chang. The Well World was an adventure, a challenge, but it was not her element. To go through the Well someday and come out something else-it wouldn't matter. The Well didn't change you inside, only physiologically. She would still want the stars.

Her reflections were broken by subtle sounds not far off. She wasn't sure she heard anything for a short time, and she listened intently as her ears strained for them. She had just decided that she was imagining things, when she heard the noise again, off to the northwest, there, not very far-and closer.

She considered waking the others, but then thought better of it. The sounds had stopped. Still, she decided, a little investigation might be in order. A yell from her would rouse the others in a hurry anyway, and there was no use waking them for nothing.

Silently, softly, she crept toward where she'd last heard the sounds. There was a thin clump of trees near a marshland river mouth just up from the sounds; she decided that whatever made them had to be there. Slowly, carefully, she moved into the thin line of trees.

She heard a sound again to her right, and headed for it. Crouching behind a bush, she peered out.

There was a strange, large bird there. Its body was something like a peacock's, its head a round ball, out of which came a beak that looked almost like a tiny air horn. Its eyes were round and yellow, reflecting the starlight. It was nocturnal, then. She breathed a sigh of relief, and

the bird must have heard her. It turned and said, rather loudly and a little rudely, "Bwock wok!"

"Bwock wok, yourself," Mavra whispered, and turned to go back to the nearby camp.

The trees exploded. Large bodies dropped all around her, one on top of her. "Renard!" she screamed. "Vistaru!" But that was all she had time for. Something seemed to cover her head, blotting out all consciousness.

Doma started, and all three of the others snapped awake at the two cut-short screams.

Renard saw them as the Lata took off; large shapes rushing them from the nearby trees. He almost made it to Doma, when one of them, much taller and furrrier than he and with glowing yellow-black eyes, got a hand on him.

That was a mistake.

There was a crackle, the Olbornian screamed, and there was the odor of burning hair and flesh. Another one was trying for Doma's reins, but the horse backed away as Renard leaped aboard. The Olbornian snarled and turned to reach out for Renard.

The Agitar got the vision of a great black cat's face, with terribly luminous slit cat's eyes, and he touched a hairy, clawed hand with three fingers and a thumb.

Which sent the Olbornian to cat heaven.

Doma didn't need any cuing. Knowing its rider was aboard, the great winged horse thundered down the beach, knocking over black shapes not lucky enough to get out of the way, and it was airborne.

The Lata, whose stingers had helped clear the way, flew to him.

"We have to find Mavra!" Renard screamed. "They have her!"

"Stay in this area!" Hosuru shouted. "We don't know what they have and we can't afford to lose Doma! We'll go after her, and if we can't free her one of us will stay with her while the other comes back for you!"

It wasn't what he wanted to do, but he had no choice. Neither Doma nor he had exceptional night vision, and if the Lata lit up they'd all make perfect targets.

The two Lata, however, saw best in the dark. Just beyond the river there was a coach of some sort; a finely wrought piece of woodwork moving on great wooden wagon wheels pulled by a team of eight tiny burrolike animals. Four Olbornians, armed with projectile pistols, stood on running boards around it; two more drove it, one controlling the little mules and the other holding a sleek, effective-looking rifle. The doors and windows to the coach were sealed with hinged wooden panels. From the way the driver cracked the whip on the poor little animals, they knew what the coach's cargo had to be.

"We can't do anything but follow the damned thing," Vistaru swore. "Renard can take care of himself."

That was more than heartfelt sentiments. In all his time in Lata, he'd not discharged. They knew he carried a lot of static electricity, but until the brief fight they'd not realized how much or how lethal.

The coach beat down the grass until it reached a smooth, tar-paved road, and sped along it to the east. It was not terribly fast, and the Lata had no trouble keeping just behind and above it, out of sight.

"We could sting them to death," Vistaru said wistfully.

"How much you got left?" Hosuru snapped. "I used mine three times. I'm nearly dry."

The odds weren't that good.

They studied the Olbornians and their coach. The creatures were about 180 centimeters high; they were all completely covered in black fur, but they also wore some sort of clothing, baggy dark trousers of some sort and sleeveless shirts with a light border and woven insignia in the center. They had long, black, apparently functionless tails, and sleek cat's bodies, but their arms and legs were muscular, and they obviously walked upright on two legs naturally.

The little mules were something else. They looked somehow sad, pathetic, and wrong. Their hind legs were taller by perhaps twenty percent than their forelegs; they were a little over a meter high, and they had long necks curving upward so they looked ahead instead of down. Their long ears were large in proportion to their heads, and they had no tails. They were covered in a soft, uniform gray fur.

They were being badly pushed and mercilessly whipped; they were certainly too small and too few for the weight they were being asked to pull, but they managed it, their short, trotting-horse gait getting the wagon there, helped somewhat by the smoothness of the road.

Finally, they turned in at a magnificent estate—a truly grand-looking palace whose horseshoe-shaped driveway was lit by torches; more torches flanked the doors, and there were rifle-armed guards dressed in the same way as those on the coach. The coach pulled to a halt and the Olbornians jumped off efficiently. A door facing the estate was opened, and two more of the creatures emerged, then turned and carefully removed a large black object from the coach.

It was Mavra Chang, and she looked stiff as a board.

"Is she dead?" Hosuru worried.

Vistaru shook her head. "No, they're being too careful for that. Drugged, probably."

"Now what?" the other Lata asked.

Vistaru thought a moment. "First, go back, tell Renard what happened, where we are—describe the place. Then help him find some place to sit down for a while. I'll keep watch here, try to find where in this palace they've put her. Tomorrow, when Renard's at his peak, we'll come get her no matter what."

Mavra Chang regained consciousness slowly, and it took some time for her to get her bearings. She looked around, finding she couldn't move her head, only her eyes. She couldn't move anything.

She was standing up, propped slightly against a wall. She thought that her hands and feet were securely tied, but she couldn't be sure.

The place was a stable. It stank of animal excrement and rotted straw, and on the walls were odd-shaped harnesses.

She strained to look around, but whatever they had drugged her with held her securely. She did see one of the animals, though, briefly. A queer-looking thing. No, that wasn't right, everything on this cockeyed world was queer-looking, she told herself. But because the creature looked so much like draft animals that she'd known back in the human worlds, "queer-looking" was the only way to describe it.

They looked for all the world like miniature mules. Black nose, big, squared-off snout, but with jackass-type ears that seemed too large for that head. A very long neck, almost too long, attached to a small body supported at an angle, the slender front legs shorter than the rear ones, which had the characteristic large upper calf and almost incredibly thin lower.

And sad, large brown eyes.

They also bore scars; some from whips, some from other unknown sources.

Three Olbornians entered the room, two in the black-and-gold livery, the third wearing some sort of crown and a long gold chain from which was suspended a hexagonal pendant. His own livery was scarlet, with baggy golden trousers. Somebody important. He was also old—he walked slowly, and there were tinges of gray in his black fur.

He walked into the doorway, almost running into the little minimule. He snarled and swatted it cruelly, claws extended. The thing gave no sound, but there was obvious pain and Mavra could see a set of bleeding scratches. It jumped and moved away.

These were a cruel, callous people.

The old one looked at her. "So, spy! Awake, eh? Good!" He turned to the others. "See to it. We'd best be off. Her companions may try some sort of rescue, so we have to move fast."

Mavra felt relief at these words; the other three had escaped! And, somehow, they would get her out of there, she felt sure. She was necessary to them.

She felt like a puppet with lead wires in it so it could be bent in any shape and would stay there. They put her on top one of the little mules, in a basic saddle. The big man led it down a back path from the rear of the house, into a dark grove of trees. The two guards held her firmly on, but she was powerless to do anything anyway.

Overhead, Vistaru almost missed the departure. There was just a glimpse of the woman and her three catlike captors going out the back and heading into the woods. She followed and tried to guess ahead.

About two thousand meters down, the woods parted for a clearing where there was a large stone structure seemingly carved out of the small hillside. Two other guards were there, having just lit torches on either side of a hexagonal entranceway. Not a Zone Gate, she decided. That stuff had been built by somebody here.

She strained to think what the place reminded her of, and, all at once, she had it. An ancient temple. An altar. Sacrifice?

She sped directly back to Renard and Hosuru. There was no time to lose.

They lifted her off when they came to the hexagonal opening and carried her gently inside. There was a chamber there, an enlargement of a natural cave of limestone or something similar. Torches had been lit along the fairly broad passageway, which opened quickly into the main chamber.

It was a temple, no question about it. There was an area for supplicants to stand, a rail, and then tables set on either side of a large yellow stone that seemed to be protruding out of the natural rock in back. It was multifaceted; millions of them, from all evidence, reflecting the torchlight as if it had a strange, eerie life of its own. Mounted on the both walls, in solid gold, were outlines of the hexagon symbol.

The high priest, for by now it was evident what he was, preceded them, lighting small candles in ceremonial holders, six per holder. Then he went behind the rail. Satisfied all was in readiness, he nodded to the guards to bring her forward. They did, placing her facing the strange yellow stone.

"Undress it," the priest snapped, and the guards removed her black cloth shirt, black pants, and boots. It was suddenly chilly.

She was nude.

The guards tossed the clothing in a heap outside the altar rail. She longed to be able to use some of the things in those boots or the belt, or even to try the nail venom on them. But she was held motionless by something she could not control.

The priest moved toward her, motioning for them to turn her a little bit toward him. His yellow cat's eyes glowed weirdly in the torchlight.

"Spy," he said, his voice crisp, businesslike, and without a trace of mercy or compassion in it, "you have been judged guilty by the High Priestly Council of the Blessed Well," he intoned, bowing his head slightly when pronouncing the last two words. He made a horizontal motion with his right hand, and she felt control return to her head. She moistened her lips, but knew she could talk.

"I didn't even have a trial and you know it!" she protested hoarsely. "I haven't had a chance to say anything!"

"I did not say you were tried," the priest pointed out, "only that you were judged. There are no mitigating factors. Heathen knock on our door to the north, worse heathen wantonly and horribly kill tens of thousands of the Chosen of the Well to the south. Now, you come. You are not of the Olborn, certainly. Nor are you here by invitation or permission of the High Priestly Council of the Blessed Well." Again the slight nod. "A spy you are, and so I ask you, is there any way for you to conclusively prove your innocence?"

What a loaded question! she thought. Prove you didn't smile. Prove you didn't kill your mother whom the court never knew or heard of. "You know no one can prove they aren't something," she retorted.

He nodded. "Of course. But there is a final arbiter of justice."

"You're going to kill me," she said more than asked.

The priest looked genuinely shocked. Mavra wondered why she'd always liked cats in the past.

"Of course we do not kill, except in self-defense. All life is from the Blessed Well, and cannot be taken lightly. As you took no other life, unlike your companions, we could not take yours."

Both parts of that observation cheered her a little. Alive meant hope, and the news that the others had sent some of these religious fanatics to an early grave was just as satisfying.

"The Well, in Its infinite wisdom and mercy," the priest explained, as if in a liturgy, "established among the Olbornians a more equitable means of final judgment-final, absolute, and conclusive. The stone that is before you is one of six, located near the six corners of Olborn. It is proof of the favored status of the Olbornians with the Blessed Well. Its power comes from the Well Itself. What it does has never been undone."

This tack started unnerving her again. She thought of Renard, changed into a different creature. What the hell did this thing do?

"The Well, in Its infinite, wisdom," continued the priest, "saw that Its Chosen People were in a harsh land, rich but without beasts of burden to help Its Chosen People till the good soil, pull its burdens, turn its water wheels. Thus we have the Sacred Stones. When a transgressor, whether alien or Olbornian, is accused, he is brought before one of the High Priests of the Blessed Well, and thence in his company to the Sacred Stone. Should you be innocent, then nothing will happen to you. You will be free to go on your way, unmolested, protected by the Seal of the Blessed Well. But, should you be guilty, it will mete out the most wonderful of justices." He paused. "You saw the detik upon which you were carried here?"

She thought a moment. The little mules with the big ears and sad eyes. "Yes," she replied, curious and apprehensive. Where the hell were the Lata and Renard?

"They are sexless, joyless. Totally placid, they are incapable of harming anything, and are forced to obey our commands. Should you be guilty, you will turn to a detik, a beast of the fields, condemned to serve the Olbornians in silent labor the rest of your life."

She was appalled, unbelieving. "You mean the mules-all of them-were once people?"

The priest nodded. "It is so." He turned to the guards. "Hold her arms tight," he cautioned. Then he turned back to Mavra. She felt strong hands holding her arms just behind the wrist. The priest waved his arms again, and she felt movement return to her whole body. As she suspected, her legs were tied.

"Touch her hands to the Sacret Stone!" the priest commanded, his voice echoing through the damp cavern. The two powerful arms ignored her twisting and pushed her unwilling hands to the faceted yellow orb.

Something like a strong, burning electric shock went through her arms to her shoulders. The effect was so strong and so painful that she screamed and actually pulled away from the wretched thing despite the strength of her two captors.

"That was Mavra!" Vistaru yelled. "Come on! Hurry!" she called to Hosuru and Renard, who rushed ahead. Neither cared any more if there was a whole army ahead; they were going in now.

Inside the chamber, the priest seemed to smile and intoned, "Again!" This time the terrible shock and pain went from her hips to her toes, and, strangely, wound up in her ears. Again she screamed and fought to pull away.

"Again!" the priest commanded, but at that moment the onrushing Lata and Agitar charged, Renard yelling bloodcurdling screams that echoed terrifyingly off the cavern walls.

The priest turned, looking stunned and surprised. Like most fanatics, the concept that anybody would invade his holiest of places had simply never occurred to him, and he couldn't handle it. He stood there petrified. Not the two guards. They dropped Mavra and whirled. They had no pistols, which was fortunate, but they bore ceremonial steel swords, which they drew.

Keeping all their attention on the guards and priest, Renard and Vistaru both yelled, "Run, Mavra! Get out of here! We'll handle this!"

The first guard took advantage of this distraction to advance on Renard, sword poised, saberlike, in front of him.

Renard smiled grimly, and moved his tast out in a similar manner, as if preparing to duel. The guard looked at the thin, snaky cooper-clad whip and chuckled. He moved with his sword, and Renard brought the tast up, touching the sword.

Sparks flew, and the guard screamed and dropped to the floor of the cavern, the point where his hand gripped the hilt actually smoking slightly.

Vistaru, who still had some venom left, swooped at the other one, suddenly turning on her internal light to catch the foe off-guard. He was too good for that, and he stabbed in with his sword.

And missed.

She did an aerial backflip and plunged her stinger into his stomach, then pushed off him. The guard yowled, then seemed to stiffen, as he dropped to the floor, limp, lying eyes wide-open and unseeing.

Marva felt the guards release their grip on her and felt the cold stone as they dropped her. Her whole body was tingling and her mind wouldn't clear, but she had enough sense to hear Renard's shout to run, and take that advice. A naked, stunned Mavra Chang wasn't going to be much good in a fight.

She was dizzy, and couldn't seem to get up, so she took off on all fours. Her head seemed heavy; she couldn't lift it, but she could see enough to head for the exit and did so, almost knocking over the guard just now meeting his end from Renard's tast. She wanted to crawl fast, but she couldn't lift her head up far enough; a nerve in the back of it was killing her, and her hair was hanging down in front, further obscuring her vision. But she made the steps and scampered out, passing the now-dead guards slumped under their still burning torches. Out ahead,

she could see, was blackness, and that was where she wanted to be.

She crawled into the bushes before she stopped, chest heaving, and tried to clear her head. She looked back at the entrance, but she couldn't get her head up quite far enough, or hold it even far enough to see out of the tops of her eyes without that nerve pinching and hurting.

With the return of her wind came a clearer head. She was still on all fours. Why, she began to wonder. It was dark, but Obie had given her night vision, and she put her head chin against chest, essentially upside down, and looked back at herself. Her hair fell straight down.

Her thin, lithe body was unchanged, her two small breasts hanging down and tugging slightly as a result of being dead weight.

My arms! she suddenly thought in panic. What did they do?

She also felt two long bending sensations with her head that way.

She no longer had arms. She now had forelegs- thin and with a knee joint that bent only one way, locking the other way. It led down to a perfectly formed, fairly thick hoof of some whitish-gray substance like fingernails. There was no hair; the legs were still the same flesh color as the rest of her, the skin still looked human. But they were the legs of the little mule.

Looking farther back, she saw what she expected to see, and sighed. Now she understood why she couldn't get off all fours, and why she couldn't seem to get her head up properly. The forelegs were a good twenty percent shorter than the hind legs. In the mule, the long neck compensated; a human head and neck wasn't designed to go that far.

Renard and the two Lata came out of the cave. She heard them more than saw them, and, after a moment's hesitation, called to them. They were there in a flash.

"Mavra, you ought to have seen that old boy's face when-" Renard started cheerfully, when she walked out of the brush into the torchlight. They all three gasped, mouths agape. For the first time they could see and know what the Olbornians had done to Mavra Chang.

First, take the arms and legs off a woman's torso. Then turn it face down, the hips about a meter high, the shoulders about eighty centimeters. Now put a perfectly proportioned pair of mule's hind legs on the hips, so that the base of the body kind of melds into it. Now put two mule's legs on the shoulders, long enough to reach the ground but shorter because of the angle of the body. But don't add an animal's hair or skin-keep it all human, perfectly matched to the torso, except for hard, nail-like hooves on all four feet, and, as a final touch, remove the human ears from her head and replace them with large, almost meter-long jackass ears, still out of the same human skin material. Then continue the woman's hair down across the back a bit into a thicker mane of the same color hair, extending along the spine to about where the breasts hung down on the underside. And, since the torso hasn't been otherwise altered, remember to put Mavra's horse's tail growing out of the waist at the base of the spinal column, above the hips, actually starting slightly in front of the hind legs, and drape it crudely over the rectum.

The others felt tears of pity rise within them. "Oh, my god!" was all Renard could say, and he felt bad about it as soon as it was out.

She shifted slightly, then turned her head to one side, almost far enough to look directly at him. Her hair hung down well below her face, crazily. Her voice was the same; even, level, and rich, but her eyes, when she turned her head to one side to look at them, said something else was inside her.

"I know," she told them. "I figured it out. Those little mules they have-they make them with that stone in there, from people. I touched it twice, then got away when you arrived. Tell me-is anything else changed?"

Choking back tears, Renard sat beside her and gently described her to herself, including the ears and misplaced tail.

The odd thing was, they all thought, she looked strange and exotic, to Renard almost erotic, a

curious and not unattractive little creature that engendered affection with the pity. But it was still an impractical, misdesigned creature, a one-of-a-kind on a world with 1560 races.

"Maybe I should go back in and complete the process," she suggested, hoping the hoarseness and thickness in her speech would not betray how she really felt.

"I wouldn't," Vistaru said softly, sympathetically. Mavra was already beginning to hate that tone. "You saw how they treated those mules? The thing does something to the mind, too. You'd be an animal, as good as dead."

Renard had a sudden thought. "Look!" he said excitedly. "It isn't forever!"

"The priest said it was irreversible," Mavra responded. "He said it so joyfully I believed him."

"No! No!" the Agitar protested. "You haven't been through the Well Gate yet!"

"The priest said the stone's power was from the Well," she retorted.

"That's true," Vistaru put in, "but so is everything else on the Well World. Why that stone is there and why it does what it does we'll probably never know- it's a substitute for something they would have to handle on their own planet, that's all. Like the magic hexes here, which really mean they can tap a limited part of the Well to compensate for something in their designed homes. You still haven't been classified and added to the Well's input, so whatever changes the stone made won't affect that."

Mavra felt renewed hope. "Not forever," she almost breathed, and seemed to relax. Suddenly she was upset that she'd let something show through the armor, and she took a deep breath.

"Not forever," Renard agreed. "Look, want to head for a Zone Gate now? Not Olborn's certainly, but we can get in somewhere, I'm sure. We can run you through like you ran me through."

Mavra shook her head violently. "No, no, not yet. Later, yes. As soon as possible. But the surrounding hexes are in the war. This hex is in the war. That's for normal times. We have to get to Gedemondas."

"I can do that!" Vistaru protested.

Mavra shook her head again. "No, you can't. You won't know what the engine module looks like, nor how it's destroyed. Besides, I have never ever backed out on a commission yet once I've accepted it. They wanted me along and I said yes. After-a Zone Gate -maybe in Gedemondas, if they'll talk to us at all, or in Dillia next door."

"Be reasonable, Mavra!" Renard protested. "Look at you! You can't see three meters ahead of you. You can't feed yourself, you're stark naked with no protection against the elements, in the middle of territory whose natives would take you back to the stone and finish the job in an instant." He got up, looked down on her, and gently moved the horse's tail aside. "You're even going to have bathroom trouble. Your vagina's where your ass should be, and the ass is farther up. The human anatomy is designed for sitting or squatting. Those legs are not designed for your body. You can't go on!"

She tried to look at him squarely, failed. It hurt too much. "I'm going," she maintained stubbornly. "With you if you'll have me. Without you if not. If you want, you can be my guide and aide when I have to see far or eat, and clean me off when I shit. If not, I'll go anyway, and I'll make it. When you were sucking your thumb on sponge, and I didn't know where I was, I didn't let you go, and I didn't quit. This won't stop me, either."

"She's right, you know," Hosuru said quietly. "At least, about completing the mission first. The whole world is at stake in Gedemondas. She's needed there. If we can get her there, it's our duty to try."

"Okay," Vistaru said dubiously, trying to see the flaw in the other Lata's logic. "If you're going to be stubborn, we'll all go. But I think a day or two in that new condition may cure you

of this bravado. If it does, don't feel ashamed, weak, or a failure to ask us to get you to a Zone Gate. / wouldn't."

Mavra chuckled mirthlessly. "Shame and weakness don't scare me, but I die when I'm a failure to myself." She shifted again. "Did anybody get my clothes? I might still manage some of them, with Renard's soldier's kit. And we ought to get out of here. Sooner or later somebody's going to notice the high priest didn't come back and raise a hue and cry. We'd best be well away."

Renard threw up his hands. "I have your clothes. We'll see, later. Now, let's move! This way!" There was resignation and a total lack of understanding hi his voice.

He wouldn't understand, Mavra thought. None of them would.

Apparently the shock of the slayings was too much for the Olbornians. There was no pursuit that they ever knew about.

Mavra found that she could trot, like the little mules. Left legs out, push, right legs out, push, and again, faster and faster. She had no feeling at all in the hoofs, which helped, but all of the exposed skin area was just like normal exposed skin area. The Lata helped, flying alongside or just hi front, telling her what was ahead so she didn't run into trees or hurt her neck, and could make some speed.

Morning had them some distance away. Renard mounted Doma, whom he'd been leading, and they scouted the terrain. It was clear that things were not going to be as difficult as they feared from the Olbornian score.

For the "Well's Chosen Ones," they were quite obviously getting the hell beat out of them. They had run afoul of a coast watch set around the Sacred Stones areas; it had been sheer bad luck to pick that spot to camp. The rest of the country was wide open, with the telltale signs of a war going badly all over: military carts drawn by teams of mules hauling supplies and large cannon and mortars south; a steady stream of aimless refugees north.

They stuck to open country, which was mostly deserted now, everyone down south into the fight or guarding the Sacred Stones and Zone Gate. They were able to relax and straighten out their situation.

Because of the precariousness of the camp, Doma's packs had never been unloaded, so they still had their supplies. They ate first; to Mavra, it was a humiliating type of experience she would have to get used to. They'd started to spoon-feed her, but she'd resisted that. They opened a tin of meat which Renard warmed, then broke up some small fruit, and put it in a wooden bowl. By standing on her hind legs and kneeling on her forelegs, she could eat, like a dog or cat. It was hard; the thin legs were even thinner at the ankles, and the legs moved forward, not back, and the damned bowl kept moving, but she managed it and the food tasted good. Water she drank by two methods: lapping, like an animal, and sticking her face in the pan and drinking the top half down.

But it worked, and that was enough for her.

Vistaru tied her hair up between and in back of her enormous ears with an elastic band, which kept it out of her face and food. She could even see level in front of her, by standing on her forelegs while kneeling on the hind ones. That position, too, was uncomfortable, but she didn't mind. It gave her neck some relief, and allowed her to see.

The clothing was more of a problem, though she'd need it. It was slightly chilly in Olborn, and it would be frigid in the upper reaches of Gedemondas.

They cut the sleeves off her shirt and managed to get it on. The pants were a bigger problem, and they didn't quite reach all the way, but Vistaru buckled the wide belt around her bare midsection and that helped. It looked wrong and stupid, and felt wrong, too, and the pants kept slipping, but it was something and it felt better. The long coat tailored for Gedemondas would possibly do what was needed, covering that impossible tail, they hoped. Some cut-off gloves might

help protect the exposed skin in Gedemondas snow. Maybe.

Oddly, Mavra felt better now. Obstacles were to be surmounted; that was part of the joy of it all. They noticed a pickup in her spirits they couldn't comprehend.

Sleeping was the worst compromise; the animal's legs were designed for sleeping standing up, but the human torso was not, and sleeping on her stomach was no longer possible. She managed lying on her side.

In the meantime, the war was going from bad to worse for those of Olborn. Occasionally they'd meet some frightened refugees, not looking as fierce or confident as those back in the priest's lair. Their world was coming apart, and with it their world-view and their notions of their place in it. No longer sure of anything, they were somehow sad and pathetic. People they ran into kept trying to surrender to them.

Roving military patrols caused worse problems; most were composed of deserters with the social restraint imposed on them by their life's conditioning and faith in their favored status with the Well all gone; they brutalized the refugees, they tried brutalizing the alien party, but renewed Lata venom and Renard's highly charged personality soon dealt effectively with them.

Mavra also found it interesting that no one gave her a second glance. To these insular people, she was just one more weird alien creature.

But progress was slow, and they turned their attention to trying to find some way to get Mavra and Renard on Doma. The problem was the great wings, which needed to be unimpeded, and which came down most of the length of the great animal's body.

Finally, experimentation achieved a compromise that Doma and practicality could accept. Nonessential supplies were jettisoned, and the Lata took as much as they could in their pouches. The weight would slow them, but Doma would also be slowed and impeded. With the instruments tossed out-Renard insisted he never used them anyway-she could sit, legs astraddle, on the lower neck of the pegasus, while he sat just behind, body pressed into hers. Straps from some of the excess saddlebags would hold her, and Doma, while uncomfortable with the extra weight on her neck, managed. The only problem was that it took all three of the others and some cooperation and kneeling from Doma to get her up there in the first place.

Finally, though, they could fly, and the distance sped by. They ducked south of the hex corner, avoiding any more priestly fanatics, and crossed barely into Palim.

The inhabitants of the hex eyed them nervously, but did not interfere or challenge them. The Palim resembled nothing so much as giant long-haired elephants. Their form was deceptive, though; they were a high-technology people, with carefully managed groves of food trees and grain, and a criss-cross of a large electric rail system and odd, gumdrop-shaped city buildings in clusters linked by ramps. They stayed clear; the Palim seemed too unconcerned by the nearby violence. It indicated that they had elected to sit out the war, and that meant the Yaxa-Lamotien-Dasheen alliance was probably making good use of that rail system in the east.

Even slowed, they made the border of Gedemondas in under two days. There was no doubt where they were; the great mountains of the frigid hex were visible from the flat plain, like some intrusive wall, a great distance before they reached it. With a few hours to scout around by air, they found the relatively small plains area that was in Gedemondas itself. It was the logical point for the two advancing armies to head for, and it was empty of all but some minor wildlife when they arrived.

They were first, but by how much?

They studied the maps. It was obvious that the Makiem would airlift over Alestol, probably to near the point where they now were. The Yaxa would move from Palim at the rail terminus, then about thirty kilometers overland to the northern edge of the plain. Renard wondered idly if there would be room for both forces.

"There will be quite a battle," Mavra predicted grimly. "If one gets here first the other will have to dislodge them if it can. If they get here at the same time, the clash will just be more

immediate, with this a no man's land. Either way, this nice little plain is going to be littered with the dead and dying before long."

"According to the hex map, here, there's a little shelter over near that cleft in the rocks," Vistaru noted. "That's where we're supposed to meet our guide, if anyone's still there."

Mavra tried to look to where the Lata pointed, but her head wouldn't come up enough. Two or three meters, that was the limit. She swore in frustration, but there was determination on her face as well.

It was about fifteen degrees centigrade on the plain, which was comfortable, but that wouldn't last long, either. The air cooled almost two degrees for every three hundred meters in altitude, and some of those passes were over three thousand meters high.

They walked leisurely to the shelter, and almost missed it. It was a low cabin of old stone and wood set back against the rocks, so old and weatherbeaten that it almost looked a part of the natural formations. It looked deserted, and they approached cautiously, uncertain of what surprises might be around for them.

Suddenly the big door, almost as high as the shack itself, creaked open, and a creature came out.

It looked like a human woman, almost. Long hair tied back in a sort of ponytail, an attractive, oval face and long slender arms. But she had little pointed ears, and from the waist down, below her light jacket, she had the body of a white-and-black spotted horse.

A centaur, the classicist Renard thought, no longer surprised. Meeting such a creature was no longer strange; in fact, it was almost to be expected.

The woman smiled when she saw them, and waved. "Hello!" she called, in a pleasant soprano. "Come on up! I'd almost given you up!"

Vistaru approached. "You are the Dillian guide?" she said, almost unbelievably. The Dillian was no more than a girl, perhaps in her mid-teens.

The centaur nodded. "I'm Tael. Come on in and I'll start a small fire."

They entered; Tael gave the strange-looking Mavra an odd look, but said nothing. Doma waited outside, placidly munching grass.

The place was built for Dillians, certainly--there were stall-like compartments for four of them, a lot of straw on the floor, and, up on brick blocks a small wood-burning stove and scuttle filled with chopped wood. Tael threw a couple of pieces in the stove and lit a small piece of paper with a very long safety match, throwing it into the cast-iron belly of the stove.

Dillians never sat; their bodies couldn't stand the weight. So everybody else sat on the straw, Mavra reclining on her side. There was plenty of room.

After some small talk, Renard voiced what they all were thinking.

"Ah, excuse me, Tael, but-aren't you a little young for all this?" he tried, as diplomatically as possible.

The woman didn't take it badly. "Well, I admit I'm only fifteen, but I was born in the uplake mountain country of Dillia; my family has hunted and trapped on both sides of the border for a long time. I know every trail and pathway between here and Dillia, and that's a pretty good ways."

"And the Gedemondas?" Mavra prompted.

The Dillian shrugged. "They've never bothered me. You see them every once in a while-big white shapes against the snow. Never close--they're always gone when you get there. You hear them, too, sometimes, growling and roaring and making all sorts of weird sounds that echo between the

mountains."

"Is it their speech?" Vistaru asked. "I don't think so," Tael replied. "I used to, but when they asked me to do this guide job for you they fitted me with a translator, and I didn't hear any difference. I've wondered sometimes whether they have any speech as we know it at all."

"That could be bad," Renard put in. "How can you talk to somebody who can't talk back?"

She nodded. "I'm still excited about all this. We've tried off and on to communicate with them for the longest time; I'd like to be there when it's done."

"If it's done," Hosuru added pessimistically.

"I'm worried about the smoke from that thing," Mavra said, cocking her head a little bit toward the stove. "Not the Gedemondas. The war parties. They have to be close by."

The girl looked uncomfortable. "I've seen them already, but they just took a close look at me and went on. A few flying horses like yours, and some really strange, beautiful things that must have had orange and brown butterflylike wings three or more meters across. None of them landed."

Vistaru looked concerned. "Yaxa and Agitar both. Advance scouts. We can't stay here long."

"We won't," Tael told them. "We'll leave at first light up the Intermountain Trail in back of the base here. With any luck we'll make Camp 43 shortly after noon, and from there we start getting into snow country-and the air thins."

"How high is this camp?" Renard asked.

"Fifteen hundred sixty-two meters," Tael responded. "But you're already almost four hundred meters up. You wouldn't know it, but the plain's a slope."

"We could fly up that far," Vistaru noted. "We're good to about eighteen hundred meters, and I think you said, Renard, that Doma's good to about that."

He nodded. "But that doesn't help our guide, here. No wings for her."

Tael laughed. "That's all right. I told you I was mountain-born. Even better if we have a head start, but beyond Camp 43, flying will be difficult. I can start up this evening, and be there to meet you in the morning. That way we move even faster." Her face darkened, and she looked at Mavra. "But you will have to be dressed far better than that. All of you, in fact. Frostbite will be a big problem."

"We have some winter things," Hosuru told her. "And I understood you were supposed to bring some stuff."

She nodded, went over to a stall, and hauled out some tough fabric knapsacks. They were heavy, but she managed them without strain. Maybe she couldn't fly, but she did add the muscle power that was their most conspicuous lack.

She sorted things out. Special form-fitting thermal wear to suit Latan contours, including transparent but tough and rigid shielding for the wings, appeared, and a heavy coat and gloves that sealed with an elastic of some kind fitted Renard. "You'll also find these useful," she said, tossing him some small objects which proved to be wrappings for his hooves, with a flat, spiked, disklike sole that would give him not only protection but better footing. She brought out some more clothes, also of the Latan model but larger and without the wing flaps. She looked a little puzzled. They were obviously for a biped with hands and feet.

Hastily, Mavra explained what had happened. The girl nodded sympathetically, but was plainly concerned.

"I don't see how these can be cut down," she said. "Your feet should do all right in the snow, like mine, but you should have some kind of wrapping. You haven't got my protective skin layers and hair," she pointed out.

"We'll do whatever we can," Mavra responded. "Renard will have to lead Doma once we get up there; I'll ride her as long as possible. That should help."

Tael was doubtful, but she was the guide, not the mission leader.

Renard went over to the door, peering out at the sky. No sign of strange or hostile creatures now; a few lazy birds, no more. But soon—who knew?

He wondered just how far off the driving forces were.

AT THE PALIM-GEDEMONDAS BORDER

The Yaxa came in for a landing with a great beating of its tremendous wings. Coming down, it saw the large number of troops and materiel now massed at the border. It looked good. Convincing.

It had been a long trip, and almost a fatal one. The creature touched the ground gently and went down on all eight tentacles toward the portable command center, a huge circuslike tent established just inside Palim. The Yaxa were born to the air; on the ground they looked awkward and lumbering, never quite properly balanced because of the long folded wings along their back. In the air, however, they were the graceful masters.

The Yaxa entered the big tent, its huge death's head, impassive as always, searching out someone of rank, finally spotting someone who would do over by the big situation map.

Communication between Yaxa was by a complex combination of noises from the thoracic regions and odd sounds made by antennae and slight wing rustles. Their names were untranslatable, so, when dealing with other races, they adopted nicknames that often were nonsense, ironic, or just plain crazy, and stuck to them for multiracial operations.

"Marker reporting in, Section Leader," the newcomer said.

The section leader nodded. "Glad to see you back, Marker. We had begun to think that the enemy had gotten you."

"It was close," the advance scout said. "Those damned little blue men with their electricity and their flying horses. The Cebu are too clumsy to worry about, but even though the horses are slow and awkward, it only needs a touch to get you."

The section leader knew this. She knew, in fact, as much about the physical, mental, and technological characteristics of the Makiem alliance as anyone could. The other side had had a much rougher trip than they; any force that could hammer its way through that much resistance so quickly was a force to be reckoned with.

"How far off are they?" the military commander inquired.

"Down the other side," Marker responded. That meant at least three hundred kilometers, a good distance, and the plain that was the logical camp for the final campaign was only a hundred or so kilometers south of their present position. They would be first. "They're a little slow with their airlift over Alestol, too. After all, they have to move everything they need a fair distance nonstop—more than either the flying horses or Cebu can normally fly. A lot of them are into exhaustion now; the ones who land soon find themselves put to sleep by those big, fat plants and then eaten. Don't sell those Alestolians short, either—some of them have translators, would you believe, and they have a hypnotic gas as well. If one of those ones with a translator gets an Agitar or a Cebu, they're sent back against their own people!"

The section leader chuckled dryly. "Oh, yes, I can believe that. A rather large amount was transferred in Zone to get them those translators. I'm happy to see that the expenditure is paying for itself." The tone changed, became more businesslike. "So how soon before they have a sufficient force to start the march?"

Marker was uncertain. "Two, three days at least. And maybe two more to move up to the plain. Call it five days."

The Yaxa leader considered this. "You're sure? As you know, we will be moving this afternoon; we should be in and mostly established on the plain by dark tomorrow. The advance party leaves at dawn by air. With luck we can hold it while our friends go after the engines."

"Who's going?" Marker asked, genuinely curious. "Some of the Lamotien, of course. Who else?" She knew that nobody would trust the Lamotien by themselves. They didn't even trust them now.

"Only Yulin can assess the engines once located," the section leader pointed out. "So we'll send the Dasheen up. They're better equipped for a nontech hex and narrow trails anyway, and they're almost as big as the Gedemondas."

"None of us?" Marker responded, appalled. "But how will we-?"

"We removed the guidance boxes from the bridge," the Yaxa reminded her counterpart. "We'll control it from the other end. But, no, up there there is no protection for the wings in the cold, and snow provides little traction. I think the Dasheen and Lamotien will keep each other honest. We'll hold the plain for them."

"But is it safe risking Yulin like that?" Marker wondered. "I mean, he's the whole game, isn't he?"

"No, the engines are. The only part of the ship that can't be duplicated. If he gets us the engines, fine. If he doesn't, what good is he to us anyway? To tell you the truth, I wouldn't feel a bit sorry if some of those Dasheen bulls died."

Marker nodded sympathetically. "Their system is not a logical one, and it grates to see them treated like that."

"Unfortunately," the section leader sighed, "that place is really a male's paradise. You know that scientific study they're always throwing up at everybody to prove male superiority? Well, we made the study, and they're right. Evolutionary-speaking, those cows are mentally and physically designed to be dull-minded, willing slaves."

"Well, at least we have better material to send into the cold mountains than the Makiem," Marker said, changing the subject to something more pleasant. "The Cebu could walk up there, but never fly, and they're terrible on the ground. The Makiem grow semi-dormant in extreme cold, and the Agitar's flying horses are valueless at those altitudes."

"But those Agitar can move well," the Yaxa commander pointed out. "And there are protective coverings for Makiem. Don't sell them short. They've gotten far already. It's going to be the roughest battle yet for both sides in a few days."

ANOTHER PART OF THE FIELD

Antor Trelig was both confident and optimistic. The war had gone well; they were in Gedemondas, and after all they'd been through, not a single one of the soldiers, commanders, and politicians believed they could be stopped.

An Agitar general came into the command tent and bowed slightly, handing him a report. He looked at it with interest, and the Makiem equivalent of a grin spread on his face.

"Has anyone else seen this?" he asked.

The Agitar shook her goatlike head. "No, sir. From the recon man who took it to the General Staff to you."

It was a photograph; a big black-and-white glossy. It was fuzzy and grainy, taken through a

very long lens from far away, and it still wasn't quite close enough, but it showed the most important thing.

Most of the picture was white; more had been cropped in the blow-up. But there, on a rocky ledge, was a sleek, U-shaped object reflecting the sunlight, and there were not quite legible markings on the side.

He didn't need to read them. He knew it had a symbol of a rising sun with a human face flanked by fourteen stars, and the huge legend NH-CF-1000-1 on the side, and, in smaller letters underneath, the words PEOPLE'S VICTORY.

It was the engine pod.

"How did you get this?" he asked, amazed. "I thought nobody could fly that high."

"One of the Cebu scouts pushed himself to the limit," the general replied. "On his third try he managed to get over the second string of mountains and found a deep, U-shaped glacial valley there. His eyes are good; he saw the reflection, above him, but knew that it was beyond his reach and range, so he fitted his longest lens and snapped as many pictures as he could with the glare filter on. This was the best."

He had a sudden thought. "What about the Yaxa? Can't they or those little imitator bastards find this, too?"

"Not a chance," the general assured him. "The Yaxa can't possibly fly high enough to clear that second range. I would have said no Cebu could, either, and the scout is half-dead as it is. He'll be a hero if he survives. As for the Lamotien, remember they can only simulate other forms, not become them. They have a flying mode, yes, based on the Yaxa, but it's highly modified to their form and requirements, and the wings are as thick as our own mounts', far too heavy to clear that altitude. No, I think we have the advantage here."

Trelig nodded, satisfied. "But they will get to the plain first," he noted. "And our reports say that the Lamotien can neutralize an Agitar shock, and the Yaxa can fly rings around any of us."

"It's about even, all told," the general admitted. "They'll be dug in by the time we get there, well fortified, and they have to play only for time, nothing more. I suggest we do it a little differently."

Trelig's huge eyes enlarged in surprise. "Something new?"

The general nodded, and spread out a commercial-looking map on the table in front of them. It was a relief map of both Gedemondas and Dilla next door to the east, and it showed great relief and, more important, it had a lot of little dotted lines all over it. Trelig couldn't read a word on it, though.

"It's a Dillian guide and trail map," the Agitar explained. "They sell them to interested people. There are rodents and other animals in that wilderness, and they trap them. The Gedemondas don't seem to mind or bother them, although our Dillian sources say they don't know much more about the creatures than we do. They don't overdo the hunting, and that's been the balance."

Trelig nodded, understanding. "So these little dotted lines are hunting trails?" he guessed.

"Exactly," acknowledged the goat-woman. "And those little rectangles are Dillian shelters set up along the trails. The trails are mostly Gedemondan, not Dillian. I understand that too many Dillians get the locals upset, and they push a ton or two of snow down on them."

That was an unpleasant prospect. He let it pass.

"Now, we're here," the Agitar continued, pointing to an area in the southwest corner. "The Yaxa will be here," now pointing to the small plains area about two hundred kilometers north and slightly east, "and, if you look closely at the map, you'll see something interesting."

Trelic was ahead of her. At least three trails came within two kilometers of where they now sat, east of them a bit. One seemed fairly low.

"Twelve hundred sixty-three meters," the Agitar told him. "Low enough for an unobtrusive air drop."

"Then we might not have to fight at all" he exclaimed, excited. "We can beat them by going in with a small force and heading straight for the engines, while they have to poke and hunt!"

The Agitar shook her head slowly in the negative. "No, there will have to be a battle, if only to cover you. They are not dumb. If we didn't move as predicted they would smell a rat and they would have you. No, the battle goes on, everything as planned. The only difference will be that we will not have any rush to win it, or take needless risks. When you secure the engines, others can be sent to try and disassemble them, if that's possible, or figure out how to move them, anyway. By the time whatever force the Yaxa sends gets there, we'll have already won the objective, no matter how the battle goes."

Trelic liked the plan. "Okay, so it's me and some Agitar males. But what protects me from the cold? I shut down below freezing, you know. Can't help it."

The general got up and walked out of the tent, then came back in with a large carton. She opened the carton and pulled out a strange, silvery costume with a huge dark globe.

"You didn't know we have had five Makiem Entries in the past century, then?" she said, satisfied. "And we don't need the mechanical stuff, either. Air you've got."

He grinned again. Things were going his way now, as they had always done. The Obie computer, New Pompeii, the Well World itself--all were within his grasp.

The general excused herself, and he sat there a minute or two, alone, looking at the map. Then he sighed, got up, and slow-hopped to a curtained-off passage between this tent and his portable living quarters. He pulled it aside. There was a flash of movement, and an object landed on the bed in the far corner.

She could hop quickly, she could, he thought admiringly.

It had been a marriage of convenience, of course. All Makiem marriages were marriages of convenience in a race that had no sex except one week a year, underwater, when they had nothing but. The convenience of the scoundrels that ran Makiem, the inconvenience of himself, naturally. She was the good minister's daughter, and, if anything, she was slicker and nastier than her father.

What a team we'd make, he sighed once again, // only we could be on the same side!

"You needn't pretend, my dear. You know everything and I know it, so what's the difference? You can't go this time."

"I go where you go," she responded. "It is law and custom. And you cannot stop me!"

He chuckled. "But it's cold up there, baby! What good would you be as a sleeping beauty?"

She reached over, opened a wicker basket, and removed something. It was a slightly different design, but unmistakably a spacesuit.

He gaped. "How long have you had that thing?" he asked.

"Since Makiem," she replied smugly.

CAMP 43, GEDEMONDAS

The trails weren't bad. Gedemondans, it was known, were large creatures, and limited but steady use by the horselike Dillians had made them even more comfortable, on the whole around two meters wide.

It was a strange party that set off from the chilly shack into the snow cover: Tael, the Dillian guide, was in the lead, then the two Lata, occasionally walking but more often riding on Tael's back, then Renard leading the winged pegasus, Doma, with the strange figure of Mavra Chang tied between wings and neck. The air was becoming cold; there was little conversation between them, nor was much possible without yelling, for blowing wind howled through the rocky clefts as if it, too, were a strange and living creature of this strangest of worlds.

It was only on the occasional breaks, done mostly for Renard's benefit, that they could say anything. The plain was far behind; the twists and turns that the switchbacked trail forced upon them had all but the confident Tael totally lost, and the bright snow reflecting the glare of the sun, even when cut with sun goggles, made distance impossible to judge. They were tiny figures moving in a sea of white.

The trail itself seemed often lost in the snow, yet Tael went on as if it were a paved and marked highway, never hesitating in the slightest-and the footing was always there.

After they had been climbing for what seemed like a full day, they rounded one more mountain curve and, suddenly, the plain was spread out below them once more.

"Wait!" Mavra called to them. "Look! They've arrived!"

They stopped, and saw immediately what she meant. Tiny puffs of orange seemed everywhere in the air, and large numbers of creatures could be seen erecting tents and digging into the rock that was the start of the mountains. The cabin was invisible, but they all knew that, if it was there at all, it was being converted into a fort.

"Look at them!" Tael breathed. This was her first taste of armies and war. "There must be thousands of them!"

"The Yaxa," Vistaru said flatly. "They will be coming up only a day or so behind us. This is not good."

Tael laughed confidently. "Let them try and find the trail!" she boasted. "Without a guide they haven't a prayer!"

Mavra turned and looked out at the sky. There were thin, wispy clouds and an occasional big, fat cumulus puff, but it was basically crystal clear.

"They'll follow our own tracks," she told them. "There's no snow, nothing to cover them. They might mistake them for animal tracks, or Dillians alone, but where a four-footed animal or Dillian can go, so can they."

The centaur frowned. A good snow guide, Mavra thought, but naive as hell. Dillia must be a very peaceful place.

"We could lay a false trail," Tael suggested. "Run tracks off a cliff. It's not that hard. The powder here could be brushed for a few hundred meters."

Mavra considered it. "All right, do it," she told them. "But it won't do much. Slow them up, get a couple, that's all. Better than nothing, though."

They rigged the deception fairly simply. The Dillian girl picked a point, walked out to where there seemed to be continuous snow, then stopped. Renard removed his small snowshoes and followed gingerly behind in her tracks, then guided her feet as she backed up into her old tracks.

Mavra surveyed the results. "A little too deep," she said critically. "An experienced tracker would catch on, but I think it'll work. Does that snow fall off there and I just can't see it, or what?"

Tael laughed. "This is the edge of what we call Makorn Glacier. A river of slowly moving ice

with a snow-cover on top. There is a crevasse there at least three hundred meters down and a good ten meters wide. I could almost feel the edge of it."

The small Lata then went back after they went around another bend with Tael's fur hat and used it to fill in the tracks. Not an expert job, but they weren't trying to fool experts.

They went on, into the hex and up at the same time. More frequent rest periods were called for. The air was becoming thin.

During one of these stops, Mavra said, "Still no sign of the Gedemondans. Hell, if they're big bastards there must be awfully few of them to be this invisible."

Tael shrugged. "Who knows how many there are? Sometimes there seem to be a hundred sneaking around the mountain tops; sometimes you will go completely through the hex without seeing one. That is not the trouble here, though."

"Huh?" they all said at once.

She nodded. "We're being watched. I can feel it. I'm not sure where they are, but there is certainly more than one. I could barely hear some intermittent deep breathing."

They looked around, suddenly nervous. No one could see anything.

"Where?" Renard pressed.

Tael shook her head. "I don't know. Mountain sounds are deceptive. Close, though. They have networks of trails they, ah, discourage us from using."

"They'd have to," Mavra said dryly. She strained but could hear nothing but the howling wind. The working part of her ears was still the same as ever, good but not fantastic; all the bigger ears had done was to give her a little better localization and add a slightly hollow sound to everything, which the wind magnified.

She was freezing to death, too, despite being covered by an amazingly resourceful patchwork set of clothes. Her face and particularly her ears were killing her; still, it was no worse on her than on the others, and they didn't complain.

"Let's keep going," Hosuru said after a moment's listening. "If they're shadowing us, they'll either make a move or they won't. Just keep listening and looking."

"Don't strain too hard," Tael warned. "If they don't want to be seen, they won't be. All bright white like the snow, they could be ten meters away and out in the open and you'd never know it."

They pressed on.

They reached Camp 43 before sundown, but Tael insisted that this would be their stop for the night. "We couldn't possibly make the next camp before nightfall, and you don't want to be out here after dark."

"I hope those Yaxa or whatever feel the same way," Renard worried.

"I hope they don't," Mavra responded. "That'll kill a lot more of them a lot quicker. Vistaru? Hosuru? You're nocturnals. You want to try this trail in the dark?"

Vistaru laughed. "Not in the dark, not in the daylight, not anytime without a guide who knows what she's doing!" she responded.

The crude shelter was built for two Dillians; the stalls were fine for Tael and Doma, and the others just sort of scrunched in as best they could. With the supplies, it was hard to close the door, and the old iron fireplace was so close to them they had to choose freezing or burning. But, it would do.

It had been a trying day; they were all dead tired, half-snowblind, and ready for a rest.

There seemed little point in setting a guard; if the Gedemondans wanted to do them in, they could do it any time. If they wanted contact, well and good. And if the Yaxa coalition party somehow managed to close in on them, they had little means to fight it anyway. As the fire burnt down, they slept.

There was a wrongness somewhere. It disturbed her in her sleep, and her mind fought for it, tried to seize on it, and it seemed somehow elusive yet present and growing more and more ominous.

Mavra Chang awoke, lying motionless. She looked quickly around. They were all there; not only Tael and Renard, but even Doma snored.

She tried to figure out why she was suddenly wide awake. There was some sense of alarm, something that had her suddenly as clear-headed as ever when danger threatened. She reached for the source with her mind and eyes. It was chilly now, yes; it must be well into the night. But that wasn't it.

Doma suddenly awoke and shook her great head. She snorted nervously. Mavra lifted her head a little, sure now that she wasn't going crazy. The pegasus sensed it, too.

There it was. A noise. Scrunch-scrunch; scrunch-scrunch, over and over, a little louder each time.

Someone-or something-was walking rather calmly and steadily up the trail, something confident even in the night and snow.

Scrunch-scrunch, the snow was falling under its feet. It seemed to be big.

And now the noise stopped. Whatever it was was right outside the door, she knew. She started to call out, to warn the others, but somehow she couldn't seem to make a move, only stare at that closed door. Even Doma seemed suddenly calm, but expectant. She was reminded of the Olbornian priest's power over her, but this wasn't like that. It was-something else. Something strange, completely new.

The door opened, surprisingly silently considering its rusting hinges and bad fit. A blast of chilly air hit her, and she felt the others stir uncomfortably.

A huge white furry shape was there. It was tall- tall enough that it had to bend a little to stick its head just inside the door. A face looked in at her, and smiled slightly. It raised a huge hairy white paw and put a huge, clawed index finger to its mouth.

GEDEMONDAS-A BACK TRAIL

Antor Trelig cursed for the thousandth time. One mishap after another on this damned journey, he thought sourly. Avalanches hi front of them, the trail undercut-almost as if someone was trying to stop them or slow them down, although no one had been sighted of any kind.

The trail was a lot more obvious on the map than it was in reality; it wasn't well maintained, some of the shelters were in disrepair and obviously had been so for years, and the trail often vanished without visible landmarks, causing the Agitar to have to probe gingerly ahead with their tasts. Their party of fourteen-twelve Agitar, he, and his not-so-loyal wife, Burodir-was now nine, still including Burodir, unfortunately.

But the landmarks were reasonably clear; the terrain was not bad, most of the climbing having been at the beginning, and as many times as the trail had vanished it had also been crystal clear, as if tramped down by the soles of many feet.

This had worried him at first, until he was reminded by the Agitar that this was, after all,

somebody's hex, and somebody had to live in it.

In a way, that thought was the most disturbing. They had neither seen nor heard a native in all this time, in all this way. It made no sense at all that there shouldn't be some creatures somewhere along the way, except the occasional panic-inducing arctic hare, or whatever it was, and a few small weasel-like creatures.

And yet-somehow, they'd made it. Somehow they'd kept to this trail. Somehow they were going all the way. He was, anyway. What the others did was up to them.

He studied the maps and aerial photos from the Cebu scouts. He knew pretty much where he was, although without the prescouting he would have been lost and dead now, he had to admit. The inner ring of mountains, slightly taller than the outer but hidden before now, was clearly ahead. And, just on the other side of that big, glacier-carved peak over there, and over a bit, was a U-shaped valley with a very important large object lying askew on a ledge.

They would not make it today, that was for sure. But sometime tomorrow afternoon, certainly, if nothing else happened.

ALONG THE INTERMOUNTAIN TRAIL

"Ifrit! My field glasses!" Ben Yulin commanded. The cow reached into the pack of her cowife and quickly extracted them.

"Here, Master," she said eagerly, handing them to him. He took them without a word and put them to his eyes.

They were not merely binoculars; they had additional special lenses that helped his nearsightedness. With the already ground prescription snow goggles, they brought anything within their range into sharp, clear focus.

"Trouble?" growled a low voice next to him.

He looked away and over at the thing. It looked like a walking hairy bush, about as tall as he, with no apparent eyes, ears, or other organs. In actuality, it was not a single creature, but a colony of thirty-six Lamotiens, adapted to the cold weather and the snow.

"That shack up there," he pointed suspiciously ahead. "Doesn't look right, somehow. I don't want any more tricks like that fake trail. We lost two good cows there." Neither his, he failed to add.

"We lost thirty brothers, don't forget!" snapped the Lamotien. "We agree it looks strange. What should be done about it?"

Yulin thought a minute, trying to find a good solution without risking his noble neck or his possessions. "Why don't a couple of you go on up? Turn white or something and take a look around."

The Lamotien considered it. "Two each, we think. Arctic hares." The creature seemed to come apart all of a sudden; breaking into small, equal-sized fuzzy masses. Two of the things came off one side and jumped to the snow; two others from the left. Yulin watched, fascinated as always, as the rest of the shaggy creature reformed and readjusted. It looked slightly thinner, but otherwise the same.

Now the two Lamotien in the snow ran together, seemed to blend into one big shaggy lump. The other pair did the same. Slowly, as if there were unseen puppeteer's hands under the shaggy mops, there was a poking here, a wrinkle there, a bend here, a growth there.

Two arctic hares were there in less than two minutes. They scampered off naturally in the direction of the cabin. The rest waited; only the colony leader had a translator, so they'd have

to reform before he knew the story. They didn't have vocal communication, that was for sure. He wondered if they talked when they melded, became one being with common mind, or what. He'd asked, but the Lamotien told him not to worry about it, the concept was beyond him anyway.

The hares returned in a little more than ten minutes, disconnected, jumped back into the hairy lump, and melded again. The shape was silent for a minute, talking to the scouts or maybe absorbing the scouts' brief memories.

Finally, it said, "The place is deserted. You're right about it being funny, though. Lots of packs and supplies still there. Somebody was there not long ago, and left-not of their own will, we'll wager. Too much stuff left."

That had him worried. "Think they were the centaurs we've been following?"

"Probably," the Lamotien agreed. "But whoever they are, they're gone now."

"Tracks?"

The Lamotien paused. "That's the funny part. There aren't any. We see their tracks, lots of snow disturbances where they unpacked, and all that. But no other tracks for hundreds of meters in any direction. None."

"Well, they didn't come back this way," Yulin said, worried now. "So where did they go?"

They all looked around at the silent mountains.

"And with whom?" responded the Lamotien.

ANOTHER PART OF THE FIELD

It seemed that they had walked forever; they had frequent rests-their captors seeming to appreciate their need for more oxygen than the atmosphere now provided-but no conversation. A few grunts and a lot of gestures, none of which the translators would handle, but nothing else.

They were off any trails the Dillians knew, though. Trails so invisible at times that the great Gedemondans leading the way in sometimes crazy patterns seemed to be lost themselves. They weren't, though; they simply knew, somehow, everything that was under the snow.

Doma, carrying both Mavra and Renard, was being led by Tael with the two Lata on her back. In front were four of the giant snow creatures; behind, four more. Others were visible now, here and there, sometimes a large number, sometimes one or two crossing paths.

Mavra still wasn't sure what they were. They didn't really remind her of anything, yet they somehow reminded her of everything. All snow white, not even the dirtiness that such thick hair usually displays so well. Tall-Tael was well over two meters, and they were almost a head taller than she-and very slender. Humanoid, yet their faces appeared doglike, snow white with long, very thin snouts and black button noses, their eyes set back, large but very human-looking, and an intense pale blue. Their hands and feet formed huge circular pads when closed, the palms and soles of a tough, white, pawlike material. But when they spread their fingers, their long, thin fingers, they had three and a thumb-although their hands seemed to be almost without bones. They could bend them any which way and flex them and the whole hand in any direction, as if they were made of some kind of putty. Fingers and toes had long, pink claws, the only nonwhite part of them other than the nose. Even the insides of their saucerlike ears were white.

They filled in the tracks by the simplest method imaginable. They wore flowing white capes of some animal fur, and it dragged behind them as they walked, the light top powder filling in behind them. They didn't sink down into the snow nearly as heavily as they should have; the padlike feet acted almost like snowshoes.

Tracks weren't a problem here; they knew they were being taken into the mainstream of

Gedemondan life, whatever that was. This was the part hidden away from all comers, the part they never let you see.

And that made them wonder. Why them? Did the Gedemondans know they were coming? Were they being helped? Or were they prisoners to be interrogated about all these invasions before being tossed over a cliff? There were no answers, only more walking.

Occasionally the great snow-beasts would pop right up out of the snow. It was unsettling at first, until they realized that there must be trap doors of some kind-whether over ice caves, natural or dug, or rock caves, or even artificial dwellings that were covered with snow they didn't know. It was clear, though, that one of the big reasons you never saw the population was that they were living and doing whatever it is they did below the snow cover, the art of camouflage coming naturally to them.

Night came, plunging this wintry world into an eerie glowing darkness. The night sky of the Well World reflected off the snowfields in distorted, twinkling wonder. New Pompeii wasn't visible, but it might not yet have risen, or it might have set, or it might be out of sight behind the distant mountains.

They hadn't had time to take any supplies. The Gedemondans had been gentle but insistent; when they had protested, they had been picked up as easily as Renard picked up a bag of apples, and plopped down on top of the two best able to carry them, Tael and Doma. Tael was too overawed and a little scared to protest much; Doma seemed curiously at home and docile around the strange creatures, as if they had some mysterious power over her.

Or, they hoped, because she could perceive no threat.

Still they didn't go hungry. Just after darkness fell they were led to a large cave they would have never known was there, and other Gedemondans brought familiar fruits and vegetables, from where they couldn't guess, served on broad wood plates, and a fruit punch that tasted quite good.

They even seemed extra concerned about Mavra's problems. Her dish was higher and thicker, the easier to reach it, and the punch was in a deep bowl so she could drink as she wished.

Renard had not used his electrical powers at Mavra's suggestion; they were, after all there to contact the Gedemondans, and this was, if nothing else, contact. But he couldn't resist it, finally, and reached over to a close relative of an apple and applied a small charge that baked it.

The Gedemondans didn't seem impressed. Finally one who was sitting against the cave wall got up and walked over to him, then crouched down across from him, the plate in the middle. A clawed hand reached out, touched the plate. There was a blinding flash lasting only a fraction of a second, and the plate and fruit just weren't there any more. Renard was dumbfounded; he reached over, felt the spot where it had been. It wasn't even warm, yet there were no char marks, debris, or anything but a tiny little odor of ozone or something. The snow-creature snorted in satisfaction, patted him patronizingly on the head, and walked off.

That ended the demonstrations of power.

They were bone-tired and chilled, but they did not spend the night in the cave. Although they didn't run, it was apparent that their captors were on some sort of schedule, and that they had a particular place for their captives to be at a certain time.

It was several more hours before they reached it, and by that point Tael was complaining to the silent leaders loudly that she couldn't go a step farther.

It was a solid rock wall, looming ominously ahead in the near-darkness. They started for it, expecting to turn any minute, but it didn't happen. Instead the wall opened for them.

To be precise, a huge block of stone moved slowly back, obviously on a muscle-powered pulley, and bright lights shone into the darkness. They went on, into the tunnel.

The light was from some glowing mineral that picked up torchlight and magnified it a

hundredfold. It was bright as day inside.

The inside of the mountain was a honeycomb; labyrinthine passages went off in all directions, and they were quickly and completely lost. But it was warm-comfortable, in fact-inside, the heat coming from a source they never did discover, and there were strange noises of a lot of work being done-but what was going on it was impossible to see.

Finally, they were at their destination. It was a comfortable, large room. There were several big beds there, filled with soft cushions of fabric, and a large fur rug that was perfect for Mavra. There was only one entrance, and two Gedemondans stood there, conspicuous yet as unobtrusive as possible. This was it, then.

They were too tired to talk much, to even move, or worry about what was in store for them. They were sound asleep in minutes.

The next day all awoke feeling better, but with some aches and pains. Gedemondans brought more fruits, a different punch, and even a bale of hay which could be used by both Tael and Doma. Where that came from there was little mystery; it was a ration at one of the trail cabins.

Mavra stretched all four limbs and groaned. "Oh, wow!" she said. "I must have slept solid and unmoving. I'm stiff as a board."

Renard sympathized. "I'm not feeling too great myself. Overslept, I think. But we're the better for it."

The two Lata, who always slept motionless on their stomachs, still had their own complaints, and Tael said she had a stiff neck. Even Doma snorted and flexed her wings, almost knocking Tael in the face.

The Gedemondans had cleared away the breakfast dishes; now only one was in the room, looking at them with a detached expression.

Vistaru looked at him. Her? No way to tell with them. "I wish they'd say something," she muttered, as much to herself as to the others. "This strong, silent treatment gives me the creeps."

"Most people talk too much about too little now," said the Gedemondan, in a nice, cultured voice full of warmth. "We prefer not to unless we really have something to say."

They all almost jumped out of their skins.

"You can talk!" Horsuru blurted, then covered, "That is, we were wondering . . ."

The Gedemondan nodded, then looked at Mavra, still on her side on the rug. "So you are Mavra Chang. I've wondered what you would look like."

She was surprised. "You know me? Well, I'm pleased to meet you, too. I'm sorry I can't give you my hand."

He shrugged. "We were aware of your problem. As to knowing you, no. We were aware of you. That is different."

She accepted that. There were lots of ways of getting information on the Well World.

Tael could not be restrained now. "Why haven't you ever talked to us?" she asked. "I mean, we had the idea that you were some kind of animals or something."

Her lack of subtlety did not perturb the Gedemondan. "It's not hard to explain. We work hard at our image. It is-necessary." He sat down on the floor, facing them.

"The best way to explain it is to tell you a little of our own history. You know, all of you, of the Markovians?" That was not the word he used, but he was using a translator and that's the

way it came out.

They nodded. Renard was the most ignorant of them; even Tael had had some schooling. But Renard, at least, knew from his own area of space of the dead ruins of that mysterious civilization.

"The Markovians evolved as all plants and animals evolve, from the primitive to the complex. Most races reach a dead end somewhere along the line, but not them. They reached the heights of material attainment. Anything they wished for was theirs. Like the fabled gods, nothing was beyond them," the Gedemondan told them. "But it wasn't enough. When they had it all, they realized that the end of it was stagnancy, which common sense will tell you is the ultimate result of any material Utopia."

They nodded, following him. Renard thought there was some argument against that, and that he'd like to try Utopia first, but he let it pass.

"So they created the Well World, and they transformed themselves into new races, and they placed their children on new worlds of their design. The Well is more than the maintenance computer for this world; it is the single stabilizing force for the finite universe," the snow-creature continued. "And why did they commit racial suicide to descend back to the primitive once more? Because they felt cheated, somehow. They felt they had missed something, somewhere. And, the tragedy was, they didn't know what it was. They hoped one of our races could find out. That was the ultimate goal of the project, which still goes on."

"It seems to me they made a sucker play," Mavra responded. "Suppose they weren't missing anything? Suppose that was it?"

The Gedemondan shrugged. "In that case, those warring powers below represent the height of attainment, and when the strongest owns the universe-I'm speaking metaphorically, of course, for they are mere reflections of the races of the universe-we'll have the Markovians all over."

"But not Gedemondans?" Vistaru prompted.

He shook his head. "We took a different path. While the rest ran toward materialistic attainment, we decided to accept the challenge of a nontechnological hex for what it was-and not try by ingenuity to make it as technological as we could. What nature provided, we accepted. Hot springs allowed some cultivation in these uniquely lighted caverns, which run through the entire hex. We had food, warmth, shelter and privacy. We turned ourselves not outward, but inward, to the very core of our being, our souls, if you will, and explored what we found there. There were things there no one had ever taken time to dream of. A few Northern hexes are proceeding similarly, but most are not. We feel that this is what the Markovians created us to do, and what so few are doing. We're looking for what they missed."

"And have you found it?" Mavra asked, somewhat cynically. Mystics weren't her style, either.

"After a million years, we are at the point where we perceive that something was indeed missing," the Gedemondan replied. "What it is will take further study and refinement. Unlike those of your worlds, we are in no hurry."

"You've found power," Renard pointed out. "That dish of food was just plain disintegrated."

He chuckled, but there was a certain sadness in it. "Power. Yes, I suppose so. But the true test of awesome power is the ability not to use it," he said cryptically. He looked over at Mavra Chang and pointed a clawed, furry finger at her.

"No matter what, Mavra Chang, you remember that!"

She looked puzzled. "You think I'm to have great power?" she responded, skeptical and a little derisively.

"First you must descend into Hell," he warned. "Then, only when hope is gone, will you be lifted up and placed at the pinnacle of attainable power, but whether or not you will be wise enough to know what to do with it or what not to do with it is closed to us."

"How do you know all this?" Vistaru challenged. "Is this just some mystical mumbling or do you really know the future?"

The Gedemondan chuckled again. "No, we read probabilities. You see, we see-perceive is a better word-the math of the Well of Souls. We feel the energy flow, the ties and bands, in each and every particle of matter and energy. All reality is mathematics; all existence, past, present, and future, is equations."

"Then you can foretell what's to happen," Renard put in. "If you see the math, you can solve the equations."

The Gedemondan sighed. "What is the square root of minus two?" he asked. "That's something you can see. Solve it."

The point was made in the simplest terms.

"But this doesn't explain why you pretend to be primitive snow apes," Tael persisted.

The Gedemondan looked at her. "To entwine ourselves in the material equations is to lose that which we believe is of greater value. It is really too late for any of your cultures to comprehend this; you are too far along the Markovian path."

"But you broke your act for us," Hosuru pointed out. "Why?"

"The war and the engine mod, of course," Vistaru said flatly, in a tone that indicated she thought her friend a total idiot.

But the Gedemondan shook his head from side to side. "No. It was to meet and speak with one of you, to try and understand the complexity of her equation and perceive its meaning and possible solution."

Renard looked puzzled. "Mavra?" he asked quizzically.

The Gedemondan nodded. "And now that is done, although what can be added is beyond me right now. As to your silly, stupid, petty war and your spaceship, well, if you're up to a short journey I think we will settle that now." He got up, and they did the same, following him out. Another Gedemondan followed with their clothing; they wouldn't need it in the warm caves, but it was obvious that they would not return to that room.

They were left in a junction area for a while, and their talkative guide left them. Soon they were joined by another Gedemondan-or was it the same one?- and they continued off. It was silent-treatment time again, regardless.

Later, after what seemed like several hours' walk, they stood again before a stone wall and were helped getting their cold-weather gear on. Some kind Gedemondan had created a form-fitting fur coat with leggings for Mavra. She was amazed, and wondered how they could have done it hi a night.

But it helped. The great door opened with a rumble and revealed a strange scene.

It was a great bowl; a U-shaped valley hung over it, and snow filled it deeply.

And, askew on a ledge, unmistakable even at that distance, was the engine module.

And now the guide spoke. It was a different voice, they thought, but with the same kindness and warmth.

"You spoke of power. Over there, just next to that little promontory there, your Ben Yulin and his associates now stand. We marked the trail as subtly as possible, and they almost lost it several times, but they managed to blunder through."

They strained their eyes, but it was too far away.

Now the Gedemondan pointed to the opposite rim. "Up there," he said, "stand Antor Trelig and his compatriots. Again, their journey was stage-managed so they arrived at their point within minutes of the other. Of course, neither party knows the other is there."

The snow-creature turned back and stared at the engine module, marvelously intact and preserved, the remains of the great braking chutes still entwined in it.

"This is power," said the Gedemondan, and pointed at the module.

There was a rumbling sound that shook the entire valley. Snow started to fall all around, and the engine module trembled, then started to move, slowly at first, then more rapidly, off the edge of the hanging valley.

It poised for an instant at the edge, then plunged over the side with a roar. But it didn't just fall-it seemed to break apart, and there was a tremendous rumble and roar. Smoke and flames and white-hot billowing clouds erupted. The thing blew itself up on the way down, and, when it hit the snow below, the explosions continued, making the valley look like a minor volcano for several minutes. When the smoke and roar died away, the last of the echoes gone, there was only a melted, smouldering ruin in the snow, bubbling and hissing.

The Gedemondan nodded in satisfaction. "And so ends the war," he said with a finality that was hard to deny.

"But if you could do this-why did you wait?" Vistaru asked, awed and a little frightened.

"It was necessary that all sides witness it," the creature explained. "Otherwise they would never have accepted the truth."

"All those dead people . . ." Renard murmured, thinking of his own experiences.

The Gedemondan nodded. "And thousands more now littering the plains. Perhaps this experience will save thousand more in times to come. War is the greatest of teachers, and not all of its lessons are bad. Their cost is just so terribly high."

Mavra had a different thought. "Suppose the engine module hadn't landed here," she asked him. "What then?"

"You misunderstand," replied the Gedemondan. "It landed here because it had to land here. It could land nowhere else." He nodded, almost to himself. "A very simple equation," he muttered.

They stood there a while in silence, stunned. Finally, Mavra asked, "What happens now? To us? To the warring powers?"

"The warring powers will pack up and go home," the Gedemondan replied matter-of-factly.

"Trelig? Yulin?" Renard pressed.

"Are too devious to have been caught here," the creature replied. "They will do as they always have done and act as they always have acted, until the time comes for their equations to solve. They are much entwined, those two, and with you, Renard, and you, Vistaru, and, most of all, with you, Mavra Chang."

She let it pass. All this talk of her importance seemed ridiculous.

"And us?" she prodded. "What happens to us now? I mean, you've pretty well blown your cover, haven't you?"

"Power is best used judiciously," the Gedemondan replied. "A simple adjustment, really. You never were picked up by us. You followed an old trail that seemed recently used, and discovered this valley. Then you watched as the engine module destroyed itself, jarred perhaps by too many sounds echoing across the valley and hitting just the wrong points as it fell. Then you made your way east, into Dillia, to report. You never ever saw the mysterious Gedemondans."

almost a perfect preservative."

"If only we could get somebody in the North to blow it up," Vardia said wistfully.

"I've already tried that," Ortega replied swiftly. "Things are different up there, that's all. So we've got a ship that's a ticking bomb, and maybe, hopefully, it'll never go off-but it just might. And if we run her through the Well of Souls, we might lose track or control of the only pilot we have!"

He shuffled through some papers, coming up with a photograph of New Pompeii.

"Look at that," he told her. "There's a computer there that knows the Well codes and math. It's capacity-limited, but it's self-aware, and so it's another player in the game. Against uncounted billions or trillions of lives in the universe, can the fate of one individual be considered? You know the answer." He slapped the computer printouts angrily, upset himself. "There it is, damn it! Tell me some way around it!"

"Maybe she'll solve her own problem," Vardia mused. "Get to a Zone Gate and get here. Then the Well's the only way out."

He shook his head. "That won't work, and I made sure she knows it. Whatever she is, Zone gates will be guarded day and night. If she makes it here, she'll be locked up in a nice, comfortable one-room office in this complex. No windows, no way out. She'll be an animal in a zoo, unable to smell the flowers or see the stars. That is more horrible to her than death, and she's just not the suicidal type."

"How can you be so damned sure of everything?" the Czillian asked him. "If 7 were her, facing her kind of future, I'm sure I would kill myself."

Ortega reached into his massive, U-shaped desk and pulled out a thick file. "The life history and profile of Mavra Chang," he told the other. "Partly from Renard, partly from some hypno interviews we did in Lata that she's not aware of, and partly from, ah, other sources I'm not ready to reveal now. Her whole life has been a succession of tragedies, but it's also the story of a dramatic, continuing fight against hopeless odds. She is psychologically incapable of giving up! Look at that Teliagin business. Even not knowing where she was or what was what, she refused to abandon those people. Even as a freak she still insisted on going to Gedemondas, and she did. No, somehow she'll cope. We'll make it as easy as we can for her." That last was said softly, with a gentleness Vardia would never have suspected of the Machiavellian snake-man and former human pirate.

"Look," he said, trying to soften it, "maybe another Type 41 Entry will come in. Then we'll be able to do something. There's hope."

The Czillian kept staring at the photograph. "You know the figures. One time there were lots of human Entries; what have we had in the last century? Two? And we lost track of both of those."

"One's dead, the other's in a salt-water hex and is the wrong kind of pilot," Ortega mumbled. The plant-creature hardly heard. Once it, too, had been a human female. That was why it was picked as the liaison with Ortega.

"I'd still kill myself," Vardia said softly.

ABOARD A SHIP JUST OFF GLATHRIEL

They had taken her first south from Dillia through Kuansa to Shamoan, the land of great spiders. She had no fear of spiders, and found them charming and very human.

The ambassador was very kind, but he explained the situation to her in graphic detail, concluding, "The only thing we can do right now is make it as easy as possible. Understand, we have no choice."

She started to say something, but a needle from someone behind pierced her skin, and things had blacked out.

They took her to a medical section with a strange machine. The ambassador explained it to Renard and Vistaru, who still accompanied her. Hosuru had gone to report and was home already.

"Basically, it reinforces the effect of a hypno," he explained. "It doesn't work on many races, but she's still Type 41, although modified, and it'll work on them and her. What it does is to do a more or less permanent burn-in of a basic hypno treatment, so it doesn't wear off. We know it works, because we took data on her in Lata using a similar device and then blocked all memory, and it held."

"But what will you tell her?" Vistaru worried. "You won't change her, will you?"

"Only a little," the ambassador replied. "Just enough to make her comfortable, adapt. We can't do anything serious; the whole reason for this is that we must keep her on hand for the skills and qualities she possesses. I think she understands that."

The process began.

"Mavra Chang," said the device, preprogrammed carefully. "When you awake, you will find your memories and personality unchanged. However, while you will remember being human, you will be unable to imagine yourself that way. The way you are now will seem natural and normal to you. This form is how you are comfortable. You cannot conceive of being any other way, even though you know you once were, and you wouldn't want to be any different than you are."

The thing went on for a bit, feeding her various bits of information, methods, skills she would need in order to cope, and then it was over.

She had awakened a few hours later, and felt strangely better, more at ease. She tried to remember why she had felt different before, but it came hard. Something to do with being hi this form, she recalled.

She remembered being human. Remembered it, but in a curious, lopsided kind of way. It seemed like she'd always had four legs. She tried to imagine herself walking upright on two legs, or picking up things with hands, and she just couldn't. It was just not right somehow. This was right.

Vaguely, in the back of her mind, she knew that they'd done something to her, something to create this situation, but it didn't seem important, somehow, and she quickly forgot it.

But she remembered the stars. She knew she belonged there, not here, not in any planetbound existence anywhere. She would sit there, topside on the ship as it crossed the Gulf of Turagin, sometimes by sail, sometimes by steam, depending on the hex, head and forelegs propped up on some crates or a hatch cover, looking at the stars.

She chuckled to herself. They thought she wanted to go through the Well. Or maybe they thought she'd settle down and forget in this new existence. But the stars came out every night, and those she would never forget. It went beyond reason and logic; it was a love affair. A love affair now forcibly broken by circumstances, but not beyond repair while both lovers lived.

And now, as the sun came up, there was a shoreline out there. It looked green and pretty and warm; sea birds circled offshore, diving occasionally for fish and clams, then took their catch to rookeries in the hillsides overlooking the beach.

Renard came on deck, stretched and yawned, then went over to her.

"Not an unpleasant-looking place for an exile," she said calmly.

He stooped down so his head was level with hers. "Very primitive. A tribal culture, not much else. They're human-what we think of as human. But this wasn't our ancestral home. They had a war with the Ambreza; the big beavers gassed them back into the Stone Age and swapped hexes, so it's a nontech hex."

also glow by secreting chemicals in the skin. MAKIEM N Diurnal: Large reptiles resembling giant toads who need some water daily though land-dwellers. Coldblooded and have sex only ten days a year during one period. NODI N Nocturnal: Resemble giant mushrooms; thousands of tendrils drop from their "caps" when needed. OLBORN SM Diurnal: Resemble huge, bipedal pussycats with the ability to create their own beasts of burden. PALIM H Diurnal: Resemble great hairy mammoths with remarkably prehensile trunk with fingers all around. PORIGOL (HM): Dolphinlike mammals who can stun or kill with sound. QASADA H Diurnal: Large ratlike creatures with long tails, whiskers, and hivelike communities. SHAMOZAN H Diurnal: These huge, hairy tarantulas like alcohol, melodic music, and games of skill. TELIAGIN N Diurnal: Great cyclopes; carnivores who raise their own sheep to eat and are bull-headed but not dumb. TULIGA (S): Giant, rather repulsive sea slugs, neither nice nor communicative. UCHJIN N Nocturnal: Look like giant paint smears flowing down" glass. ULIK H Diurnal: Great six-armed snake-men that live in a desert hex at the Equatorial Barrier. XODA NM Diurnal: Resemble four meters of praying mantis, and have a hypnotic way of inviting you to dinner. YAXA S Diurnal: Females who eat their husbands after sex. Look like giant orange-and- brown butterflies with hard shiny black bodies, eight prehensile tentacles, and a death's head for a face. Visual system is quite different from Southern norm. ZHONZORP H Diurnal: Large, bipedal relatives of the crocodile given to dressing up like grand opera, capes and all, but are solid technicians.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jack L. Chalker was born in Baltimore, Maryland on December 17, 1944. He learned to read almost from the moment of entering school, and by working odd jobs ranging from engineering outdoor rock concerts in the Sixties to computer typesetting, amassed a large SF/fantasy/horror book collection that today is ranked among the finest in private hands.

Chalker joined the Washington Science Fiction Association in 1958 and began publishing an amateur SF journal, *Mirage*, in 1960, and in 1963 founded the Baltimore Science Fiction Society. After high school, he set out to be a trial lawyer, but money problems caused him to switch to teaching as a career. He holds a Bachelors degree in both history and English from Towson State College and an M.L.A. in the History of Ideas from the Johns Hopkins University, and taught history and geography in the Baltimore City school system from 1966 until 1978 with time out for military service, until his writing career allowed him to become a full-time free lance writer. Additionally, out of the amateur journals, he founded a publishing house. The *Mirage Press, Ltd.*, producing over thirty books, mostly nonfiction, related to SF and fantasy, and, although no longer a major publisher, it still publishes an occasional book. His interests include computers, esoteric audio, travel, history and politics, lecturing on the SF field to private groups, universities, and such institutions as the Smithsonian. He is an active conservationist, a Sierra Club life member and National Parks supporter, and he has a passion for ferryboats, with the avowed goal of riding every one in the world. In fact, in 1978 he was married to Eva Whittey on an ancient ferryboat in mid-river, and they have lived since in the Catoclin Mountain region of Maryland with their son.