

HIGHWOOD

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ONE

Kearney Wynn topped the steep path and paused to catch her breath. Behind her, most of Chrestigho Branch was already lost in heavy clusters of bottle-green leaves. She could still see where the big limb made a wide, quarter-mile arc and plunged into thick foliage. Beyond were the last traces of the female barkeries, and further, the hazy, olive-blue wall that was the immense trunk of Sherandhel itself.

For a moment, she imagined a necklace of tiny silver dots atop a bark crevasse, high up the sheer face of the great column. A hunting party, maybe, but it was too far to be sure. She followed the trunk until it vanished in a dark blur, where the foliage merged into a sun-green umbrella.

As she watched, the umbrella darkened, and she knew one of the perpetual rainclouds was brushing the top branches. If the rain was heavy enough, the late afternoon would bring a light mist over Chrestigho, as water filtered down through a mile and a half of greenery. But no individual drops would ever get this far.

She kept her eyes slightly lowered and straight ahead as she walked. Chrestigho Branch was as wide as a city block at the Colony, but it narrowed to no more than forty yards or so this far out. It was a safe enough margin, she knew, but she kept well to the high center bark, anyway.

Kearney had looked down once—her first day on Sequoia. And once had been enough. She still shuddered at the memory of green fading abruptly from olive to cobalt to yawning darkness—down eight thousand unfathomable feet to whatever lay below.

The green ceiling darkened as she came under the looming shadow of Havarhta Bough. Havarhta was an offshoot of Hunter's Branch, which curved around from male territory and crossed a few yards above Chrestigho. She made the crossover quickly, without looking to either side.

Hamby Flagg was waiting.

He squatted on a stubby pinnacle of bark dangerously near Havarhta's edge. His pale skin was almost citron-colored in the filtered light, and she noted distastefully that he was wearing the same ragged shorts she'd seen before.

"Good morning, or whatever it is, now," said Kearney. "I'm glad you could make it. I thought perhaps you wouldn't come."

He gave her a quick, acid grin. "Oh, did you, now? Listen, friend—" He pointed a stubby finger at her midsection. "You ever pull that hand-talk crap on me again—"

Kearney waved him off impatiently. "Come off it, Flagg. You wouldn't have bothered if I hadn't made it interesting."

"Huh?"

She grinned impishly. "You read very well. And I did mean exactly what I said. I'd have walked right over The Line after you."

Ham frowned and muttered under his breath, "No, you wouldn't. You know better."

She smiled condescendingly. He wasn't sure at all, she was certain of that. Good. He didn't know what she might do, and that would help.

Ham shifted nervously and scratched his bare chest. "Look, I'm here. I can't stay forever. It's not safe to. What is it you want?"

Kearney stretched her long legs and notched her fingers in her belt. "I want to settle something else before we get into that. I want to know just how I got down from Sherandhel and into the female Colony. All I remember—"

Ham's eyes brightened. His lip curled into a slow grin. "All you remember is you passed out up there and you can't stand not knowing whether or not you got—what do you call it—molested?"

Kearney felt the heat rise to her face. "I assure you, the thought never—"

"Haw! Sure it did." The big grin widened. "Well, you can rest easy. Everything you *came here with* is still intact. What you did was keep your mask on too long on the way down. When you got to thick air you were already high on an oxy-mix and you couldn't get enough of the heavy stuff."

Ham spread his hands. "And that's it. Oh, I took a look at your papers and I know you're a socio-whatever-it-is and you've got a lot of fancy letters after your name. You've also got a lot of Class 'A' gear that's got no business on a 'C' planet. I put everything back where it was and dumped you and your stuff near the left fork of Chrestigho where the females'd find you. Anything

else?"

Kearney was silent. She knew if she said anything now it would come out as a mild explosion.

"Listen," Ham said finally. He took a deep breath, squinted at her curiously and shook his head. "I don't know you and I don't want to. I got nothing against you, and we're not likely to get well enough acquainted for me to find anything. You caused me a hell of a lot of trouble showing up here—I had some tall explaining to do to those characters, you know that? Now, suppose you get on with whatever it is you got me over here for and we can both go about our business. And it's not morning, by the way, it's around noon. If you're going to stay here, and I suppose you are, you might as well learn how to tell Tree time."

Kearney was watching him. She decided he wouldn't be a bad-looking man if he hadn't let himself go to fat. Evidently, his four years on Sequoia had been too easy. He was flabby. Out of shape. A big, flabby lizard with a blond beard and that utterly *ridiculous* Bear! She couldn't help grinning at the picture.

"What's funny?" he said darkly.

Kearney bit her lip and pretended to study the bark under her boot. "Well, we could start with RA reports, I guess...."

He looked up, puzzlement spreading across his face. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Resident Agent reports. Yours. I read them at ConFed. For—ho! ho!—*background* material on Sequoia." She laughed. "Now *that's* funny, Flagg."

Ham ignored her. He peered over his shoulder and listened to something, then faced her. He studied her a long minute, then his frown suddenly turned into a wide smile.

"Well, now. That's it, isn't it?"

"What's it?"

"You're on the track, Ham," the Bear broke in tinnily. "It's a fairly common defense mechanism, I'd say. She's attacking what she doesn't understand, primarily, and of course you can tell by her tonal quality there are very strong indications of fear, apprehension...."

Ham nodded agreement. "I can see that."

Kearney opened her mouth in bewilderment. "You can see *what?* What are you talking about, anyway!" She tried to keep her voice down. The man was absolutely impossible!

"There, you see?" said the Bear.

"Who am I supposed to talk to," snapped Kearney, "you or that—stuffed brain?" She laughed shrilly. "Honest to *God*, Flagg—things must be *very* bad on Sequoia!"

Ham didn't miss the implication, but his expression didn't change. "Like I said—it's pretty clear. Nobody did your job before you got here and you don't much like that. You figured maybe you could just—cut up little pieces of paper and stick 'em all together and that'd be that." He grinned and shook his head. "Sorry—I didn't come out here to write guide books."

Kearney raised one brow. "Flagg," she said coolly, "nobody could ever accuse you of *writing*. And I can do my own work, I assure you. It's just a little easier not to have to start from scratch. Usually, the RA reports cut out a lot of unnecessary digging. This time they don't. It'll take me a little longer, is all."

He frowned at that. "How much longer?"

His meaning was obvious to Kearney. She gave a bitter little laugh and cast her eyes up to the high green ceiling. A rare, straw-colored beam of light, no thicker than her finger, stabbed through the miles of heavy growth and spotted a broad leaf.

"Okay," she said wearily, "let's get it all out, Flagg."

She eased herself down on rough bark and crossed her ankles. "I have a socioecological report to make. You can help or not help. I'd rather you did. I'll make it if you don't." She flicked a small green bug from her boots. "It's as simple as that."

Ham rested his square jaw in the palm of his hand. He looked at her and closed one glass-blue eye in thought. "Well, let's see," he said soberly, "the Lemmits live in trees. The males live on one side of The Line, the females on the other. They don't like each other very much." He looked up openly. "What else would you like to know?"

Kearney felt her face burning. She took a deep breath and swallowed her words.

"That's the way you see it, then," she said evenly. "Four years and you know the females and males 'don't like each other very much.' "

"That's what I said."

"And that's all."

"Now, look—!" Ham bit his lip.

"No, *you* look, Flagg!" She pulled herself to her feet and faced him. "I don't believe for one damn minute you're quite the dull-witted clown of Sequoia you pretend to be. Though God knows you're doing a *marvelous* job of trying! The male and female Lemmits don't dislike each other, Flagg. They despise each other—*they can't stand the sight of the opposite sex!*"

"Sometimes," Ham said absently, "I can kind of understand how they feel."

"That's good!" the Bear laughed.

"All right," Kearney said evenly, "we'll pretend for the moment you're striking a serious note. And you're right. There's nothing too new about sexual separation. It's happened before. But it's not the same on Sequoia. Sequoia doesn't have a simple separation of the sexes. Sequoia has hatred. Ritual mating. *And a whole by God population of homosexuals!* One hundred percent of the population, Flagg."

Ham leaned back on his perch and raised a shaggy brow. "Kind of depends on where you are, doesn't it? If you go messing around with statistics, I mean." He smiled crookedly. "I guess that makes you and me the deviates here, doesn't it?"

Kearney sighed. "Okay, Flagg. That's what it does, all right."

Ham was enjoying himself. "I mean," he went on, "everybody's not the same. If they were, you wouldn't have a lot to do, would you?"

"That's it, then?" Kearney asked him.

"That's what?"

"You don't intend to tell me what you know."

Ham stood up. He was taller than she'd thought. Some of the fat—not all of it—folded itself back where it belonged when he was on his feet. The Bear hung limply from a worn strap over his shoulder.

"Now you got it right," he said tightly. He was so close to her, she could smell the acid scent of sweat, and count the tiny beads of moisture on his brow.

"Nobody asked you to come here—least of all the Lemmits, who by the way are very damn touchy about everything—particularly their sex lives. And since it's kind of their world, I don't see any reason why they can't run it the way they want to. Do you?"

She looked away from him. "That's enough, Flagg."

"No. There's one more thing! Take some nice pictures of the funny planet, Miss Wynn, and put some fancy words together. Then hike it back up Sherandhel and flag a taxi. *You don't belong here!*"

He turned away, and stalked quickly up Havarhta Bough.

"Flagg!" Kearney snapped.

He stopped and glared back at her.

"You know something's terribly wrong with the Lemmits, don't you?" she said quietly. "And you really don't care...."

Ham squinted at her, then shook his head in disgust and disappeared through olive foliage.

Kearney stared after him a long moment. She'd seen the one small flicker of hesitation in his eyes.

She was right, then.

Ham Flagg knew.

And if he did, she asked herself, why was he so damned and determined to keep that knowledge to himself?

TWO

kearney pressed her face against the skimmer window as the dayside crescent of Sequoia curved over the horizon.

"My God—look at that!"

Immediately, she felt the heat rise to her face and she grinned sheepishly at Streeter Kane. Kane winked at her and chuckled to himself.

"Okay," Kearney said wryly, "so I sound like I've never been offplanet. But, Streeter, really—"

Kane nodded in understanding. He touched the control bank lightly. Blue lights flickered and he gestured to port as the skimmer veered sharply.

Below, gray clouds scudded over the broad surface of the planet. Occasionally, the clouds parted to show dark patches of green, and once Kearney thought she saw a flock of great-winged birds etched against dull olive. And everywhere gaunt, black spires poked sharply through the cottony mist.

"It's kind of hard to take, all right," Kane assured her. "And those are just the tops, of course. Most of 'em hit by lightning. Hell, they ought to have been over—what? Twenty thousand years? Fifty? I don't think ConFed's even got an educated guess on that, yet."

He nodded again, toward the invisible giants. "Real foliage doesn't start until three, four thousand feet under what you're seeing. It's another three on down to where the Lemmits live."

He grinned at Kearney. "Sure you don't want to change your mind?" He reached past her to check the panel and carelessly let his hand brush her leg.

Kearney looked past him out the window. "No," she said almost to herself. "I'm not sure at all, Streeter...."

Kearney knew a great deal more about Sequoia than Streeter Kane—as far as facts were concerned. But seeing the great Trees was something else again. She turned back to him.

"How do you—know which one is mine?" she asked.

Streeter shrugged. "Don't." He lifted his hands from the console. "Ship's got it now. There's a Homer on top of Sherandhel. I activated the signal as soon as we hit atmosphere. The RA ought to be on his way up to get you."

"Oh. I see."

Kane caught her tone. He reached out and touched her hand. "What, Kearney?"

Kearney shrugged. "Nothing." She looked up at him. "Do you know Hamby Flagg?"

"I hauled him in here. I leave his supplies up by the Homer. No, I don't know him." He paused and looked at her. "Why?"

Kearney sank down in her seat and folded her legs under the console. "He writes lousy reports," she said dully.

Kane stared at her, then threw back his head and laughed. "That's all you're worried about, Kearney?"

Kearney didn't answer.

The sunset was startling over blood-red clouds. Then, night dropped down without warning and brought angry winds razored with stinging pellets of rain.

Kearney huddled under the weather tent anchored to the naked branch and silently cursed Hamby Flagg. She checked her watch once more. Seven hours! What the hell was he *doing*? Did he intend to leave her up here all night?

She was grateful for the thermal suit and the oxygen. It was like spending the night on the bare peak of a mountain—only this mountain by God *moved* in the wind. And creaked.

She remembered with a cold shudder that lightning had been searing the tops of Sequoia's Trees for thousands of years. With her luck, it would be Sherandhel's turn again tonight. She made a grim face. A great way to begin the tour—baked to a crisp before she was twenty feet into the Highwood.

She swept the thought aside and settled in to wait for morning, or Hamby Flagg—whichever came first.

Flagg arrived at noon the next day.

He was an anonymous figure in a worn thermal suit much like her own. A thick air hose masked his features. All Kearney could see were glass-blue, expressionless eyes that seemed to look past her with no particular interest. He didn't speak to her. He hoisted the compact load of supplies the skimmer had left and pointed to the climbing vine that led to the foliage belt three thousand feet below. He showed her the safety clamp on her suit, and clipped his own into place.

Then he left her.

Kearney followed quickly. She didn't look down. She knew what was there and she didn't want to see it. Not just yet....

She couldn't remember being so tired.

Every muscle felt like an agonizing weight attached to her bones. Hamby Flagg wasn't much on rest stops. When he did pause, it wasn't for long. She was only able to sink down and catch

her breath and then he was on his way again. So far, he hadn't spoken. Kearney decided she wasn't sure he remembered she was there.

She collapsed gratefully on the broad branch under a cover of heavy leaves. There was no sound around her. The foliage was bright emerald, the air itself tinged with a dull, topaz-yellow. Flagg was turned away from her, pulling the thermal suit down over his legs. She suddenly remembered how stifling hot she was, and reached eager hands to jerk the mask off her face and shove the tight hood from around her head. It was a painfully beautiful feeling. She ran fingers through her long hair, fluffing it out quickly with a comfortable sigh of pleasure.

Flagg turned at the sound. Kearney started to speak, then caught the man's expression. Color drained from his face. His jaw went slack.

"What-the-bloody-*hell!*" he gasped. He backed away from her as if he'd been struck.

Kearney looked at him quizzically. *Now, what?* She raised herself up on unsteady legs and faced him, hands on her hips.

"Well, what the bloody hell yourself, friend!" she blurted. "What's the matter with you, Flagg? It *is* Flagg, isn't it?"

Hamby stared. Whatever it was he saw, he couldn't bring himself to believe it. He stole a quick glance over his shoulder at the foliage behind and Kearney followed his gaze. She caught four golden eyes before they disappeared into green shadow.

"Well," she demanded, "what is it?"

She folded her arms and glared at him fiercely. "Come on—whatsr— whass—"

Now that was irritating, she thought crossly. The words wouldn't come out right. She tried to concentrate on Flagg. Flagg insisted on wavering in green air. He simply wouldn't stand still. She stared past him, followed the gigantic column that stretched above them through heavy foliage until its cold crest was swallowed in the sky. She followed it up ... up ... up until it faded into warm, salty darkness....

Kearney opened her eyes.

At first she was sure she was in some kind of a cave, then she remembered they were unlikely to have caves in the Highwood. She brought her vision into focus and saw the walls curving above her were hollowed from richly-grained wood. The wood glowed with a soft orange light, and she saw the light came from a wicker cage directly over her head.

A tiny buzzing sound came from the cage and Kearney studied it thoughtfully. She decided, finally, the light was really thousands of tiny fireflies clustered together. The buzzing was restful, almost hypnotic, and she closed her eyes and began to drift into sleep again. Then she heard the sound. She opened her eyes quickly.

The two creatures sat across the room, watching her silently. As Kearney turned and saw them, one rose and moved soundlessly in her direction.

She followed the creature with her eyes—a light, fragile thing with a tiny waist and long, slender legs. The slim body was covered in a fine, silky gray fur that lightened to pale white over small, budding breasts. When it kneeled down, Kearney stared up into golden saucer eyes.

"You feelit better, *Hai?*"

The voice was soft, sibilant, almost a purr. Kearney strained to bring her crash course in the Lemmit language into play.

"Yes. Much better, thank you."

She wanted to ask where she was, how she had gotten there, where Hamby Flagg had gone—but something warned her this was not the thing to do at all. Not now.

The creature smiled. Small, pliant lips curved under a velvety button nose.

"You havit hungry? You colders?"

"No," said Kearney. "Maybe a little water. In a minute. Thank you."

"Erfedrie gettin foods, or whatever," the creature insisted. "You be askit Erfedrie, Erfedrie bringin, *Hai?*"

Kearney smiled warmly and pulled herself up on her arms. She could see the other Lemmit over a silky shoulder. It sat unmoving on the other side of the room, big eyes fixed unwaveringly on Kearney and its friend.

"Is that your name? Er-*fed-ree?*"

The Lemmit seemed delighted. "Erfedrie!" She laughed. "And you callin whasit?"

Kearney frowned. "Oh. Of course! You mean my name? Kearney. Kearney Wynn."

A small red tongue appeared at the side of the Lemmit's mouth. It flicked in and out, tasting the new syllables carefully.

"Keeeeeeme. Kerneew'n!"

"Right!" Kearney laughed. "Very good—better than I did. We'll have to do some—"

Kearney stopped. She stared down, startled. Delicate silk fingers toyed with the snaps over her breasts.

"Hey, now!" She gently pushed the small hand away. "Wait a second, friend...."

The fingers went away as softly as they had come. Golden eyes peered down at her curiously.

"Whas bein wrong, Kerneew'n? *Hai?*" She glanced across the room at the other Lemmit, then smiled gently at Kearney.

"Whasit, Kerneew'n?" she repeated sadly. "Whyser you pushit, *Hai?*"

Kearney looked up at the large, golden eyes, the small pink mouth that curled like the tips of mothwings. Erfedrie was alien—but she was unmistakably all female. And Kearney had the sudden, chilling sensation that she could see a sensuous, unearthly caricature of herself mirrored in the Lemmit's silken features.

"Erfedrie's likit you ver mucher, Kerneew'n," she said softly. "Ver mucher, Kerneew'n...."

Kearney felt the whisper-light fingers brush against her again and she shrank quickly away from them.

"Go away, please," she cried, "go *away!*"

THREE

ham froze, the long arrow nocked in his bow.

The Lemmits on the branch ahead had stopped. They stood perfectly still, deep golden eyes searching for shadow patterns, flat, dishlike ears trembling slightly with touches of sound.

Ham didn't try to listen. Whatever it was they heard, it was well beyond his own range. It might be a lizard scratching on a nearby branch, or something several miles away.

From the corner of his eye he saw Karajhak drop silently and press his ear against bark. He stayed a long moment, color and form molded to the branch itself. Finally, he raised one slender arm and another hunter moved quickly and melted into greenness.

Ham followed with his eyes. He saw the hunter slide off the branch through heavy foliage. If a single leaf noted his passage, Ham didn't spot the movement. He flowed with the uncanny grace peculiar to Lemmits that always seemed to remind Ham of quicksilver rolling about on a sheet of glass.

He caught the hunter moments later fifty yards above, flattened on a slim bough—a small discoloration, a blotch of gray on gray. Enough, though, if you knew what you were looking for.

Ham allowed himself a satisfied grin. His wood vision had come a long way in four years. In the beginning there was one color on Sequoia as far as he was concerned: Green. A smothering, thick blanket of green that made him feel he was drowning in a viscous chlorophyll sea.

Now, his color sense included a whole palette of subtle tones and shades—a thousand greens and as many yellows and browns and russets. The Highwood around him teemed with silent, unmoving life. A *seri* bird tried to hide butter-light wings in the saffron blooms of a climber vine. A *teli-teli* dozed on a wide leaf, but its jasper back glared like an electric sign to Ham.

He felt he could nearly match the Lemmits now with his quick eyes. He couldn't approach them on sound, or speed—or their uncanny ability to blend with their surroundings. He was surprisingly good at trail-sniffing, an art he would have never dreamed of practicing on Earth. That was a sense reserved for primitives—or animals. It was certainly not a talent that could be learned by a city-bred Terran.

He wondered how his nose would react now to the smells of one of the sprawling megacenters? It was a frightening thought.

In the beginning, it had bothered him that no matter how proficient he might become on the trail, he could never approach the most inexperienced Lemmit. He'd stopped worrying about that long ago. They didn't expect him to be a Lemmit. It was enough that he was no longer a menace on the hunt. He knew that if they didn't trust him, he wouldn't be there at all. Carelessness couldn't be tolerated. There were too many ways to die in the Highwood.

The hunter dropped silently back to the branch and spoke quickly to Karajhak. Karajhak listened, nodded, and the rest of the party suddenly relaxed.

Ham stalked to the front of the column. "What's up?" he asked.

"Gibiks." Karajhak spoke without facing him. His big, oversized eyes blinked once. Pharesh, Karajhak's current favorite, laid his hand easily over the hunter's shoulder. Karajhak shot him a murderous glance and shook him off irritably.

"Hunder'so Gibik," he said, finally looking at Ham. "Anyways, this whasis Theremek's thinkit. Karajhak sayin be more likit two, maybe three hunder—" He made a quick gesture with his slim fingers. "Comit cross us thiser way, by Khartego Branch. Maybe ten, 'leven *Lhats* 'way, now."

Ham made a face. A pack of Gibiks that big would chase away every trace of game for miles around.

Karajhak's quick eyes caught the look.

"*Hai?* You speakit somethin, 'Amby?" He frowned, and his nose twitched uncertainly.

Ham read the slight hint of challenge in the Lemmit's features, and wished he'd said nothing at all. Karajhak had been as touchy as a blister-bug since the hunt began. It was that time of year, and every male in the Colony was on edge—but Karajhak was edgier than most.

"Just thinking," Ham said easily. "The idea of meeting a pot full of Gibiks gives me the creeps is all."

Karajhak gave him a narrow smile and shrugged thin shoulders. "Meet? Who gonner *meet* Gibiks, 'Amby? We bein long wayser gones 'fore Gibik come."

Ham cleared his throat and looked blandly past the hunter's shoulder. "Well, I figured that. I just meant—"

"Gibiks *here*," Karajhak scolded softly. He jabbed one hand quickly into the other. "We bein here. Plenty mucher time to crossit Ghe'hetse, *Hai?*"

Ham said nothing. He caught the quick, almost imperceptible exchange of glances past Karajhak. Karajhak jerked around. He let his gaze sweep every face. Lemmits began busying themselves with bowstrings and spearheads that suddenly needed attention. Karajhak dismissed them all with a dark scowl and set off down the branch at a hurried pace.

Pharesh paused beside Ham. For a moment, he seemed to consider catching up with Karajhak, then thought better of it. He stared sorrowfully after the retreating figure, then skulked along behind.

Ham was bone tired.

On top of that, he was almost mad enough to strangle Karajhak. He cursed the Lemmit and slowed down to catch his breath.

Karajhak had used dangerously bad judgment in deciding to go on with the hunt. He knew it, the other Lemmits knew it, and Ham was dead certain Karajhak had perpetrated the whole thing deliberately. Ham shook his head and let out a short breath. That was the thing about Lemmits. If pride got in the way of reason, you could be damn sure reason didn't have a chance to come out on top....

The scenery was changing drastically. Foliage thinned out and branches began to shrink in size where the end of the Tree interlaced with the beginnings of another. It was easier to spot trouble—and just as easy, Ham reminded himself, for trouble to spot you. If Karajhak had miscalculated the Gibiks' direction, or distance, or speed—

He shuddered at the thought. "Damn the little bastard's temper!" he muttered to himself. The Gibiks nearly always sent scouts ahead of the pack—sometimes miles ahead. If they caught the Lemmits in the Ghe'hetse Crossover, or even *smelled* them there....

"You're very adventurous today," commented the Bear. "I'd guess with the air density as it is and all other factors considered, Brother Karajhak had a good chance of catching that—about seven to five."

Ham gave the Bear a fierce glance. "That's tough."

"A rash statement based on nothing. Easier to voice with careless bravado when one is standing securely on a branch and not being tossed from it."

"Listen—" Ham began.

"—Oh, sure. The thought occurs that I should mind my own business—which is kind of a

double something or other, since, as a mirror to your questionable ego, I am, in a great sense, minding *your* own business, no matter what I say."

Ham didn't answer. Sometimes, if you completely ignored them, a psychBear would run down of its own accord. He glanced ahead. The last hunter in line had disappeared and he quickened his pace. If the Gibiks found him alone in the Highwood, he reflected miserably, he wouldn't have to worry about Karajhak's temper or the psychBear or the girl or anything else. A Gibik wouldn't leave enough of Hamby Flagg to send home under a postage stamp.

For some reason, the girl had been worrying at the edge of his mind all day. She'd shown up on Sequoia at the worst possible moment—if she had to show up at all. Lemmits were easy enough to get along with most of the time, if you knew how to handle them. But now wasn't most of the time. With a Mothering coming up, they were as touchy as hot lizards. Nearly anything could set them off—or nothing at all.

He remembered the year before, when a white bird had managed to run into a branch over the Colony and fall squarely on The Line between male and female territory. The Lemmits had read everything but the end of the world into that particular omen, and Ham had kept close to his quarters until things calmed down again.

They hadn't really made quite a big a deal out of Kearney Wynn. He was grateful for small favors. Still, Jhavhat wasn't exactly overjoyed at her appearance in the Highwood. Ham had spent two days assuring the cagey old wizard that there was some perfectly logical reason why a human female was on Sequoia, and that he, Ham, certainly considered the woman-thing as utterly despicable as all female creatures.

He hadn't dared dignify Kearney with a name. Females identified each other among themselves, the same as males, but to males they were all "that creature," "the short female thing," or some other description befitting suborder status.

Finally, Jhavhat managed to discover a fairly favorable sign among his dry leaves—but it had cost Ham his last Earthside candy bar to turn the trick. He thought about that candy bar as he jogged along behind the Lemmits. His chest ached at Karajhak's ridiculous pace, and sharp pains clawed at the back of his calves. His mouth was dry and there was a burning emptiness in the pit of his stomach—the kind of emptiness that might be best filled by the slick taste of chocolate and the pleasure of discovering an unexpected almond....

The more he thought about the candy bar, the less he liked Kearney Wynn.

—Not that he gave a damn about her in the first place, he added hastily. She was good enough to look at, maybe—a little on the slim side and kind of tall for her shape, but he couldn't find much fault, even in Kearney Wynn—considering he hadn't seen a human female of any size or shape in four years.

Still, he couldn't forget how she'd looked at him the morning on Havarhta Bough. He wouldn't ever forget that.

She had no business pinning him down with a bunch of questions. Like he was some damn—clerk or something. He remembered the scene perfectly—how she stood there with one hand on her hips, legs braced apart in those godawful boots that weren't worth a Fed penny on bark. A black wing of hair had fallen over one eye and she stared at him with cold disdain down her educated nose.

Okay—so he was wearing everyday bush gear. What did she expect—green tie and tights? She could take her fancy degrees and—

He grinned to himself suddenly and let the breath of a laugh escape his lips. She wanted to know all about sex among the Lemmits, did she? Well Miss Smart Butt just might find out all she wanted to know before she left Sequoia—and then some. There were enough wide-eyed and willing teachers over in the female Colony. They'd be more than glad to explain—

Ham stopped. He blinked and wiped sweat from his eyes and felt his heart slip up into his throat. He was alone. There wasn't a Lemmit in sight! The whole branch ahead was empty. More than that, the limb split suddenly and forked to the left and the right.

"What the hell were *you* doing," he growled at the psych-Bear, "taking a goddamn electric nap?"

"I am neither Danyul Bun nor Lee Ferikson nor any other great tracker of the wilderness," the Bear answered dryly. "Whereas you, now—"

"Shut up," snapped Ham. "I'm thinking."

"Well you might, too."

Ham held his breath and listened. The Highwood had gone silent. There was only one sound to be heard, and that one made his blood run cold. It was a faint *thrum—thrum—thrum—thruuuuummmmm.... thrum—thrum—thruuuuummmmm....*

He knew what it was.

He'd heard it once before and hadn't ever wanted to hear it again.

Gibiks had large, double sets of lungs—one set breathed in while the other breathed out. Which meant a Gibik could keep moving at a fair pace almost indefinitely. When a large pack traveled together, they could sound like a thousand sleepy housecats all at once—unless you knew what they were. Then they didn't sound like anything in the universe except hungry Gibiks.

And that was exactly what they sounded like now.

He ran quickly down the left branch, peering ahead, telling himself to keep calm, that panic wouldn't solve anything. Gibiks could probably smell that, too. Then he ran back and stared down the right.

Nothing.

He remembered, suddenly, and emptied his lungs of air and threw himself to the bark at the fork of the two limbs. He let his nostrils pull up the scents lingering there. The Lemmits had definitely *been* there, but— He glanced up, puzzlement spreading across his face. They had come to the fork, all right—but they hadn't gone down either limb!

He wondered if Karajhak had finally snapped, and led the whole party off the branch and down—

"'Amby! Hai, *quicket!*"

Ham jerked up. Karajhak was less than four feet away on the limb above. No wonder he couldn't pick up their trail below.

Karajhak gestured wildly and Ham pulled himself up, feeling his knees and stomach scrape bark.

"Kar—" he choked, "must've gotten behind a little. I'm—" The Lemmit's eye cut him off scornfully. "No *talkit*, 'Amby. Gibik *smell* talkit—you know that?"

He turned coldly away and Ham followed. He could see taut muscles trembling under silky fur. He was surprised to note that Karajhak was just as scared as he was. Though why he shouldn't be, Ham couldn't decide.

Karajhak bent low, sniffing the branch at his feet as he ran. Sometimes he stopped a moment, cocked his head, then moved on. He made Ham extremely nervous. He could see no reason for doing anything at all besides running faster than he'd ever run before. It wasn't necessary to strain for the sound of Gibiks anymore. They were close enough to hear without any effort at all.

Karajhak stopped so suddenly Ham nearly ran over him. The Lemmit let out a low cry and started ripping bark with his fingers. Ham stared. *Now what the hell....!*

"Too late to bein runners," Karajhak explained over his shoulder. "Gibik findin us plenty quick, now."

Ham swallowed. "Yeah, well—"

The bark under Karajhak's hands came loose with a sudden, ripping sigh. Ham got one quick look at a dark hole with something vaguely white at the bottom—then the odor rose from below and found his nostrils.

His stomach turned over and nearly emptied itself on the spot.

"My God!" he gasped. "What—*is* it!"

"No talkit, 'Amby," snapped Karajhak. He looked fearfully over his shoulder past Ham and nodded toward the hole. "In, 'Amby—quicket!"

Ham gaped at him. "In *there?*" He looked up as Karajhak shoved.

A bed of wet, colorless things came up to meet him, then he hit bottom. He immediately choked and retched. The things he hadn't crushed squirmed and mewled beneath him, gnawing at his legs with thin, ineffectual pincers. Karajhak came in on top of him, pulling the bark back in place as well as he could, and pressing Ham deeper into the mess below.

Ham retched again.

"No more sicket, 'Amby," Karajhak complained. "You unnerstandin no more sickit?"

Ham cursed him soundlessly under his breath. There was no damn way he could be any more *sickit*. There was nothing left to be sickit with.

He looked up miserably. Karajhak had raised the bark slightly. A tight grin bared sharp teeth.

Ham edged up beside him, ignoring the noises under his feet.

Ham shuddered. The Highwood was alive with Gibiks. The great creatures moved swiftly from branch to branch with terrible, ugly grace. There was no sound at all except the low *thruummmm—thrummmmm* of their chests.

Gibiks had the long, hairy arms of a Terran tree sloth, and the agility of spider monkeys. Their pelts were a darker gray than the Lemmits, and the small bullet heads held little more than beady pink eyes and cavernous jaws. Ham turned away from the sight.

If he was about to be eaten by Gibiks, he sure as hell didn't have to watch.

"Is hokay, 'Amby," whispered Karajhak. "No Gibik gonna be comit here—is no likit to smellin *Sheri* wormses...."

"You can't very well blame 'em for that," muttered Ham.

Karajhak didn't answer. He was watching intently through a tiny inch of bark.

It seemed like an eternity to Ham before the Lemmit heard the signs for which he was waiting. Ham heard them, too—a *teli-teli* clicked testily, then let out a raucous cry that echoed from branch to branch. A blue barker thumped lazily against a nearby leaf. Life was coming back to the Highwood, and the Gibiks had moved on.

Ham pulled himself up and blinked in the buttery afternoon light. He took a deep breath and turned to Karajhak. Karajhak raised a cautious finger to his lips, and nodded to his right. Ham followed him a dozen yards down the branch before Karajhak stopped. The Lemmit turned, suddenly, and faced Ham with sad, painful eyes.

"Listen, 'Amby," he said. "Whyser you not keepit up before, *Hai*? All bodies goin on an you bein back where Gibik comit. Karajhak up *there*—'Amby still bein *here*. Whyser, 'Amby?"

Ham signed. *Now* we're going to talk about it. "Look, Kar—"

"Toooo bad," Karajhak said solemnly. "Pretty toooo bad, 'Amby. Whyser, *Hai*?"

Karajhak waited.

Ham said nothing. He was too tired to follow the Lemmit's train of thought. Besides that, he knew better than to argue. It just wasn't worth it with Lemmits. This one had been mean-tempered all morning. Now, he was either hurt, mad, depressed—or hell, maybe even happy. There was no way to tell. All you could do was wait, hope he ran down eventually before—

Ham stopped.

He didn't take his eyes from Karajhak. He didn't let his gaze even flicker to the left or the right. He simply turned deliberately in the opposite direction.

It was waiting on a limb twenty yards beyond Karajhak's shoulder and in the brief half-second it was within Ham's vision he knew instinctively what it was.

It was not from Sherandhel Tree. The amber blossom in its hand said it had declared itself *Dhaj*—and Ham knew his eyes should never, never have looked upon it.

He didn't think about anything. He simply put one foot in front of the other and prayed Karajhak understood exactly what it was he was doing....

FOUR

kearney awoke.

She lay perfectly still for a long moment, cautiously opening one eye, then the other. The fireflies dozed in faint clusters of amber; only a dim glow came from the wicker cage.

Through the narrow mouth of the hollow she could see the first pale tinge of a bottle-green dawn. The sun had been up for a good three hours, but she knew it would be another two before it rose high enough to penetrate the miles of foliage overhead and let Sequoia's day begin in earnest.

She turned and squinted toward the rear of the hollow, then breathed a deep sigh of relief. The coarse sleeping robes of Erfedrie and Drephira were empty. That meant they'd gone before first-light to be early at the vines.

Erfedrie had scolded the older Lemmit unmercifully the night before, following her doggedly from one end of the room to the other with high, chattering accusations.

Drephira obviously cared more for her sleep than Erfedrie's welfare. If this wasn't so, Drephira would get up in time to gather fresh fruits and wouldn't be satisfied with the pulpy, half-eaten

specimens she invariably brought to the hollow—sour, shriveled bits of offal not fit for a bark lizard.

For awhile, Kearney found herself feeling sorry for the harried Drephira. That was before the fight ended, and the Lemmits decided to make up....

She moved her sleeping robe as far away as possible. That didn't help at all. She pulled the robe over her head and finally tried to sleep with both arms pressed against her ears. She finally dozed off, but the sounds followed her into sleep and wove disturbing dreams she didn't care to remember in the morning.

The fight and its aftermath had accomplished one thing, anyway, she decided. It had kept Erfedrie occupied for the night and left Kearney free of the Lemmit's overtures, and Drephira's deadly glances.

The natural bowl in the rear of the hollow constantly filled itself with slow drops of bitter water. She guessed it tapped one of the giant branch's pipelines deep within the cambium sheath.

She washed her face, combed her hair into some semblance of order, and slipped a fresh blouse over her shoulders.

From the narrow doorway, the light seemed much brighter now, and she could see silken shadows moving against barkeries across the way—and further, thick clusters of yellow-green leaves spread against endless branches.

She was glad the two Lemmits were gone—she didn't *need* that sort of business this morning.

Kearney wrapped arms protectively about her shoulders against an invisible wind. *My God!* she thought. *I haven't led a particularly sheltered life, but I am not ready to play the third side of a female triangle. I haven't been on Sequoia that long!*

She had decided she could probably handle Erfedrie and Drephira—only it didn't end there. There were the furtive glances and soft, casual touches as she passed through the female side of the Colony. And then, every evening, there was the business of the feathers.

They were small tufts of bright blue stuck in the bark outside their hollow. The collection seemed to grow day by day, and finally she asked Erfedrie what they were for.

And Erfedrie told her.

Each feather, she explained blandly, was notched in a certain way along one side of its barbs. The feathers represented different suitors who wished to make love to Kearney.

Kearney had stiffened and felt the heat rise to her face. Erfedrie gave her a knowing grin and held a single feather under her golden eyes. The other side of the barb carried a personal message, she said. Would Kerneew'n like to hear one?

No, Kerneew'n would not! She stalked back into the hollow and brooded by herself for the rest of the evening. The whole idea was bad enough—she'd be *damned* if she had to listen to the scatological shorthand on a feather!

The thing to do, she told herself, was to look at the whole thing objectively—from a socioecological point of view. Only that wasn't easy. She felt very much like a fly gathering data on spiders: It was simple enough to get close to the subject. Backing off later was something else again....

It was still early for much real traffic about the Colony, but Kearney kept to the high, less-frequented trails, just in case. She was in no mood for company. Something worried at the edge of her thoughts—it was tantalizingly close one moment, provocatively out of reach the next. She knew, from experience, there was no use trying to capture elusive mental butterflies. It would surrender, in time, or it wouldn't.

Kearney frowned irritably. There were enough questions on Sequoia to keep a *corps* of socioecologists climbing the walls. Any first-year student would grasp that much, her first hour onplanet. The bland surface sketches in Flagg's reports were less than a preface to the real world of the Highwood. Certainly, there were glaring, obvious anomalies that could be picked up and collected like beach pebbles—homosexuality, ritual mating, social prohibitions—God, a whole raft of psychological no-no's! They were fine, academic curiosities, and nothing more—the sharp tips of socioecological icebergs masking greater dangers below.

Somewhere, Kearney knew, there was an explanation for it all. Mores and manners didn't form overnight like summer dew. Somewhere, sometime, something had happened—something that had set the whole pattern of Lemmitian deviation into motion.

Kearney stopped. She bit her lip thoughtfully and moved off the path under a broad cluster of leaves, then eased herself down and stared into the green distances.

And that, of course, was it, wasn't it?

There wasn't any sometime and somewhere on Sequoia.

There was now.

There was here.

Lemmits occasionally talked about things that happened yesterday, or the day before, or even a year in the past. But for the most part it was now. And it was always *here*. Not just on Sequoia, or in the Highwood itself. Here. On Sherandhel Tree.

Hunting parties might cross the outer branches to a neighboring giant, but such a place held no real name connection in the Lemmit mind. The Lemmit didn't *associate* himself with the act of being outside the shadow of Sherandhel. He lived and died, essentially, in a closed ecology. He was confined to a temperate zone of a single Tree. Seldom above that zone—*never* below. Period. All else was beyond the borders of Lemmit philosophy.

Only they're not really confined at all, she reminded herself. *Not physically, anyway. No one in the universe has more potential freedom than the Lemmits. They've locked themselves in a stronger cage than that...*

The clue, then, lay outside the mental bars of the Lemmit mind. Somewhere Lemmit logic and reason couldn't—or wouldn't—go. Beyond Sherandhel, beyond the Highwood itself.

It was difficult to venture into complexities with Erfedrie, but Kearney had gleaned at least one basic, and terrifying, truth from the female's store of experience: The Lemmits had no recorded history that didn't include the great Tree.

But Kearney knew life didn't begin in trees. It began, traditionally, in the muddy life soup of a primitive sea. And there was certainly nothing like *that* in the Lemmit consciousness. Legends on Sequoia spanned a bare handful of years. Nothing lived across the centuries, and the concept of millennia was inconceivable.

Somewhere between the forgotten past and the everpresent now, something had happened. And whatever it was, it had irrevocably locked the Lemmits out of time.

And there was something else, too.

It was too early for trends, Kearney knew. She had done little more than set up the problem itself and feed in a few basic starter factors.

But there it was, anyway—a dark blot on the face of the small screen of her psy-pak. It was the beginning of a very positive-looking, undeviating curve. She knew, of course, it meant nothing at all. It was only a line that had nosed itself into the edge of an otherwise empty field.

Only it shouldn't have even been there at all....

Kearney looked up, startled. She stopped to take her bearings and realized her thoughts had carried her off the high paths above the bark canyons, onto a polished trail that wound through the low hollows themselves.

It was an area she hadn't seen before. The path narrowed and twisted sharply downward. Dark tiers of wood rose around her, closed in upon themselves until there was only a thin strip of citron light overhead.

She let her eyes travel up through shadow, then trace the brooding walls back to the floor of the hollow.

There was no breeze at all, but Kearney felt suddenly chilled. There was a vague, uncomfortable stillness in the dusky air. It was as if everything here had ceased to change in some far, dryadic past. Light, sound and shadow held drawn breaths, waiting out of time....

Kearney shrugged off the dark thoughts and curved her lip in a gesture of self-disgust. *For God's sake—waiting for what? What are you going to do, let yourself get spooked every time a—*

She jerked up, every muscle caught in the shock of tension. A cry stuck in her throat.

Okay, she told herself calmly, spooked or not, I saw something there. There was something up there and it moved!

She stood very still, watching one point a few degrees above eye level, letting peripheral vision do the work. There! Her heart skipped a full beat. She turned her head slightly and caught the flick of golden eyes. They were gone as quickly as they came, but there were others now, pale blinks of light watching her from the dark tiers and the shadows of the hollow itself.

She backed away until her shoulders touched cold wood. She could see them now—slight,

silky forms all around her, ghost figures bathed in olive.

Kearney stood rigid. One of the Lemmits separated itself from the others and stepped toward her. She wore a thin garland of buttery flowers around slim shoulders and she was extremely tall for a female. She moved with a graceful, willowy motion, and Kearney felt something stir within her. She swallowed hard and knew color had burned into her cheeks.

The Lemmit caught the quick shadow of emotion in Kearney's features. The great eyes half-closed in a lazy gesture and she smiled with pink, mothwing lips. She stared at Kearney a long moment, then turned and walked away.

Kearney shook her head. *Now that is perfectly ridiculous, Wynn . . . you have never had a thought like that floating about in your feeble mind and you don't have one now!*

She suddenly realized there were distinct clusters of Lemmits in the hollow, and on the tiers above. Each cluster centered around one of the flower-clad figures.

It was some kind of an honor, then. A ceremony where certain females had been singled out for some special purpose. And whatever it was, she told herself grimly, she didn't want to have anything whatever to do with it. She turned—then stopped. The path was blocked. Golden eyes smiled. Kearney whirled in sudden panic. The other females had moved a step closer.

Okay, just take it easy—nothing's going to happen....

She bit her lips and fought a mounting wave of hysteria. The hell something wasn't! She knew perfectly well what was coming, and how much of a chance she had of doing a thing about it.

For a quick moment, she felt strangely detached, as if she were standing outside of herself and watching another Kearney Wynn who was obviously in a great deal of trouble. *She wasn't that Kearney Wynn at all. Whatever happened to that one couldn't possibly—*

Something touched her. Softness. Kearney jerked back. Her mouth opened in the beginning of a scream. Then she recognized the figure beside her.

"Erfedrie!" Kearney felt like crying.

The Lemmit cocked her head and looked at her quizzically. "Kerneew'n—whasis you bein here, *Hai?*"

"Look," Kearney said shakily. "Please, never mind the questions. Just get me *out* of here—do you understand?"

Erfedrie's eyes widened. "Is no placers for you bein, Kerneew'n," she said soberly. "You know that? No placers, Kerneew'n."

She looked warily over her shoulder and grabbed Kearney's arm in her tiny fist. She pushed her out of the circle and Kearney clutched the Lemmit's hand in a tight grip.

The females moved reluctantly aside. Silken hands reached out as she passed and Kearney caught a glimpse of the Lemmit with pale eyes and buttery flowers around her throat. She looked quickly away, keeping her eyes straight ahead.

They were out of the circle, climbing the narrow path. Erfedrie's pace quickened. Kearney saw a welcome patch of green light overhead and—

Erfedrie stiffened at her side. Kearney stopped and the small hand jerked from her own.

A dozen or more Lemmits stood quietly at the top of the hollow. One female stood apart from the others. She was older than the rest; her pelt was faded to a dark, tarnished bronze and her yellow eyes blazed with anger.

Kearney's heart sank. Erfedrie had pointed out Olobhari from a distance. She remembered the squat, ugly figure and the trail of slim young Lemmits that were always at her side.

One stubby arm moved in a slow arc and pointed straight at Kearney. Kearney looked wildly about for an opening. Erfedrie was gone.

God, she thought, this can't be happening at all ... !

Something moved out of the corner of her eye. Kearney screamed. Her arms jerked painfully behind her. A hand struck out and she stumbled roughly down the path.

Voices cluttered excitedly around her. Soft hands fluttered like hungry birds over her body. Her blouse tore from her breasts; the light scent of flowers brushed against her, mingled with a heavier, stronger, terrifying odor she couldn't identify. Darkness rushed up to meet her. She fought for breath, screaming against the assault of mothwing lips and velvet bodies—

And then, suddenly, she was alone.

Kearney sat up. She stared around the hollow, puzzlement creasing her brows. She wrapped her arms around bare shoulders and trembled.

They were gone! They had *been* there and then—

Something... She remembered. She had heard it, even above the chitter of voices and the quick breath in flowered throats. It was a single, piercing note that hung above them for a long moment, then echoed into silence through the Highwood.

FIVE

Ham picked up the empty bottle and tossed it against the wall. It bounced away without breaking and spinned to a stop on the polished floor. He gave it a sour look and spat after it disgustedly.

"Anyway," he said wryly, "that's the goddamn end of that."

It was one thing he wouldn't have to worry about anymore. He knew exactly how long two cases of fine Scotch whiskey lasted on Sequoia. They lasted four years, two months, six days and fourteen hours.

He looked mournfully at the empty bottle. All in all, he decided, he hadn't really done badly, considering. He'd started off wrong, maybe, but he had straightened that out quickly enough.

He worked out the plan in his head on the long trip out. He would have a drink when he got to Sequoia. Just one. No seconds. That was to celebrate arriving in one piece.

The forty-eight quart bottles would give him 1,536 ounces to last over the six years of his contract—2,190 days, or 312 weeks. He'd limit himself to five good shots a week. Five would do it. He could make it almost through the sixth year that way. Hell, he'd hit it within twenty-four ounces—just five short weeks on the wagon.

Only the pilot had blown a thruster and almost flattened them on Brunhilde II and he'd broken a quart out of stores to ward off the shakes from that. Another bottle had cracked while he was hauling the heavy cases down Sherandhel and one thing led to another. Various crises had to be dealt with. The careful rationing system went all to hell. He finished off half a case in the first three months.

He didn't touch the last two bottles. He had kept them locked away for nearly a year now.

Until last night.

The encounter with the Gibiks shook Ham badly. Only it wasn't just the Gibiks. It was the Gibiks and everything else. It was the Mothering coming up. And the girl arriving at the wrong damn time. And a couple of other things piled on top of that.

Mostly, he admitted, it was the Lemmit he'd seen on the trek with Karajhak. He had never seen a *Dhaj* Lemmit before—and as the saying went, he'd never hoped to see one, either. He'd carry *that* particular picture with him the rest of his days.

He could still vividly remember the terrible sight over Karajhak's shoulder. The *Dhaj* was perched on a high branch. It stared right at Ham and Ham felt the blood freeze in his veins.

Every strand of fur had been handpicked from the miserable creature's body, and every inch of that body bled from a thousand self-inflicted wounds. The *Dhaj* just sat there, watching Ham—an amber death-blossom clutched in its hand.

He was lucky to be alive and he knew it. He had turned and walked away and given Karajhak the option to let him live.

Karajhak could use the option, or toss it away. Ham was banking on the fact that Karajhak hadn't actually *seen* Ham spot the *Dhaj*. If he hadn't, Ham had a chance. What a Lemmit didn't see, hadn't really happened. It was not a part of his own experience and, therefore, it didn't necessarily exist. If Karajhak had decided that particular incident was something he could, logically, include within the category of a Karajhak-oriented experience, he would have killed Ham on the spot.

No one below Karajhak's station could look upon a *Dhaj*—not even another Lemmit. And certainly not a Hamby Flagg.

Ham let out a deep breath, remembering. The story of the *Dhaj* was the one and only legend about Lemmits he'd ever heard. Old Jhavhat had told him, and he had nodded politely and dismissed the whole thing. Jhavhat was as crazy as a wood tick. You couldn't believe anything he told you.

Ham thought hard. He wondered what the hell *else* Jhavhat had mumbled about in the last four years....

He hadn't been at all surprised to hear the high whistle-horn break the morning air. The *Dhaj* had come from somewhere, and whatever a messenger like that had to say, it ought to be important enough to bring the sexes together.

He watched Jhavhat stalk casually up to The Line as if he was out for a morning stroll. He picked at his pelt and squinted up at the high branches. He was staring quizzically at the palm of his hand when Olobhari waddled out from the female side of the Colony.

Olobhari was nearly as good at the game as Jhavhat. She gave no indication that she was actually *going* anywhere. She came to The Line in a roundabout manner and never once looked anywhere near the male.

Jhavhat knew she was there. When he had waited long enough to assure his audience that he was not aware of the presence of a female, he turned and spoke.

—But not to Olobhari. There was a Lemmit-high stake planted directly on The Line, between the two sides of the Colony. A flat, bone-white lizard skull was mounted atop the stake, and Jhavhat spoke directly to the lizard.

Ham thought it was a ridiculous waste of time, but it did the job. It saved face and made everybody happy. When he had first arrived on Sequoia he had asked Jhavhat about the sex of the lizard. Jhavhat gave him a smug grin and an answer he should have expected—if he'd been on Sequoia any time at all.

About one out of every hundred lizard eggs held a baby lizard that had no hope of getting any fun out of life. It was neither male nor female, but neuter.

The whole idea depressed Ham. You could trust a Lemmit to come up with something like that....

After the nonconversation had been concluded, Jhavhat and Olobhari spat on The Line to wipe away any stigma of association that might not have been filtered out of the meeting by the lizard. Then, each turned backs to the other and strolled away as if nothing had ever happened.

Ham sat gloomily in his hollow and contemplated the empty bottle. Vague thoughts were stirring in the back of his head. He didn't like to think such thoughts. They concerned things he had firmly relegated to the very bottom of his mental stew. Now they were rising to the murky surface again, and he didn't like their color at all.

He'd poked them out of sight more than once during the last four years, but they were getting harder and harder to handle.

Something was very wrong on Sequoia.

He'd known it from the start. He'd sensed it, just as the girl had, and he knew that was why he'd been so hard on her. He had gone to a lot of trouble to bury some very ugly questions. The girl had come along and dug them all up again.

It was always there, that subtle sense of wrongness in the great golden eyes, and it was something you didn't want to think about—not when you had to live with those eyes every day, and wonder about them. It was easier to turn away and look at the thousand shades of emerald and absinthe and topaz in this extraordinary world, and think how fine it was to have every boy's dream fulfilled, and live in the greatest treehouse in the galaxy.

It was easier than peering into those eyes and asking questions you hoped to God no one would answer. Because if anyone ever told you—

For the first time in his life, Ham knew what fear was really like. It wasn't just scared-out-of-your-wits fear or pee-in-your-pants fear, either. It was sweat fear that came from somewhere deep, deep inside. It smelled as cold and rotten as the grave and it made you sick to your stomach to know it was coming from you. It was a darkness at the end of the long hall at grandmother's house and a door there you never ever wanted to open....

There was the Mothering.

That was enough in itself to drive the Lemmits annually out of their minds. He was sure the preliminaries were going on now and the ceremony itself could take place at any time. You never really knew. He was relatively sure the Lemmits didn't, either. It just happened when it happened. But he was sure the time was drawing close. There was a certain way the Lemmits *looked* at each other, and there were the special hollows Ham knew about but had never seen, and he supposed it was much the same across The Line.

The Lemmits didn't need more than one trauma of that particular magnitude. Only now, Ham told himself, they had another. Chrestigho had a *Dhaj* on its hands. A *Dhaj* with a message.

Neither the message—whatever it might be—nor the Mothering could be ignored. Lemmit psychology just didn't work that way. They'd handle both problems at once—if it killed them.

If he had believed in astrology, Ham would have said all the planets and moons and whatever were converging out of the wrong goddamn house at the wrong time. There was no telling what the Lemmits might come up with. It could be an omen. That worked, sometimes. And old Jhavhat could dream up omens in his sleep. They might work a brand-new ceremony into their already rigid set of prohibitions that would be worse than the two problems they had on their hands now.

Or, he decided, they might all go berserk and drag him out of his hollow and tear him limb from limb just for the hell of it.

The lemon-colored light was turning to olive-green when he heard the noise. He didn't like the sound of it at all. Something cold turned over in the pit of his stomach and he ran out of his hollow and climbed the path to a higher tier.

The Lemmits on both sides of The Line were chittering away at a deafening pitch. Ham's jaw fell open and the short hairs at the base of his skull started climbing the back of his neck. The girl was standing on the female side of the Colony. She was standing with her hands on her hips, looking up at the lizard pole.

That was the part Ham couldn't believe. She was talking very earnestly to the skull, just as if she knew exactly what she was doing.

SIX

it was greater than darkness.

Darker than all the nights she could remember folded tightly together and packed away on a musty shelf. If a thousand moons burst suddenly over Sequoia, she knew Sherandhel would smother every bright beam. Not a single mote would reach her here.

Blackness reached out to hold her. She thought bright shafts of light to hold it away.

She tightened her fist and moved one arm slowly away from her side. Tears welled up in her eyes.

My God—what have they done to me!

Kearney remembered. She bit her lip to hold back fear and moved fingers blindly about until they found something to touch. She needed that. It seemed very important to touch something.

It was a vine. Dry and stiff and taut. Her fingers explored and found another, and then another. She forgot fear for a moment and let her hands move out in a tight circle.

Her heart sank. She was enclosed on every side, then. The vines formed a cage, and she was inside.

Like an animal. It was harder to swallow the tears this time.

She brought herself shakily to her knees and heard the vines groan with her weight and she knew something else. Her motion caused the cage to move. It swayed sickeningly and she held her breath. She was in a cage, and the cage was hanging from something and that was when the fear reached out and took her before she could push it away. She knew that if you hung from something on Sherandhel, there was a good chance you hung over nothing at all.

When she heard the high whistle break over the Highwood and knew they were gone, that it wasn't going to happen, her first thought was to run.

The second thought was less promising, more realistic. There was no place to run *to*. No place wherever to go.

Kearney pieced her clothes together as well as she could and started back up the high trail to Efedrie's hollow. The first wave of panic was gone. She wasn't really afraid to go back. If she knew her primitive cultures, they'd be just as anxious now to forget the whole thing as she was. It wasn't like picking up a good book and then answering the phone and coming back in the middle of chapter two. Rituals began at the beginning, and since they were rituals, there was no provision for interruption or deviation. There would have to be new omens now, new preparations, and probably a purification of the site.

At least, she hoped that was the case, anyway.

She had walked into something special, that was clear enough. It was a first-class orgy on the

surface, but she was certain it was a great deal more than that.

Sex was no stranger on Sequoia, but this sex was served up with all the trimmings, and that put it in a different light altogether. This was sex with meaning—she grinned painfully at the phrase. It was a textbook ceremonial fornication, and she had damn near had the starring role!

She didn't try to fool herself. She knew she had experienced some rather strange feelings back there. For a moment, she had been something less than the cool, objective observer. Some part of her had been caught up in the urgent, desperate hunger reflected in golden eyes. It had happened, and that was that. And now the question was: just what exactly was the whole thing all about?

She came up on the high quarter of Chrestigho, near the crossover point to Havarhta Bough, where she had held her one abortive interview with Hamby Flagg. The thought of *that* little incident brought a sour taste to her mouth. Smug, insipid bastard! There was so much he could tell her. He knew very well what was happening on Sequoia—part of it, anyway. And if something was wrong, why would the planet's Resident Agent *want* to keep it to himself? That was an RA's job, wasn't it—to stop trouble before it had a chance to get started?

She knew part of the answer, of course. Flagg's defensive belligerency masked fears he didn't care to face. He'd probably bottled up a nice collection of woolly-worms by now, things he didn't want crawling around in his consciousness.

Undoubtedly, it was an easy pattern to fall into, she granted. You had a tendency to protect your environment, and Sequoia had been Flagg's world for four years now. He'd faced the problem, and made a fairly human decision. There were leaks in the boat, and it would eventually sink. Meanwhile, if you happened to be a temporary passenger, you might think twice about kicking another hole in the hull.

Kearney angrily shook that thought away. No! She wouldn't buy that at all. Flagg had a greater obligation than his own comfort, or even his own survival, if it came to that. There was a whole Confederation of worlds out there beyond this one, and there were other things to consider besides—

Kearney stopped. She stood very still and sucked in a quick breath and held it. She had reached a high ridge that poised like an immense, frozen wave before it plunged down onto Chrestigho. The whole Colony was laid out beneath her, bathed in mottled patches of jasper and gold.

There was movement there, and Kearney frowned in puzzlement. She was too far away to make out individuals, but it was clear that something had brought a great many Lemmits out of their hollows—something important enough to bring males and females together with only The Line between them.

She saw a squat figure separated from the others, and even at this distance recognized her as Olobhari. The other Lemmit, then, must be the male wizard, Jhavhat. She watched them, two small dots of white standing before the lizard skull. She understood the meaning of that. Erfedrie had hinted at the skull's role in Lemmit culture, and Kearney had guessed the rest.

She stood for a long moment before descending down into Chrestigho. There was no breeze in the Highwood, but she felt a sudden chill all the same.

It was a standard socioecological field computer—Confederation issue psy-pak. It was miniaturized for weight and toughened for extreme climatic conditions. It was also engineered for minimal cultural disturbance, which meant it was guaranteed not to upset the natives. If you didn't know what it was, it appeared to be a gray, almost featureless slab of metal. It weighed nine and one-quarter ounces and it was no thicker than a good-sized wallet.

Kearney slipped the psy-pak out of the pocket in her boot and took long strides toward the rear of the hollow. She had used it in front of the Lemmits before—it was designed for that—still, she was glad Erfedrie and Drephira were gone.

She needed very much to be alone. The pattern was pulling itself together in her mind and she didn't want to lose it.

She put off the work only long enough to change clothes and get a quick drink of water. There was fresh fruit and sweet climber roots by Erfedrie's robe, but Kearney ignored them. There was a gnawing hunger in her stomach, but that could wait.

She let the figures in her head put themselves to work. She took the old readings apart and

went over them again from the beginning. This time, she very pointedly ignored the nubby black line that tried to push its way into the act again. If she let *that* sort of thing get to her, she might as well trade in her equipment for a crystal ball.

The ritual sex business was simple enough. It had standard, tested values and she reduced them to a workable formula. She could only guess at the meaning of the male-female encounter at The Line. It was an "X" factor, an unknown. But she was sure it had a significant crisis value, whatever it might mean. She could safely assign it a strong plus potential.

Kearney sat back, exhausted. There was a dull ache in the back of her head. Figures whirled about until they became garbled, meaningless squiggles without sense or reason.

It could mean anything—or nothing at all. She was basing her whole premise on vague, nebulous supposition, plus a few fairly sturdy facts. She brushed a strand of dark hair from her eyes and wearily fed a final factor into the computer.

SEVEN

sometime in the night she opened her eyes and stared up at darkness. The Highwood rang with the sounds of life—a raucous symphony of whoops and shrieks that echoed through the heights. A small animal scratched for grubs on the limb directly above. Once, something droned in a full circle outside her cage, then fluttered blindly against the bars and fell away. It didn't sound like a bird to Kearney, and it was much bigger than an insect ought to be.

Sure, she reminded herself grimly—and you're not exactly swinging from the old elm back home, either.

She felt abnormally calm, strangely detached. It was the same feeling she had experienced in the dark hollow when she had realized what was happening there. She didn't like the feeling at all. It was as if she had gone beyond fear and passed on into—what? Acceptance?

Like the Lemmits themselves, she thought. The slow centuries had kneaded them into something they had never meant to be. And now the protective coloration that kept old fears at bay was as much a part of them as their pelts and golden eyes. There was no longer any way to tell exactly what had been there before.

She shuddered at the thought and cast it aside. It wasn't a role she cared to play herself. In the long run, it was better to face fear and recognize it for what it was.

She knew what was happening to her now. It was a very human and natural reaction called shutting out the bogey-man. Short-term defensive measures, not to be confused with the long-term Lemmit variety. This business of feeling detached from the situation was another way of being afraid to be afraid.

Okay, then, she told herself firmly. It's a luxury you can do without, friend. There are better things to think about—like how to break out of vine cages and where to go after that.

There was no satisfactory answer to the second—but it was easier to imagine than the first proposition so she let herself dwell on it awhile.

There was only one real answer, of course. There was no safe place on Sequoia. They wouldn't leave her hanging in the cage forever. They would come back eventually and find something interesting and ceremonial to do with her, and probably something very fatal.

So get out of the cage and climb six or seven thousand feet to the burned black stub above Sherandhel and activate the call-button on the Homer there and hope someone hears you. And in the meantime—what? Hold your breath in the thin air? Freeze to death? Worry about that when you get there, she told herself.

The vine bars seemed next to impossible. She set to work on the floor of the cage instead. It wasn't much more satisfying, but she could feel a certain amount of progress under her fingers. The material wasn't as stout or new as the fiber they'd used for the bars. Whether it could be handled in one night was something else again. She was under no illusion that they'd give her more time than that.

She felt very much like a mouse attacking a large wicker chair. She tried not to think about what she'd do if and when there was a hole big enough to crawl through. That meant thinking about lowering herself under the cage out over nothing and making her way up the sides and shinning up the vine that held the cage to the limb above. She had no idea how far that might be. She didn't want to know. Not yet.

For a moment, she was only dimly aware that she could see her hands. She realized, suddenly, she shouldn't be able to do that at all. She jerked up, a little cry forming in her throat. She caught a quick glimpse of an orange face staring down at her. Then it was gone.

"Take it easy," the face said. "It's me."

Kearney's heart leaped. "*Flagg!*" She stood up shakily, stretching toward the sound of his voice.

"For God's sake," Ham whispered nervously, "keep it down! You want the whole Colony up here?"

He was still there, she knew, but he had covered the small cage of fireflies he carried with him. She could still see a faint patch of light, though, and she kept her eyes fastened to it. If it had been the sun itself it couldn't have been warmer or brighter at the moment.

"I hate to say this," Kearney sighed, "but I've never been so glad to see anyone. Or hear you, or whatever it is!"

Ham made a noise under his breath. "You can save the compliments," he grumbled. "They won't do me much good if your female buddies catch me hanging around here. You hurt or anything?"

It was a grudging afterthought to the rest, but Kearney was glad for small favors.

"No. I'm not hurt or anything. I'm too stiff to move and everything aches but I'm not hurt like you mean hurt. They got tired of beating on me, I think. I'm kind of glad it's dark so I can't see what I look like. And you don't have to worry about the Lemmits. Lemmits don't wander around in the dark."

Ham almost laughed, then remembered where he was. "You gotta tell me about Lemmits sometime," he said dryly. "I never had a chance to talk to a real on-the-spot alien expert."

Kearney stiffened at his tone. "Okay. You made your point, Flagg."

"And you sure as hell made yours!" he snapped. "You mind telling me what you pulled a fool stunt like that for? Just for the benefit of your vast store of cultural knowledge, that lizard pole's not a public phone booth. It's not there because these characters *like* to chat at one another. It's there because sometimes they don't have any other choice.

He made another disgruntled noise under his breath. Kearney was getting used to the sounds.

"As long as we're passing out compliments," he added, "I'll throw out another. I thought even you knew better than that!"

"Thanks. I did."

"Did what?"

"Know better. But I didn't know what else to do. Like you said, sometimes the males and females have to communicate with each other—whether they like it or not. I didn't have any choice. I had to talk to you, somehow."

She paused and took a deep breath. "Flagg, I took some readings. It was just preliminary stuff and it didn't mean very much at first—at least, I didn't think it did. Then this miserable damn curve showed up! I thought the computer was just looping—it does that, you know. It'll pull in cultural background noise and make a quantitative jump. It's programmed to give answers and it tries too hard to oblige. Only—"

"Listen," Ham broke in wearily. "Just hold up a minute. I know exactly where all this is going. I figured out *that* much before I got here. You're going to tell me how the Lemmits are a real uptight bunch of individuals—how they're born with arms, legs and built-in breakdowns. Only I already know that, you understand? I figured it all out by myself—without a computer!"

She shook her head rapidly, forgetting he couldn't see her. "You say you understand, but you don't—not really," she told him. "Okay, they're born uptight, like you say. That's the way Lemmits are. Only that's not enough, Ham. It doesn't *say* anything. This 'uptightness' is a cultural pattern *now*, all right—it's taken on the status of a norm because it's been with them God knows how many thousands of years. And as long as the Lemmits stay within that so-called norm, they're on the safe side of the scale—for Lemmits, anyway."

"She's running true to form," the Bear said suddenly. "The first indication, of course, is the use of standard, acceptable terminology. Words such as 'norm,' 'cultural pattern' and the like. They lend an air of authenticity to the business. Association with valid and logical theorems. The idea is to assume the listener will fasten upon these key words and accept the illogical trappings along with them."

Kearney was startled for a moment. She had completely forgotten about the Bear. "I'll bet he

calls you Teddi, doesn't he?" She grinned.

"Now listen—!" Ham said hotly.

"No, let her go," the Bear answered evenly. "It's just another defensive gesture. And yes—Flagg does call me Teddi. It's a normal derivation. My purpose—"

Kearney laughed. "It's an abnormal derivation, with very deliberate connotations, and you know it! I'm perfectly aware of what you are and what you're supposed to do, by the way. You're a psychBear and you mirror Flagg's emotions. You're supposed to be a constructive balance, though whether you are or not remains to be seen."

"I shouldn't think you'd be qualified to judge," the Bear said stiffly. "If I wasn't doing my job, I'd be the first to know it."

"Fine," snapped Kearney. "Then why in hell do you *reinforce* this idiot's arguments? God, maybe you do mirror the real Hamby Flagg! I hadn't thought of that. Maybe he doesn't *have* any rational ideas to reflect!"

"Once again," said the Bear, "you're indicating—"

"Shut up," blurted Ham. "Knock that stuff off!"

"You getting uncomfortable?" chided Kearney.

"I'm getting sick of wasting time. You got something valid to say—"

"Great," Kearney agreed. "Let's get back to Lemmits. We have a norm that *looks* like a long-standing cultural tag. What it is is a serious deviation buried under the guise of acceptance. It's hard to spot because we don't have anything to compare it with. All the Lemmits have it. But it's there, all the same. I wasn't really sure until Olobhari and old whatsisname met at The Line. I still don't know what it was all about, but I don't have to. It was a cultural crisis point, I knew that much. And the computer agreed. Coming right on top of the orgy business—"

"Wait a minute," Ham stopped her. "*What* orgy business?"

Kearney explained what had happened to her in the dark hollow.

Ham gave a low moan.

"Look," Kearney protested. "It wasn't exactly *my* idea."

"Sure," said Ham, "and for your information, it wasn't exactly an orgy, either. It was a Parting, and that's just what it means. It's the last time the Chosen are allowed to have sexual relationships. It comes right before the Mothering, and after that's over, of course, they're considered unclean by their own sex. The same thing goes on with the males. Hell, it's a wonder they didn't—"

"They tried," Kearney said soberly. "I was about *that* far from a ceremonial gang rape. If it hadn't been for—"

She stopped, stared up at the darkness with sudden interest. "Flagg—you said a—Mothering!"

"Yeah, I said a Mothering," he told her impatiently. "What of it?"

Kearney's thoughts ran wild. "But—when was that? I didn't even know!"

Ham muttered under his breath. "Course you didn't know. You weren't there, you were here. I guess we can be grateful for that, anyway," he added sarcastically. "It happened about three, four hours ago. It's over, thank God."

Kearney shook her head. "But nobody *said* anything!"

Ham gave a wry laugh that set her cheeks burning. "Listen. When are you going to get it through that educated head of yours that you're not on Earth or Hyperbadd or anywhere else besides Sequoia? They don't post a damn notice on the bulletin board—'hey, gang, we're going to have a Mothering tonight'—they do what they do 'cause something tells them they *have* to. Because the moon is right, maybe—except they don't have one."

Ham paused. "They could have done without this one easy," he brooded. "It went badly. Lemmits like their cultural hang-ups in nice, easy doses. That meeting at The Line threw 'em into a royal panic, and your little performance there didn't help much. The males demanded Honor concessions at the Mothering and the females had to grant them. I figure they took out their humiliation on the males some other way, which'll help increase the tension some—if that's possible."

Kearney was barely conscious of his words. She could feel her heart beating wildly.

I didn't know.... it was the Mothering all along and I didn't even know!

She bit her lip thoughtfully. "Ham," she began slowly, "don't you see at *all*? I knew about the ritual mating business but I didn't know it was about to *happen*!"

She drew in a deep breath and brought two fingers pensively against the bridge of her nose. It

was all falling into place—the Parting, the meeting at The Line, and then —the Mothering. And the reading had been right all along! Right from the beginning, when the small smudge of darkness forced its way onto the graph and began its ugly climb upward.

"Will you do one thing for me?" she asked. "Will you be honest with me—for once?"

He didn't answer for a long moment. "Look," he said finally. "I know what you're trying to do. Don't get carried away by a bunch of wiggly lines on that handy pocket brain of yours. The Lemmits are going through a rough time right now. They aren't built to handle more than one decision at a time. You ought to know that—you're the expert. Did you ever see a primitive society that didn't start climbing the walls when something came up that wasn't on the program?"

"All right," Kearney began, "but—"

"But nothing," he said flatly. "The Lemmits have problems. I'd guess they've had problems for four or five thousand years. You want to label one of 'em a—a cultural crisis, go ahead. It doesn't change a damn thing."

"No, it doesn't," she said quietly. "But it could...."

"Now what's that supposed to mean?"

She shook her head in the darkness. "I don't have to tell you, Flagg. You already know—a lot better than I do. This isn't just a primitive society we're talking about. It's a great deal more than that."

"You're talking in circles again," he muttered. The words held the same bitter inflection, but this time Kearney wasn't quite convinced.

"Even you have to admit the Lemmit society *might* be built on a false premise," she said. "Just answer one question, will you?"

Ham was silent.

"What happens, Flagg, when they come up against a problem they can't handle? What happens when something breaks through that façade *and they have to face themselves without it?*"

She waited a long minute.

"Flagg?"

Something knotted up inside her. Fear breathed just outside the bars of her cage. She called his name again.

But she knew he wasn't there.

EIGHT

kearney wondered how they'd do it.

The easiest way, of course, would be simply to push her off the nearest convenient branch and forget the whole thing. In the Highwood, that was the most natural and effective method of getting rid of things you didn't particularly want to see again.

She knew, though, the Lemmits wouldn't let it go at that. They'd think of something else. A fitting ceremony, something with meaning. And maybe an appropriate chant or two.

In a way, she decided darkly, primitive cultures showed a great deal more class than the so-called "civilized" societies. At least, there was always some attempt to justify what you were doing—to attach some significance to the fact that you had definitely decided to do someone in.

She bit her lip and mentally kicked herself. You can knock that stuff off *now*, friend, she thought angrily. Your fine academic mind and beautiful scientific approach to daily living got you into this mess in the first place.

The two Lemmits ahead paused and looked back at her. One jerked her head impatiently. Kearney had to laugh. They couldn't imagine why she'd lag behind at a time like this.

She gave them both a sour look and they frowned and turned away.

They had come for her as the first yellow-green haze of light filtered through the Highwood. When they pulled her out of the cage they noticed the pitifully small beginnings of a hole in the woven floor. They seemed slightly amused at that.

Kearney wasn't amused at all. She looked at her hands and wanted to cry. They were raw and bruised and the fingers were too stiff to move.

She shoved her hands into her pockets and bit back the pain. Raw skin burned against fabric. They hurt like hell. And she'd be double-damned if she'd let them know it.

She guessed they'd been walking for nearly an hour. It was hard to tell in the Highwood. Time and distance became vague, obscure dimensions in a world of perpetual twilight, where the scenery never seemed to change.

She knew they had passed under the shadow of Havarhta Bough some time before. The Colony itself was far behind. Ahead, Chrestigho narrowed perceptively as it arced into a dense cluster of leaves. Wherever they were, she had never been this far from the hollows before.

She smothered a sudden wave of fear.

Was that it, then? They were going to take her far from the Colony? Do away with her in some spot that wouldn't *offend*?

She stopped. The idea burned her with sudden anger. What was the *matter* with her? What the hell was she thinking about—following blithely along, no questions asked? What was she supposed to do, lay her head on the block and smile like a good little girl?

She clenched stiff fingers into tight fists by her sides. She felt a quick wave of overpowering, hatred for the two Lemmits ahead. They were confident that she was helpless, that there was nothing she could do.

Sharp ears noted the lack of footsteps behind them. They turned again, chittered impatiently at Kearney.

Kearney shook her head. "Sorry. This is where I get off, gang."

They stared at her curiously. Golden eyes blinked in the saffron light. Kearney stared back stubbornly. She kept her hands to her sides, legs planted firmly on the bark pathway.

The Lemmits looked at her a long minute. One frowned irritably and said something to her companion. The second Lemmit shook her head, then finally agreed. With a final glance at Kearney, they turned away and trotted off down the branch ahead.

Kearney watched, dumbfounded.

Now what? She stood with her hands on her hips and followed the females with her eyes until they were well out of sight.

She didn't for one minute believe they'd given up that easily. Probably, they had gone for reinforcements. Which meant, she decided, there wasn't a great deal of time left to stand around gawking.

She frowned, puzzled. If that was true—why would *both* of them take off? Why not leave one behind to stand guard? The answer came to her and she flushed angrily. They weren't even *worried* about that!

She jerked up suddenly, squinting her eyes. She let out a deep breath, slowly. They hadn't been out of sight two minutes. Now, one was coming back again.

Kearney tensed, wondering which way to run. And where was the other Lemmit, by the way? Circling around behind her?

Okay. She ground her feet into bark. So be it, then. Forget the other one. Take care of them one at a time. If she came out of that in one piece, head back down Chrestigho and wait for night again. Then, try to make it past the Colony and up Sherandhel to the top. She'd never make it, of course. She knew that. But it was a hell of a lot better than—

"Kerneew'n!"

Kearney stared. The slim form raced toward her, waving an arm in greeting.

Kearney gritted her teeth. Well, *that* was the lowest trick in the book! Send Erfedrie back to—what? Lure her into the trap with silken charm? What did they think she was, anyway?

"Kerneew'n!" Golden eyes flashing. Mothwing lips pursed in a smile.

"That's close enough, friend." Kearney backed off warily.

Erfedrie stopped. Her smile dropped into a painful frown. She looked genuinely hurt. Huh-uh, thought Kearney. Not today, little girl.

"Whasit, Kerneew'n? Why you no comit, *Hai*?"

Kearney raised a brow and blew a strand of black hair from her eyes. "Whasit yourself, Erfedrie," she said darkly. "Take a wild guess."

Erfedrie looked puzzled, then shrugged lightly. Pink lips formed a wide grin. It was a childlike gesture. Vacuous, totally without meaning. It was, Kearney understood, Erfedrie's charming method of handling situations she didn't care to face. She wasn't sure whether it was typically Lemmit or something Erfedrie had come up with on her own, but it was damnably frustrating.

"Okay," Kearney asked her, "suppose I *comit*—then what?"

Erfedrie relaxed, suddenly encouraged. "You comit, Kerneew'n. Please?"

"You didn't answer the question."

Erfedrie smiled wanly.

Kearney sighed and shook her head. "I'll probably regret this, but somehow I just can't picture you as the Queen's Own Assassin. You simply don't cut it, Erfedrie. All right. If I decide to go, which way do you suggest? And what's there when we get there?"

Erfedrie grasped her arm and led her quickly to the edge of the branch. Kearney swallowed hard. Looking down wasn't her thing at all. She had already learned that little lesson.

Erfedrie pulled insistently, then pointed. Her palm made a quick, looping arc downward from where they were standing, then flattened into a steady curve.

Kearney got the picture. She reluctantly followed the motion with her eyes. Chrestigho split a few hundred yards ahead, where the two females had disappeared. The main limb continued in a fairly straight configuration, but the left-hand branch curved sharply and sickeningly downward into deep shadow, then crossed a greater limb below.

Kearney sucked in a quick breath. A long string of silvery dots moved across the broad limb through emerald patches of light. Further ahead, another column disappeared into a dense cluster of leaves.

Kearney's heart beat against her chest in warning. Every Lemmit in Chrestigho must be down there! It wasn't just the females, either—the males were there, too. The whole Colony was on the move. But—why? Where could they possibly go?

Something brushed at the edge of her mind, then danced provocatively away. She pulled back from the dizzying height, then faced Erfedrie.

Erfedrie read the question in her eyes. She shook her head quickly.

"No askit for now, Kerneew'n," she said nervously. She laid a soft hand on Kearney's arm. Kearney could feel the Lemmit trembling.

She was scared, Kearney realized. Just plain, flat-out scared!

"What, Erfedrie? What is it?" she asked gently.

Golden eyes glistened. "Erfedrie have muchit sadness, Kerneew'n. Erfedrie is thinkin—how bein happy again, if Kerneew'n dyin?"

Kearney tensed. "Is that why you came for me? You— know what's going to happen, and it—makes you sad, because you know?"

Erfedrie frowned, then suddenly forced a smile through her tears. "Oh, no, Kerneew'n—you no seein whasis Erfedrie's sayin, *Hai*? Erfedrie's no thinkin this anymore. Is maybe so one time, no bein true now."

She glanced at the distant columns, then looked away, but not before Kearney caught the shadow of fear passing across her features.

"If it's not that, what is it, Erfedrie?"

Erfedrie clutched her arm until it hurt. "No more, Kerneew'n," she said gravely. "Is no more death-makit for Lemmit peoples...."

Kearney glanced at her curiously. *That* didn't make any sense at all.

NINE

ham decided he'd spotted Pharesh.

Well, someone who looked like Pharesh, anyway. It was hard to tell. The fine veil of mist made one Lemmit look very much like another.

He brushed tiny beads of wetness from his face. He wished he had a jacket or a poncho or the torn sweater he'd foolishly tossed away the year before. Not that anything would do a hell of a lot of good now. An unhealthy chill had worked its way through his clothing and into his pores. He was sure a thin layer of mold was forming on his skin.

He stared dismally out at the Highwood. This insane trek was on its tenth day now. It had rained steadily for more than half that time. A dull curtain of moisture smudged the atmosphere, and the thousand and one shades of green ran together in a colorless tapestry of indistinct olive.

He had to admit the weather fit the mood. He glanced over tight, huddled circles of silence, past silver pelts turned to tarnished pewter.

Ham shivered involuntarily, and this time the weather had nothing to do with his actions. He'd lived with the Lemmits four years—but he was a stranger among them now. They had turned

away, shut him out. No more, though, he realized, than they had closed themselves from one another.

He could almost feel the dread sense of pain and emptiness in the air. It was as strong and foreboding as a color or a taste or something you could reach out and touch.

He knew where it had started. It had started back at Chrestigho. The Lemmits had simply folded their souls in neat bundles and packed them away. They had started out naked and hollow and alone for—where?

He knew better than to ask. There was no one here he could trust anymore besides Karajhak, and he wondered if he could really trust Karajhak now.

For a second, the chilling vision of the *Dhaj* Lemmit flashed through his mind. He cast it quickly aside, but it bobbed to the surface again almost immediately, like something foul and dead tossed up from an oily sea.

And there was no way, really, to set the *Dhaj* aside. The *Dhaj* was very much with them now—in every golden, haunted eye. He had touched them all with his blood-red blossom.

"You want my opinion, you'll leave them alone," said the psychBear. "If you can't see what's happening here you'd better have your probers checked."

"Eyes," Ham corrected dully.

"Okay, eyes. You know what I'm talking about. They're as tight as bowstrings, as nervous as cats."

"I could do without the clichés," said Ham.

"Sorry. I only mirror your vocabulary," the psychBear pointed out. "Consider the source. Anyway, that's not the big issue here, is it?"

"Go right ahead," Ham said sourly. "Give me your concise evaluation of the problem."

"Your evaluation is that the *Dhaj* Lemmit's contact with the Chrestigho Colony—via Karajhak—set this woodland tour in motion. That's the logical assumption to make. It's difficult to take it any further. We'd be in the area of speculation, then—and rather vague speculation at that."

"That doesn't tell me a thing," Ham grunted.

"I'm not a computer, I'm—"

"I know what you are. Don't get into that."

"Okay—so you have some dark thought patterns flapping about—you want to delve into that mess of porridge? A couple of levels down you're equating the *Dhaj* Lemmit with an image you saw in a horror movie. Age twelve or thirteen. I can't tell which. The image was on the screen around nine seconds, but it made quite an impression on your youthful mind. Ergo, you can't help connecting this trek with doom and disaster. Further—"

"I remember that movie," Ham cut him off, "and it's not buried a couple of levels down, either. It never has been. And you don't have to make obscure references to my childhood. It isn't necessary to go back to age twelve, for God's sake—I see this hike ending in doom and disaster, as you put it, because I can feel it down here!" He slapped his stomach hard. "And if I couldn't *feel* a damn thing I could use my head. The *Dhaj* Lemmit didn't slice himself up into catfood to invite us all to a picnic."

He jerked the psychBear from his shoulder and held him at arm's length.

"Look, Teddi," he said tightly. "I don't know what you're trying to pull, but whatever it is, forget it. You're talking in circles. I want to know why."

"Flagg—"

"Shut up. Listen. I know when I'm trying to hide something from myself. I figure I'm trying to do that right now, maybe—through you. I don't intend for that to happen. Do you understand that? This isn't the time to play games, Teddi!"

"I assure you no one is playing games. Your action now—lashing out at me—is merely a form of self-castigation, based on your concern for a situation you consider—"

"Crap," said Flagg. "I'll get an answer somewhere else."

Ham reached up and savagely flicked the psychBear to "off."

"I strongly advise against that."

Pharesh sat on a high knoll of wood, apart from the others. He nibbled listlessly at a cluster of berries.

"*M'khaa*, Pharesh," Ham greeted him.

Pharesh looked up blankly, then glanced away. God, thought Ham, he looks like he's crawled in a hole and pulled his pelt in after him.

"Pharesh," he said quietly, "I seek Karajhak. Have you seen him?"

Pharesh seemed to jerk slightly at Karajhak's name. He turned empty eyes on Ham.

"Karajhak's not bein with Pharesh, 'Amby. You see that?"

Ham nodded. "Yes. But I'm looking for him, Pharesh. I haven't seen him since we started. I only found you this morning. I wished to greet you, and ask about Karajhak."

That wasn't entirely true. Ham had spotted Pharesh days before, but hadn't dared to strike up a conversation until the Lemmit was alone. Not with the males in the mood they were in.

Pharesh looked up mournfully. "Karajhak is no bein with Pharesh, 'Amby."

"I know that. Where is he, then?"

"Is no bein here, 'Amby."

"Look," Ham began. "I didn't ask you—"

He cut himself off quickly. Hell, he *had* asked—only he had let one of the subtleties of Lemmit indirect rhetoric slip by without listening.

"Pharesh—he's not here at all—that's what you mean, isn't it? Karajhak's not on the trek, is he?"

For a minute, he was afraid Pharesh wouldn't answer. Finally, the Lemmit looked up at him. Ham almost backed away. Pharesh's features were contorted. He was shaking all over.

"*Karajhak no bein here, 'Amby!*"

He stared emptily at Ham. A low moan started in the back of his throat. The sound sent chills up Ham's spine.

He wished he'd kept his mouth shut. Barring that, he wished he was on the other side of the Highwood.

Every Lemmit was on the trek.

No one was left behind.

If Karajhak wasn't here—

Ham walked quickly past the miserable huddle of damp pelts. He didn't stop until he reached the rear of the column. An uneasy knot formed in the pit of his stomach.

So much for Karajhak, then. Whatever had happened, Ham didn't even *want* to know now....

TEN

the mist stopped sometime during the early hours of the morning, but it was late afternoon before the upper branches cleared themselves of moisture and let islands of green light filter through to the Highwood.

The change seemed startling enough to Kearney. The interminable days had gone by like a long line of sad gray animals, one following dismally after the other.

Nearly anything would have been a welcome relief. The pale patches of light seemed almost Earth-bright to her now.

If the female Lemmits noticed any differences in the weather, it wasn't evident to Kearney. They moved silently through the Highwood, slender wraiths among shifting patterns of olive and gold. They drifted so quietly along the pathways they might have been part of the play of light and shadow itself.

Erfedrie had talked to her in the beginning—hushed conversations in the darkness or in the early hours when others couldn't hear. But whatever somber mood had infected the Colony finally swallowed Erfedrie, too. Kearney's questions met golden eyes that saw nothing and, eventually, she quit trying.

She walked gingerly along near the center of the column. She kept her eyes a few inches ahead of her feet, and she was painfully aware that the soft scuff of her boots was the only sound to be heard.

To hell with it, she told herself wearily. *I'm not a Lemmit and I can't very well go barefooted. I didn't ask to come along.*

When they had first joined the others, Kearney had watched the scenery with interest. But that was before they left Chrestigho Branch and, finally, Sherandhel itself, and crossed to a

neighboring giant that mingled its heavy inner branches with the outer growth of their own Tree.

They had moved on since then, and those same branches were heavy no more. It was obvious they were traveling through the Tree's outer limbs, far from the massive trunk, and it was painfully clear to Kearney the path ahead wasn't getting any wider.

She was grateful, at least, for one new factor: as the branches thinned, they moved through increasingly heavy clusters of leaves, and the leaves gave her the comforting illusion that a great protective wall had risen up on either side of the narrow branch. The limb beneath her feet might be a giant on Earth—it was a full sixty feet or so around if it was an inch. *But I'm not on Earth*, she reminded herself, *and if I was, I certainly wouldn't be strolling about through a tree of any size. —And sixty feet isn't very damn big by Highwood standards.*

Cursing Hamby Flagg was an unrewarding pastime, but it gave her a certain sense of satisfaction—as if each new thought was a sharp needle that might send some tangible arrow of displeasure in his direction.

She knew he was on the trek. She had spotted him far ahead with the males the second day out—a pinkish-green blob among a thousand silver blobs.

She grinned pleasurably at the illusion. "Blob" was a good term. She liked to think of Flagg in the context of blobness. She was sure now the son of a bitch knew very well the females hadn't planned to do away with her. He had *known*, and perched on the limb above her cage and then left her there—left her without a word to sweat out the night by herself!

And it was true, of course. Erfedrie's words had confirmed that. For whatever reasons they might have, there would be no killing connected with this journey.

"Is no more death-makit for Lemmit peoples...."

It had the ring of ritual finality. And she had further proof now: she was still very much alive.

Her blood ran hot at the thought. Okay, maybe he didn't know *exactly* what was happening, or where they were going or why. But he knew enough. He knew she'd be all right and he left her there without a word and she would never forgive him for that.

She almost laughed aloud. God—she was stuck in a world of trees with a whole planetful of fur-coated maniacs. And the only Tarzan in sight was an overweight bastard with a Teddy Bear! She laughed to herself until tears filled her eyes and it wasn't at all funny anymore.

She slept fitfully, and the same dreams she'd had since the beginning of the trek returned like dark birds coming home to roost. She dreamed of spidery graphs that warped themselves into tortured hourglass shapes. An ominous black bar nosed its serpent shape up the hourglass, snaking over its curves and finally dissolving into dark particles that fled with maddening speed through the narrow waist.

Kearney screamed for it to stop.

Too fast!

There's no time—

Mustn't go SO FAST!

But the black sand dropped at light-speeds into darkness. Time ran out. A great bell sounded somewhere in the distance and she knew it was already too late—that it had always been too late—

And all through the dream, Ham Flagg grinned at her with his Teddy Bear face, and finally stripped away his clothes and showed her the silver pelt he kept hidden there, and the budding breasts and slender legs and the butter-colored flowers about his neck....

Erfedrie shook her awake just after first dawn touched the Highwood. Kearney jerked up stiffly, trembling from the dream.

The Lemmit touched a warning finger to her lips. Kearney opened her mouth to protest, but Erfedrie was already moving away, slipping noiselessly through the sleeping forms.

"Erfedrie—what is it?"

Kearney caught up and laid a restraining hand on the Lemmit's shoulder. Erfedrie shook her head. "No talkit, Kerneew'n."

She moved along the bark pathway, a slim silver figure against cobalt shadow. The limb was choked with thick leaves, bottle-green umbrellas tiger-striped dull yellow. They whispered like new paper when Kearney brushed them aside.

Erfedrie stopped, went to her knees, and motioned Kearney down beside her.

"You lookit, Kerneew'n," she whispered. "No talkit, *Hai?*"

Kearney looked from wide, golden eyes past the Lemmit, where Erfedrie had parted the leaves. She squinted a moment, letting her eyes search for perspective. Suddenly, she caught the sense of depth and distance. Her stomach tightened in quick contractions.

The air was thick with the pungent odor of greenness; it was like peering down into the deep currents of a chlorophyllic sea. She and Erfedrie rested in the last shallows of that sea, poised on a narrow shelf of life, just before the emerald ocean plunged into darkness.

There was another limb, running almost parallel with their own, a heavy reef nearly lost in black and jasper. Kearney was no great judge of distance, but she guessed it was a good two hundred yards below.

The morning dropped mottled patterns into the chasm, and after a moment she became aware of a vague sense of movement there. The giant limb seemed to shift, dissolve, then form itself into something else again, as if it had a life of its own.

She looked again. A quick breath caught in her throat. She suddenly knew what she was seeing, and a cold chill began the long climb up the back of her spine.

The branch below was crawling with life. *Gibiks!* She'd never seen one before, but she knew. There were hundreds, countless thousands of the terrible, apelike creatures. The column seemed endless. Kearney watched, fascinated and repelled at the sight. She forgot about time. Finally, she pulled herself away and met Erfedrie's eyes. The Lemmit stared back, but said nothing.

Kearney studied her curiously. Erfedrie had brought her to this place for a reason. She knew that. Maybe—she couldn't *tell* Kearney what she wanted her to know—she was gripped in the same fear that held the rest of the Colony in silence. But she could *show* Kearney something, and let her draw her own conclusions.

Kearney parted leaves and looked once more at the scene below. Obviously, Erfedrie saw some meaning in the seemingly endless trail of life moving through the Highwood. Was she supposed to see that, too?

It came to her quite suddenly. Not through any process of reason, or logic. It was a moment of understanding. A door opened for a brief second and closed just as quickly. And in that flash of insight, a moment of simply *knowing*, she was almost smothered in a wave of blind, unreasoning animal fear.

She could feel it, smell it.

She shrank from it in horror and shut it out of her mind.

The Gibiks knew...

Whatever lay ahead of the Lemmits, the Gibiks wanted no part of it at all. They were fleeing as fast as terror would take them in the opposite direction.

That was the thing, then, Erfedrie had brought her here to see.

ELEVEN

he had been on Sequoia long enough to know the signs. For awhile, though, he tried to write them off as something else. Hell, two, maybe three thousand Lemmits on the march was enough to send game scattering through the Highwood for twenty miles around. He'd seen it happen before—even with a small party of hunters. Something suddenly telegraphed the presence of danger and everything that crawled, breathed and slithered simply vanished.

Only this was different.

He'd known all along that it was. Finally, even the psychBear stopped responding to his hypothetical excuses, and that meant it was time to quit.

The Highwood was empty. Period. Gibik, tree-lizard, leaf-hopper—you name it. Everything had taken off in an all-fired hurry for somewhere.

"You want to know what I think—" Teddi began.

"That's the trouble," Ham said morosely. "I already do."

Just before noon the column turned sharply to the left and climbed for half an hour up a gnarled branch heavy with waxen leaves. The green tunnel briefly smothered the pale light of the Highwood, and the pathway was plunged into near-darkness.

In a quick moment of panic, Ham could see himself stepping off into nothing. He remembered

the flash in his backpack, then shook the thought aside. That's all the Lemmits needed right now. Introduction to a new technical innovation with all the psychological trimmings that went with it. He wouldn't *have* to step over the side. They'd handle that job for him.

He came out blinking into relative brightness. The psych-Bear's glassy eyes adjusted mini-seconds faster.

"God stuff me!" cried Teddi. "Look at that!"

Ham blinked again. The Colony had stopped still. He could have bottled the silence—that, and the acid odor of funereal fear that swept back over him in heavy waves.

The tunnel opened on the last finger-branches, of their current Tree—the third from Sherandhel by Ham's count. Beyond lay the first limbs of another.

—Only this was a Tree unlike any he'd seen before.

It was like watching your father die, he thought quickly—tall and stern and immortal one moment, then empty and hollow and not there at all.

The Tree was dying, or already dead. Death-yellow leaves hung from ashen limbs, shriveled hands whose bodies had already sighed and dropped away.

"I'm getting emanations of fear," said the psychBear. "Not just from you, either," he added. "Your, buddies down there are experiencing a lot more than the daddy's-gone-to-Heaven bit. They—"

"Shut up," said Ham. He didn't need the Bear's alter-guesstimates to tell him an oppressive pall had further beclouded the column.

"Give me an alternative or two," he said evenly. "Whatever hits you at the moment."

"I'll start with the obvious," Teddi answered. "You already have that one, don't you? Not so primitive fear of death. Father-God-totem. A love/fear paradox—attraction and repulsion—positive/negative feelings about the security of death."

The Bear paused. "That's basic, and the other is out of the same package. Pilgrimage to the shrine. The Dead-Place-where-God-lives."

"You're reaching." Ham shook his head. "You're leaving out the *Dhaj* Lemmit. This isn't a regularly scheduled religious tour, it's something special."

He nodded below. "My God, look at 'em, Teddi—I'd lay odds they never even *dreamed* of a dead Tree before!"

"Fine," Teddi said evenly. "You got it all wrapped up, why the questions?"

Ham ignored him. It was clear enough the Bear was still playing games. There would be time to find out why, later. Now, he peered over the column into the fading light. He thought he could make out the gray shadow of an immense trunk somewhere beyond the skeletal web of branches.

"Look," Teddi said reluctantly. "If you want to follow *that* line—"

"I'm already following," Ham said intently. "Just keep quiet a minute."

"I know you are—only I'm a split ahead as programmed. King's Knight to take Queen's Rook. Mate in three."

Ham wasn't listening. He already knew the *Dhaj* had come to Chrestigho from the dying Tree. First premise positive. Second premise asked who or what had sent him there.

TWELVE

it was bigger than Sherandhel—larger and more frightening than anything Kearney could imagine.

Erfedrie had called it Vherakhensel—and even the telling of the name had brought flash-points of fear to golden eyes.

Vherakhensel.

Kearney tasted the name on her lips, and watched dawn break through the Highwood. She shivered, pulling her legs beneath her as a chill tongue of air brushed the morning.

The females were camped beneath her vantage point, two hundred yards or so from Vherakhensel's trunk. The males, she supposed, were somewhere nearby.

This close, there was no way to gain a reasonable perspective of the Tree. It might as well have been a giant wall towering out of the darkness. She *knew* it was the trunk of Vherakhensel, but only because she'd seen it from a distance. And even then, more than a day's march away, it

had been immense, awesome—crowding everything else from her vision.

Even the illusion of size was gone now. Vherakhensel was the end of the world, stretching interminably on either side and looming out of sight above.

For a moment, reason deserted her again, as it had for a brief instant when she gazed down on the fleeing Gibiks and caught a quick mind-smell of animal fear.

The smell was here, too—only it was far stronger on Vherakhensel. Kearney looked up at the giant trunk. Gray bark—hung like dead flesh to its sides, and cold shadow covered its face.

For a quick, cold moment, Kearney wondered how close she might be to mirroring Erfedrie's pure, primitive terror of things she could neither explain nor comprehend.

THIRTEEN

"there's another Colony down there," said Teddi. "I see them, you see them. The Chrestigho Lemmits see them, too. Only, as you put it, they're doing their damndest to make believe nothing exists. This should tell you something."

"It does," Ham said somberly. "It tells me I need a drink. Badly." He bit his lip and tasted memories. "I could've kept one lousy bottle."

"As I told you, at the time—"

Ham stared coldly at the Bear. "I don't need a stuffed sermon right now. Okay?"

He squinted through the dull yellow air at the enormous mass above, then let his eyes settle on the thick branch to his right.

The females were camped there. He could make out silver-gray blotches against the bark, but it was too far away to pick out individuals.

All right, he told himself harshly, what you mean is you can't see the girl. Kearney Wynn. The human-type female. Though why the hell you think you *want* to....

He knew the answer to that. He had dreamed about her the night before. And the night before that, too. It was an uncensored fantasy that was both interesting and alarming. Interesting, because it came across in thundering, colorful, erotic detail—alarming, because it told him a lot more about himself than he cared to explore.

He was sure the whole thing was strong enough for Teddi to read without any trouble. And if the psychBear knew what was good for him, he'd keep whatever he'd peeked to himself. Ham knew all he wanted to know for the moment. The thought of one of Teddi's smug intratherapy sessions left him with a sour taste in his mouth.

Ham shut the girl out of his thoughts. Or tried to. Afterimages hung on stubbornly. Images like dark hair, disturbingly long legs, the angle at which full lips met the curve of a cheek—

He gritted his teeth and pounded one fist into the other. He knew the Bear wouldn't miss *that* gesture.

He had an idea what was happening.

The Bear was involved in some devious, half-cocked scheme of its own. The scheme, he was sure, centered around Teddi's misguided conclusion that he, Ham, needed a mechanical censor. Just what the Bear thought Ham didn't need to think about was something else again. But Ham was certain he was right. The Bear's avoidism tactics were perfectly transparent.

Ergo, the dreams about Kearney Wynn.

The psychBear was expending so much effort in one area, he was neglecting another. Not that Teddi could control Ham's sex urges—if he decided to take off screaming after a female—or male—Lemmit, the Bear could do little to stop him. What he could do was help Ham sublimate such ideas in the first place. And a man who planned to spend several years away from the opposite sex needed a certain amount of sublimation.

But Teddi was busy with other things now. And he wasn't helping at all. And the idea that Kearney Wynn was physically on Sequoia didn't aid matters. The whole thing frightened Ham. He realized he was finding less and less to criticize about Kearney Wynn. Eventually—

"All right," he growled at Teddi. "Let's hit the obvious points again. The Tree is dead or dying. Even if you set the religious aspects aside, and you can't, really—the Lemmits down there can't *stay* in a dead Tree. For practical reasons beyond any ritualistic prohibitions, and you can bet there are a couple of dozen of those around, somewhere. For one thing, they'll get the wrong kind of weather without a mile and a half of leaf cover. Too much water and not enough. Nothing to

catch and keep it and nothing to hold it back. The same thing goes for light—the night/day cycle will get all fouled up. And even if you ignore all that, there's the most important reason of all. No game. No fruit. The food supply's gone already."

"Valid," Teddi agreed. "So?"

"So they have to move out."

"Right. Logically they do. But they haven't."

Ham frowned impatiently. "Well hell, that doesn't mean they won't."

A thought suddenly struck him and he turned the psychBear around in front of him and studied glassy eyes.

"You're trying to say something else, though, aren't you? Or trying *not* to."

"I reflect your line of reasoning and I'm necessarily limited by it," the psychBear said evenly. "I can explore trails you would eventually find but I cannot blaze new ones. I'm a focal point for reason and deduction—but I can only use the powers you give me to work with."

"My God," Ham said nastily. "I hope I'm not holding you back!"

The remark was wasted on Teddi. "I wouldn't know about that," he said. "I'll admit it's something I've thought about, though. I've never been Linked to anyone else so I don't have much of a basis for comparison. Which is just as well, wouldn't you think? I mean—"

"I know what you mean, and don't get off the subject. I asked what you were trying to say about the Lemmits."

"What *you're* trying to say is you have some doubts about the logic of the situation."

"If you mean I'm not sure Lemmits will necessarily do what they ought to do, you're right. But I can't see any alternatives, either—not to this situation. The Lemmits have to get out of that Tree. Period."

Teddi paused a long moment. "I can't question that," he said finally.

Ham frowned at him curiously. "I have an idea you could, and probably do." He bit his lip and narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. "These Lemmits are obviously in trouble. The Chrestigho Lemmits are here because someone sent for them." He looked up quickly. "A—relief party. Rescue mission!"

"Quite probably," said Teddi.

Ham glared at the Bear and muttered under his breath. "You're awfully damned agreeable all of a sudden—well hell, of course! Lemmits don't *need* help from another Colony. They're quite capable of rescuing themselves. All they have to do is pull up stakes and find another Tree."

He shook his head. "Besides, there's another reason I can't buy that one. It's not necessarily a logical reason, but it has a strong emotional drift. The *Dhaj* came from here, and he doesn't symbolize rescue to me. Only thing the *Dhaj* says is—"

Ham stopped. The words suddenly stuck in his throat. "My God!" He stared at the Bear. "You *knew* that, didn't you?"

"You knew it too," Teddi told him. "As soon as you saw the dead branches. But I couldn't let you have it, Ham."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Simply that you weren't ready. The realization of what was happening here came before you were prepared to handle it."

"Listen—!" Ham blurted.

"No, Flagg," the Bear said gently. "I think you'd better listen now."

Ham looked at his hands. He couldn't stop them from shaking.

"This thing has been building for a long time," said Teddi. "You sensed the pattern the first year we were here and I knew it wouldn't be easy. You were quite aware of your responsibilities to Sequoia—maybe more than you realized. Because unconsciously you wondered if you'd be able to handle this when it happened. You knew, of course, that something had to happen eventually. And the more you dwelled on that the more you worried. The more you worried the deeper you repressed the growing knowledge that something was terribly wrong on Sequoia."

Teddi paused. "Why do you think you were so hard on the girl?" he asked. "You fought her all the way because she told you things you already knew—and those were things you didn't want to hear at all. You—"

Ham savagely slashed the psychBear to "off."

"I'm sorry," said Teddi. "I have to override that."

"Override!" yelled Ham. "You *can't!*"

"I can," the Bear said solemnly. "If I feel it's called for, Flagg. That's in the rules."
Ham felt hot tears burn his eyes. Fear washed over him in a sudden wave of nausea.
What the hell's happening here!
He tried to think. God, it was hard to think! Something—
Got to—get—control—! Got to—
Sharpness snick-snicked! out of Teddi's threadbare belly. Ham watched darkness ride up through glass-bead eyes....

FOURTEEN

Kearney dozed in the afternoon and woke with the heaviness of uneasy sleep. Dim shafts of ocher slanted through the stark branches. It was a somber, unhealthy light, without the softening greens of the living Highwood.

Logically, she decided, it should be warmer under Vherakhensel's naked limbs, without the thick umbrella of foliage to filter out the sun. Instead, there was a warning chill in the air, as if the winter that never came to Sequoia might descend upon it soon.

She raised herself lazily on one arm and brushed dark hair back over her shoulders and shook sleep from her eyes.

There had been a dream.

It was fading now, and she remembered it was nothing more than a labored effort to get from somewhere to somewhere. Heavy boots mired in impossibly thick molasses. Anxiety. Frustration. Sleep-minutes mirroring the slow wake-up hours.

Kearney gave a luxuriant cat stretch and walked to the shallow cleft a few yards away. The cleft held a natural bowl of dark, brackish water. She kneeled, cupped her hands and let her face touch the liquid, then slipped her blouse down over bare shoulders and ran cool handfuls over her arms and breasts.

The water felt good against her skin. She stood, knotting the tail of the blouse around her waist.

Quick memory flashes came: Thick towels. Hot water. Sudsy tubs—

She cut off the thought and made a face at herself in the dark pool.

"Too early for boondock fever, Wynn," she scolded the image. "You haven't been on Sequoia *that* long."

She started up the slight rise to the female camp. She remembered washing in dirtier water than that—it was better than no water at all. There were always things you could do in the field—little things, to maintain the traces of civilization. And it was better than going native. Like *some* people she could mention....

She smiled to herself and tried to picture Ham Flagg in neatly-pressed dress blues. Silver piping on the sleeves and trousers, white scarf flung jauntily over one shoulder.

It was an impossible exercise. The image of a big, clumsy castaway came up to blot out the picture. An overweight beachcomber in dirty shorts, dragging that ridiculous Bear everywhere—

Kearney stopped short. She was on the crest of the rise, looking down on the female camp. The broad branch stretched toward the wall of Vherakhensel. And the branch was empty. There wasn't a Lemmit in sight.

She stood perfectly still and took deep, calming breaths. There was an answer.

There was a perfectly reasonable answer, and it would come to her.

She rejected fear number one: that the Lemmits had deserted the dying giant and fled back to the green world of Sherandhel.

That was illogical. There was a definite purpose to this trek across the top of the Highwood—a terrible, frightening purpose she had tried to convey to Ham Flagg, and only half-understood herself.

She closed her eyes and frowned thoughtfully.

That was it, then. If they hadn't gone one way, they'd gone another. Toward Vherakhensel. And that made more sense than anything, of course. They had come this close to the heart of Vherakhensel for *some* reason.

She peered down the branch toward the gray wall in the distance. The branch curved out of sight too quickly. She'd have to move closer to see.

Once past the crest, she spotted them easily—a silver column snaking its way toward the trunk. For a brief second, she felt an urgent sense of panic. Maybe she should run, catch up with the column before it disappeared? What if Vherakhensel *wasn't* the Lemmits' destination? What if they intended to pass it by on the way to somewhere else?

She felt a sudden chill at the prospect of starting back to Chrestigho alone. She knew she wouldn't know Sherandhel Tree from a slippery elm.

She was pondering that when movement caught her eye from another direction. She glanced up, searching for the spot again. It was right about—

There! She took a quick breath of surprise. There was *another* column! It was on a higher branch, some fifty yards above the females, but still within her vision. It had to be the males, of course. They were moving toward Vherakhensel, too.

Kearney traced the two columns with her eyes, extending their Lines of march until invisible arrows came up against the hulk of Vherakhensel.

She frowned, puzzled, squinted carefully into the fading afternoon.

Lemmits! There was another Colony of Lemmits on Vherakhensel!

Kearney shook her head in disbelief, but she could see them clearly now—two patches of silver-gray against the giant trunk, waiting for the columns from Chrestigho.

That was the answer, then. That's what the long trek was all about. Only—what were they *doing* here? She knew there shouldn't be Lemmits on Vherakhensel. Vherakhensel was *dying*...

She watched silently as the two columns moved toward the immense wall. The females reached the Tree first.

How odd, she thought. No one even bothered to greet them. The Chrestigho column simply—merged with the Lemmits waiting there.

She glanced up. The same thing was happening with the males now. Only it wasn't working out quite as easily. One—no, *two* males on the edge of the group had gotten caught up in the rush. They suddenly stumbled out of the mass and fell to the ground.

Kearney grinned to herself. Hell, it was just like home. Somebody elbows you on the roadway and the next thing you—

She stopped. There were a lot more than two down now. Four, half a dozen— A puzzled frown spread across her features. What was *happening* up there, anyway?

She glanced down again and caught her breath. Females were dropping limply away from the group as if a sudden plague had started at its center!

Kearney raised a critical brow. Knowing the Lemmits it was probably a *group* orgasm or something, she decided grimly. Wouldn't be a damn bit surprised.

She shook her head and let out a deep breath. There was something uncomfortably familiar about the whole scene, only she couldn't quite put her finger on it.

It was like—what?

—First day at ballet school for very awkward little girls. She laughed to herself.

—Or those ancient films without sound, maybe. Where you missed about half of what was going on because—

Kearney stiffened.

Oh—

My—

God—

NO!

A scream died in her throat. She bit down on a tight fist, tasted blood.

no—

no—

NO!

It's over! She cried out in terrible, silent pain.

Oh, God, it's over and I didn't even know....!

FIFTEEN

ham took a final step, wavered, fell forward.

The branch blurred. He let his legs collapse and stretched his arms blindly against the fall. His

hands slapped rough bark and he grunted in pain.

He rested for a long moment on his hands and knees. His lungs ached dully. He stared at sweat drops staining the bark pathway, then dropped to his back and stared up blankly.

He lay perfectly still for a short time, then forced himself to his feet.

His body cried out in protest. What the hell was he *running* for?

He shook his head numbly. There was a vague sense of urgency playing at the edge of his mind. For the moment, though, he couldn't remember why....

Saffron light dimmed to dun-colored shadow. He stopped, craned his neck and sniffed the air. His body stood rigid for long heartbeats, then went to ground like some pale night animal. His nose touched bark and he sucked in the store of odors there.

Tree spice. The cloying heat of lizard spore.

A thrill of recognition coursed through his veins. There was something else, too. It was an odor foreign to the Tree, yet as much a part of it as the other smells mingled there.

He was right, then. He was certain the males had come this way! They had curved off sharply to the south some half a mile back, and he had lost them, but he had them again, for sure.

Ham straightened slowly. He let a painful smile cross his features. There was another thing, too. It came to him on a nearly motionless current of air. *Green wood!* It was the smell of a fresh, living Tree, and it was very close.

He ran on easily. The light pack slapped evenly against his shoulders, sharing a steady beat with the bouncing psychBear.

The Bear was silent.

The Bear hadn't spoken since—when? Ham hesitated, breaking his stride. He couldn't remember.

He tried to think how long he had been running. One day? Two? Wasn't there a night in there somewhere? He thought he remembered a night.

He shook his head. The dull ache came back, but some of the furry cobwebs fell away.

The Bear was wrong!

That was it. He knew that now, and felt a sudden anger surge through tired muscles. The goddamn stuffed little bastard had no *right*—no right at *all!*

There had been a needle, of course. Some very quick and potent juices and then nothing.

Ham ground his teeth. Teddi had put him under while it was happening—using the Bear-fuddle logic that what he didn't know wouldn't hurt him. And that didn't make any sense at all. What it meant was that the psychBear had fused its nodes somewhere along the line and lost whatever reason/judgment powers had been crammed into its undersized stainless steel brain.

It meant, clearly, that the Bear was simply insane and couldn't be trusted.

Ham flinched at that one. If Teddi was insane and Teddi was a reflective ego of Hamby Flagg—

He dropped the thought quickly. Wherever *that* premise went, it couldn't very well lead to anything constructive.

Whatever the psychBear had done, he reflected dully, it hadn't helped at all.

Ham knew.

And Teddi had been right about that—the knowledge had been in his head all along. He'd simply rejected it from his conscious mind, with the Bear supplying a few therapeutic safeguards. Mental censors. Brain erasers. Mind dullers.

Only Ham knew.

Even before the gaunt gray figures loped past him in the darkness, fleeing Vherakhensel.

Ham knew.

He smelled the sweat-fear and the blood of Vherakhensel in their shadows. He saw them waiting. Patiently. Almost eagerly. Their throats were bared like hungry lovers for the blade and why not? They had sent the *Dhaj* with his death-blossom, and now the blossom was home again.

Ham silently cursed them all.

Stupid-monkey-faced-walleyed-bastards!

It was insane, bloody Lemmit logic was what it was.

The Tree is life.... and now the Tree is dead....

He could almost quote the goddamn verse.

He woke under the pale aura of dawn. He didn't remember sleeping. He woke squatting on his

haunches and bit his lip against stiff pain in his legs and thighs.

He rubbed dry sleep from his eyes and laughed lightly to himself for no particular reason. The strangeness of his own voice startled him into full wakefulness.

He had been right. Somehow, he had stumbled into it in the night and never even known. He laughed again. So much for the famous Flagg nose! Emerald light filtered through full, olive clusters of growth. He was back in the Highwood. The bloody corpse of Vherakhensel was far behind.

Ham ignored the stiffness in his limbs. He sprinted quickly up the broad branch. Nothing looked familiar yet, but that didn't matter. The Lemmits were ahead somewhere and he'd have no trouble picking up the trail. Not on good, wet green wood.

He stopped, once, just before noon, to cram handfuls of vermilion berries into his mouth. The bright juices traced red rivulets down his chin and over his chest.

He could almost feel the strength returning to his arms and legs. His head was clear, and for a moment he thought he'd almost enjoy talking to Teddi again. Almost. But not quite. Not until the little son of a bitch had his tubes blown and his nodes sparked. Let *him* try a little intratherapy for a change! He grinned wickedly at the thought.

He stopped again at a broad pool of water trapped in the "Y" of two intersecting branches. He sprayed the water over his body and brought a dripping handful to his mouth.

Hell, he decided grimly, *I've been here way too long*. The stuff was full of tiny bug droppings and stank of lizard pee and God knew what else. —And it was the best damn pool of water he could remember seeing anywhere!

Coolness touched his lips for a brief second. Ham jerked up suddenly. His hands fell apart. Water splashed to his feet.

The sound started far below. It rolled up out of blackness, split the morning quiet like a thousand thunders and cracked like a monstrous whip through the Highwood.

Ham tried to move. The blood was frozen in his veins and his legs had turned to stone. The sound roared to an unbearable pitch and he yelled at the top of his lungs and clamped hands tightly against his ears.

He knew what he was running from now.

"You straw-headed little bastard!" he screamed soundlessly at the psychBear. "You didn't tell me a damn thing about this!"

The limb jerked and slammed him roughly off his feet. With the edge of his vision, he saw a great, terrible column of night smother the sun-green day.

He knew it was the death of Vherakhensel. But it looked much more like the dark hand of God.

SIXTEEN

kearney clutched tightly at the thick tangle of vines. Thorny growth cut into her hands and pressed sharply against all the wrong, tender places.

To hell with that, she told herself grimly. *I've found a home in the briar patch—this is no time to bitch about the accommodations....*

She craned her neck and risked a glance upward. The green ceiling of the Highwood looked as if it had been sliced in half by the flick of a giant razor. Naked walls of a new, olive-colored canyon formed a quarter-mile gap across the forest. Stark points of brightness stood out against the leaf wall—white, open wounds of immense limbs that had stood in the disaster's path.

Kearney shuddered, remembering.

The world had screamed, ripped itself eight ways to Thursday in a ragged death-cry, and now the forest was heavy with a thick blanket of unnatural silence. It was as if sound had been sucked out of the Highwood forever.

She looked down, choosing a route in her eye that might avoid the worst of the barbed foliage. The broad limb was less than a dozen yards below—not a killing drop, maybe, but she much preferred to make the trip one foot at a time.

When her boot touched solid wood she sank gratefully to the rough bark. She lay still, taking deep breaths, waiting for her body to stop shaking.

Finally, she let her eyes glide upward again, past the thick tendrils and thorny leaves of the climber-vine that had saved her life, to the enormous limb a hundred feet above.

She found the spot where she'd been standing when Vherakhensel roared through the Highwood and sent her grasping for thin green air. She decided the limb she was on now was a slimmer, secondary offshoot that forked down from that heavier bough.

Kearney frowned, biting her lip thoughtfully. She was sure she had her directions straight again. If she could make her way back up the offshoot, start from there....

She sighed deeply. Her whole body ached for sleep. Part of it, she realized, was the prospect of what lay before her. The idea of trailblazing a path back to familiar ground was almost laughable, she knew. It was like choosing one wave from another on a trackless sea. If she could only *rest*....

She straightened and shook the thought quickly aside. Great. You can rest later, friend, she told herself sternly. Only right now you'd best gear up that kinky compass in your head and get us out of here!

—Or there'll be all the time in the world to take it easy, she added silently.

She had run from Vherakhensel until she could run no more.

Finally, exhaustion pulled her down, drained her, left her empty and trembling, and she suddenly quit fighting and let all the dark doors open.

Something black and ugly fluttered at the edge of her thoughts. A familiar curve rose over a blood-red graph and grinned at her like a crooked mouth.

It was nearly all there now—

Fear.

Hate.

Guilt.

—and rising on a smothering wave of madness, a final, searing crescendo: the bittersweet death-wish come true....

After a long while, reason came. And when the females moved swiftly past her from Vherakhensel she watched, and waited quietly in the shadows, and then followed. She had no desire to join them—but she had no illusions, either. Her chances of finding Chrestigho and Sherandhel alone were almost infinitesimal, and—where else was there to go in the Highwood?

Kearney tried to remember.

How far ahead had they been when it happened? she wondered. Were they all dead now? Erfedrie? Olobhari? The slender creatures with wet, golden eyes and buttery petals about their throats?

She shook her head. They shouldn't be. Not if *she* was still alive. They had been further from the disaster than she was. Not that that proved anything, but some of them should have survived, anyway.

She forced herself to her feet and back on the pathway. With her eye she traced a line up the smaller branch that would take her back to the main bough. The only place to start, she thought, was at the beginning.

She had passed the fork and moved a hundred yards down the main branch when she found the body.

She stopped still, her heart slamming wildly against her chest. It was wedged in a bark crevasse near the curve of the limb. She forced herself closer. It had been one of the males, she knew, though it was difficult to tell even that much now. The Lemmit had evidently fallen from a great height—his body was crushed, almost flattened by the impact.

She looked up. There was a giant branch almost lost in the leaves above. It had to be four, maybe five hundred feet away.

She forced her eyes back to the Lemmit. She studied the body a long moment, puzzlement crossing her features. There was *something*....

Her mouth opened in a little "O" of understanding. Of course—the bright red beads! Expecting to see redness there on the ruined body, she'd almost missed them.

She knew who it was, then, who it almost had to be. She had seen the beads before when Erfedrie had pointed out Jhavhat, the male wizard.

She walked around the body, looking at it from all sides. Now that the beads had given her a beginning, she could see other things clearly. The Lemmit's form had been shrunken in life, older. His pelt was heavily flecked with white and—

Kearney suddenly gasped and jerked back from the still form. She waited until her legs stopped trembling, then bit her lip and moved closer again. The Lemmit's right arm was folded crookedly under his chest, but she could still see the tips of monkeylike fingers. There was—something, clutched in the wizard's hand.

She gritted her teeth and stretched one arm toward the body. *God, she thought wildly, what if he doesn't let go.... !*

The thing came easily away and she almost ran from the body. She sat down shakily and set the object before her.

She stared at it for a long moment. Everything logical told her the thing shouldn't be there at all. It wasn't possible. It was right there, in front of her, but she couldn't let herself believe it was true. If she believed that—

It was a god, an idol. No question about that. Only it couldn't have come from the Lemmits. This wasn't that kind of a culture, and if it was, she would have to throw out a great many conclusions and cram in some new ones that really didn't fit at all.

She shook her head. The sight of the thing was enough to chill her blood. It wasn't a Lemmit, certainly—or anything else she'd seen on Sequoia. It was an ugly, crude statue of something with a pale, almost bulbous body, stubby arms and spindly legs ending in outsized splayed feet. Whatever it was—if it was anything at all—*it very definitely didn't belong in the Highwood.*

It was the face, though, that held Kearney's attention. It was an almost human face, with manlike features. Almost. But not quite. It was a terrifying parody of humanity. Something lost and lonely that had come pitifully close, and failed.

Kearney almost saw the sound before she heard it.

It broke through her thoughts with the sharpness and clarity of a sound that comes out of perfect stillness. She froze where she was, without breathing, then caught the flash of movement, the quick blink of silver-gray against green.

Males! Her heart stopped. She felt the chill of fear rising up the back of her neck and caught herself quickly.

They don't know I'm here, she told herself calmly. *They haven't seen me. If they knew, they wouldn't be moving about.*

She began inching her way backward, her eyes never leaving the patch of olive where the brightness had appeared. There was a thick umbrella of foliage only yards behind her. If she could make it that far....

A voice chattered in a high, excited pitch. Another answered. Kearney forgot caution. She jerked up, turned and ran. There was nothing else for it now, and she wondered why she was strangely calm when she knew perfectly well she didn't have a chance in hell of outrunning a Lemmit in the Highwood.

The foliage whispered behind her and the open branch lay ahead. They weren't talking anymore. Maybe they hadn't heard at all. Maybe—

Kearney stopped. A scream started in her throat as the Lemmit rose up in front of her out of nowhere.

SEVENTEEN

A single finger went to the Lemmit's lips. Kearney's scream died.

Erfedrie!

Kearney's spirits soared in recognition. She wanted to fling herself on the silver form in joy, but the Lemmit was already waving her arms frantically, golden eyes wide with alarm.

Erfedrie slipped off the edge of the branch and disappeared in foliage. Kearney followed without looking back.

"Most Lemmits no bein killit, Kerneew'n," Erfedrie told her. "Why you askit, *Hai?*"

Even in darkness Kearney could make out the pained features on the female's face. It was a typical Lemmit expression—a blend of long-suffering impatience and complete disdain. It meant creatures who asked inane questions deserved what they got. And "inane" on Sequoia had a special definition, she knew. It encompassed all remarks that questioned the Lemmit point of view.

They were huddled in a wooden hollow at the base of a thick branch heavy with pale, amber-yellow foliage. The foliage was a parasite that eventually sucked the moisture from the outer bark and caused the wood to dry and fall in upon itself. The process formed a myriad of hollows, and the powdery residue of rotting wood made good soil for the parasite.

The foliage also gave off a damp, noxious odor that held traces of ammonia to Kearney's nose. She supposed Erfedrie had chosen the spot because it helped mask their own odor from any males who might still be searching for them.

She only guessed this was true. Certainly, Erfedrie hadn't deigned to share any such knowledge.

"I only asked," Kearney said wearily, "because I was concerned. I didn't know where you were when Vherakhensel fell."

"Why you speakit, Kerneew'n?" Erfedrie asked blandly. "Some Lemmits maybe is no more bein livit—not so many, maybe."

"You know that?" Kearney asked.

"Oh, sure enough, *Hai?*"

"How?" Kearney said crossly. "What'd you do—take a head count as they fell?"

Erfedrie sighed. "Kerneew'n. Why makin lotsa Lemmits no more livit, *Hai?* Vherakhensel no be killit *these* Lemmits—is no bein Vherakhensel Lemmit. You see that?"

Kearney saw it, all right. "No," she said doggedly. "I don't see that. It doesn't have a damn *thing* to do with anything, Erfedrie!"

She pulled her legs beneath her for warmth and turned abruptly away from the Lemmit. She knew better than to argue further. Her tolerance level was running particularly low at the moment. She was tired. And dirty. And scared stiff. She wasn't sure just how long she could keep raw nerve ends from climbing out of her pores and shouting. Not a hell of a lot longer, she was certain—not with a crew of hairy males sniffing about the Highwood for her skin.

Besides that, her feet threatened to swell right out of her boots and she was hungry. —And not for tart red berries and bitter nuts, either. Her mind swam dizzily with unattainable delights that did little more than aggravate the great hollow in the pit of her stomach.

It wasn't the right setting for dialogue with a thickheaded female who had never *once* in her life considered the possibility that she might really have no idea what she was talking about.

Kearney clearly understood what the Lemmit had in mind, all right: Vherakhensel didn't have it in for Erfedrie's Colony, because *that* Colony belonged to Chrestigho.

Kearney scowled. It was a charming bloody thought, all right. If you could let yourself believe that, the next step was not thinking at all.

Erfedrie hadn't asked why the males were after her scalp. Kearney decided she had—in true Lemmit fashion—written the business off on the general premise that males were impossible bastards who might do anything.

Kearney had no such illusions. She knew what they had in mind—and why. The thought sent icewater chills up her spine. She was sure the idol Jhavhat had carried to his death was very likely the only thing that had survived the Vherakhensel massacre. It didn't take a great deal of thought to assume that whatever the idol was—taken within the psycho-historical context of Lemmitdom—it was probably the most significant single article on the planet. She couldn't say *how* she knew, or list valid theorems to prove her point.

She simply knew. And the males knew, too, and knew she had set eyes upon something she should never have seen. They were out there now, waiting. And Kearney could almost feel the dark thoughts behind night-gold eyes.

"Erfedrie," she said finally. "Can we do it? Can we really get away from them?"

Erfedrie blinked in shadow. "Male-things no dead makit, Kerneew'n. No more talkit. Makit sleepin now, *Hai?*"

She turned away, curled into a gray kitten ball.

Kearney's face darkened. "Erfedrie—listen to me!" She jerked up, moved to the Lemmit's side. "I don't want to sleep," she snapped angrily. "I want to *know!*"

The Lemmit gazed at her without expression. Kearney shook her head.

"Erfedrie." She brought calm to her voice. "I trust you. You must know that. But—I want to know, don't you see? I'm not *like* you. I'm not the same and I can't be. People —people who aren't Lemmits just think in a different way. Can you understand that? That I can't just let tomorrow *happen?* I have to think about things like that, Erfedrie. Just—shrugging the whole thing off and

saying whatever's there is there isn't enough for me!"

Kearney swallowed hard and fought back tears from her eyes. "Erfedrie, I have to know. Where are we *going*?"

Erfedrie looked up at her.

Oh, God, there it is again. Kearney moaned. *That smug, complacent—*

"Where you thinkin, Kerneew'n?" Erfedrie said irritably. "What placers we be goin, *Hai*?" She nodded vaguely over her shoulder. "Is only bein *one* placers for goin, Kerneew'n. Lemmits be livin on Chrestigho. You know that?"

Kearney sat up straight. "You—oh, *no!*" she cried. She shook her head violently. "But we can't, Erfedrie!"

"No? Whysit, Kerneew'n?" The Lemmit looked at her curiously. Kearney opened her mouth, then stopped. God, she must be completely deranged as far as Erfedrie was concerned. Of course they were going back to Chrestigho— they had to go to Chrestigho *because there was no other concept of "destination" in Erfedrie's mind.... !*

She didn't know whether the fact that death waited for them on Chrestigho had ever entered the Lemmit's mind. Either it had or it hadn't. Probably, it didn't matter to Erfedrie, one way or the other. And why should it? Kearney realized with a sudden chill. *Death* is the lover you clasp to your breast on Sequoia. Life is only the cruel, punishing prologue to the darkness a whole world's waiting to find.

She wrapped her arms tightly about her shoulders against the chill of morning. She decided, grimly, the reports on Sequoia's seasonal variations were less than accurate. The days seemed to be growing perceptively shorter and, for nearly a week now, the temperature had very definitely dropped during the dawn hours.

It wasn't *much* better during the day. What little dull light pierced the thick foliage did nothing to heat the Highwood, and the nights were almost unbearable.

So, she asked herself dryly, what the hell did you expect, friend? Hamby Flagg's the Resident Agent on Sequoia. His other reports were about as valuable as spit in a forest fire. Why should he be big on climatology?

Erfedrie stood a few yards away, so naturally blended with the palette of the Highwood Kearney had to look twice to hit her image from the gray-green shadows behind her.

Kearney watched. Erfedrie sniffed the air, flinging out senses across the treescape, then reeling them back full of the smells and sounds and colors that would tell her whether anything unexpected lay ahead.

They hadn't spotted any males. Kearney knew *that* didn't mean anything, either. They were there. All you had to do was look at Erfedrie. She could almost tell how close they were by the color of the Lemmit's eyes.

Erfedrie's head moved almost imperceptively and Kearney moved silently up beside her. Erfedrie pointed, tracing the new route through tones of green, and Kearney nodded.

The Lemmit had prolonged the sniffing business almost interminably this morning. Kearney thought she knew the reason. They were about to make a Crossing, moving through the relatively open patches where the outer branches of one Tree interlaced with another.

Crossings bothered Erfedrie. She didn't like the long periods of exposure without good cover nearby. Kearney wondered dully what difference it made. Didn't Erfedrie really know that if the males *wanted* to catch them, they would? Was she so damn dense she couldn't see they had some *reason* for letting them alone?

She had never mentioned Vherakhensel. First, because it was the last thing in the world she wanted to talk about and, secondly, if she knew Lemmit logic at all, the incident had already begun to fade from Erfedrie's mind. That was the Lemmit way—yesterdays and tomorrows flung carelessly in neat, unlabeled pigeonholes. There was sex, hunger and today—the big three—and death-love waiting in the wings. Period.

It was a maddening way of life, and it put impossible barriers between Lemmits and any other poor creature who might want to communicate some abstract complexity beyond those rigid bounds. Like, for instance, the time of day, Kearney thought sourly.

Once the Crossing was completed, Erfedrie seemed to drop fear and caution like a worn garment. There were no more stops for checking the wind, then waiting long hours until the

Lemmit felt they could go ahead safely. Kearney hadn't really understood how much this procedure had slowed them down before. Now, Erfedrie bounded through the Highwood at a pace that left Kearney dragging breathlessly behind.

Kearney didn't complain. She was determined to keep moving if it killed her. The seasonal change was even more noticeable now. The limbs around her were dark and brooding, and the few leaves she saw were small, citron-pale specimens that were a poor match for the lush growth to which she was accustomed.

She had no desire to stop in this cold shadow world. She had the unreasoning conviction that if she kept moving, the whole thing might somehow pass behind her.

Near the end of the second day after Crossing, Erfedrie stopped at the fork of a broad limb and dropped laughingly on a nest of yellow leaves. She smiled up impishly at Kearney.

Kearney raised a suspicious brow. Grim Lemmits were one thing. Happy Lemmits were something else again.

Erfedrie caught her expression. "Is ho'right, Kerneew'n," she said. She patted the bark by her side, then pointed vaguely down the path. "We bein back on Sherandhel now, *Hai?* You know that?"

Kearney stared at her curiously, then followed the Lemmit's gesture. Far down the dark branch she could make out a greater blackness. Finally, her eyes picked out the shaggy texture of bark she supposed represented the massive wall of Sherandhel Tree.

Kearney shook her head. "No, I can't go for that, Erfedrie," she said. "It just doesn't look like Sherandhel. It's not Sherandhel—I don't care if it is the dead of winter, nothing changes like that!"

She sat up, caught the Lemmit's eyes and held them. "Okay, exactly where are we, friend?" she demanded. Somewhere, at the edge of her senses, a tiny spark of fear caught hold again.

"We're not on Chrestigho Branch," she said evenly. "*Where the hell are we, Erfedrie?*"

Erfedrie leaned up on one arm. "Kerneew'n"—she blinked painfully—"is no bein Chrestigho Branch. Erfedrie no speakit 'bout Chrestigho, *Hai?*"

"You *said*—" Kearney blurted.

Erfedrie shook her head. "Is sayin we bein on Sherandhel, Kerneew'n. Why you askit?"

Kearney felt the heat rise to her face. "I *askit*, goddamn you," she yelled, "because I know you're lying!" She grabbed the Lemmit's arm in a fierce grip. Erfedrie grimaced and jerked away from her.

"Is bein Sherandhel," Erfedrie said stubbornly. She pointed again to her left. "Chrestigho Branch bein two, maybe three sleepits up, *Hai?* You know that, Kerneew'n?"

Kearney backed away and stared. The spark of fear blossomed, exploded, and she suddenly understood. *There was no seasonal change on Sequoia. It wasn't fall or winter or anything else. Erfedrie was leading them steadily down through the Highwood!*

Kearney took a deep breath to still the beat of her heart against her chest.

"Erfedrie—" Her mouth was almost too dry to speak. "You live on Chrestigho Branch. What are we doing down—*here?*"

"Is Sherandhel," Erfedrie said stubbornly.

"I know it's Sherandhel," said Kearney. "But it's not Chrestigho. It—" She stopped. The thought had been hovering there all along. She'd simply avoided bringing it to the surface.

"We can't go up, can we?" she said soberly. "The males wouldn't let us do that."

Erfedrie shook her head violently. "Is no more male-things, Kerneew'n. No followin since Crossing, you see that?"

Kearney had guessed that much. It accounted for the Lemmit's unhampered pace the last few days. It didn't, however, answer the question.

She made a quick mental calculation. If Chrestigho Branch was two or three days above, that would mean three, maybe four thousand feet. The Lemmits lived across the eight to nine thousand foot level of the Highwood, and the tip of Sherandhel loomed over five thousand feet above that.

She felt a sudden, sinking sensation in her stomach. She leaned against a branch and took a deep breath. Her legs felt like water. They were *two-thirds* of the way down the Tree! Whatever lay on Sequoia's surface, it was only a mile or so away now.

She looked narrowly at the Lemmit. "Erfedrie, why aren't the males following us anymore?"

Erfedrie didn't answer. She didn't have to, of course, thought Kearney. It was all there in her eyes.

"It's because we're where they want us to be," Kearney said almost to herself. "They forced us here, down through the Highwood—away from Chrestigho. You knew that, and you didn't even try...."

Kearney thought a small muscle moved slightly at the corner of Erfedrie's mouth, but that was all.

"Is ho'right, Kerneew'n," she said with forced conviction. "Is Sherandhel."

Kearney looked at her, then turned and sank down heavily. She ran tired fingers through her hair. How could you put the blame on Erfedrie? she asked herself. Erfedrie was caught in the inescapable trap of Lemmit logic—it was sealed at both ends, with the Lemmits right in the middle.

She stretched heavy limbs and got to her feet. "Okay," she sighed. "What's done is done, isn't it? The thing is we can't very well stay here, can we? You got any suggestions?"

Erfedrie's eyes widened. "Is plenty safe bein here, Kerneew'n."

"Safe!" A dry laugh exploded in Kearney's throat. "Will you wake *up!*" she yelled. "We're 'safe' from warmth, food and water, Erfedrie—we can last without the first for about a week, maybe. Then we won't have to worry about the other two!"

Kearney set her jaw firmly. "If we can't go up, then we'll just have to go down. That's all there is to it."

Erfedrie stared at her. She was sure the Lemmit's skin paled under the light silver pelt.

"Kerneew'n—" Her voice seemed pitifully small. "This place bein *Shai'Khel*, you know that? Is no more world placit under here."

Something started up the back of Kearney's neck. She made a quick translation and knew she was close enough.

Any way you cut it, *Shai'Khel* meant Last Branch.

EIGHTEEN

kearney took long, deliberate strides down the dark path, her eyes locked firmly on the looming mass of Sherandhel trunk.

She didn't look back.

There was absolutely no use arguing with Erfedrie. Kearney knew that. Several thousand years of conditioning would keep Erfedrie from leaving Last Branch. Up *or* down. She had used the full arsenal of Colony logic to bring them here. No alternatives had occurred to her before, back in Vherakhensel's shadow. They sure as hell wouldn't come to her now.

Kearney stopped, craned her neck up at the wall before her. God, it went on forever! There was no way you could comprehend the Trees of Sequoia. And certainly not from this position—standing antlike next to the giant trunk. She tried to imagine what Sherandhel must be like where it met the ground—and couldn't. She pictured immense roots stretching out from the base, reaching out over darkness down to—what?

She swept her thoughts quickly away from that subject. It wasn't the thing to dwell upon at the moment.

She turned her attention back to the Tree. There was still a *chance* she could reach a branch further up, follow the plan she'd considered once before.

She could try—and hope none of the males had been left to wait for her. They couldn't cover every possible escape route, could they? If it worked, she could cross as quickly as possible to the branches of another Tree. From there, it shouldn't be too difficult to bypass Chrestigho, circle back into Sherandhel and head for the top branches, and the Federation Homer beam waiting there—

Her spirits rose for a brief moment, then faded back into sober resignation as reason broke through the fantasy.

She couldn't possibly survive the scarred heights of Sherandhel, not without thermal clothing and oxygen, and none of that was available outside Chrestigho. There was no use dreaming—a daring raid on the Lemmit Colony was more than fantasy—it was complete madness. And she was convinced the males hadn't gone far from Last Branch. They would be there, lying quietly against some branch above. Hoping two female creatures would brave a try for home ground.

Kearney cursed under her breath and stomped her feet against wood. *Damn*, it was cold! She

was shivering all over. What little light filtered down to this level was fading fast. What happened tomorrow or next week suddenly seemed remotely academic. Getting through the night without freezing to death was a Priority One project!

She caught movement from the corner of her eye and turned. Erfedrie stood on the pathway behind, watching her. Big, unblinking eyes were dim points of gold in the half-light.

Kearney faced her without expression. "You still there, are you?"

Erfedrie didn't answer.

Kearney shook her head. "Erfedrie—what is it you *want*?"

The Lemmit stayed a cautious distance away. She made no move to come closer. Kearney saw questions in her eyes, but she had no answer for Erfedrie's problems.

"Hell with it," she muttered to herself. "Do what you have to do. I can't very well blame you for that."

Kearney had grown accustomed to maneuvering over the branchways of the Highwood. It wasn't something she particularly liked, but it was the way you got from one place to another on Sequoia.

Trunk geography, she discovered, was something else again. The labyrinthine convolutions circling Sherandhel made the canyons of Chrestigho seem less than insignificant.

They were shallow fissures that barely marred the giant's hide.

She wished longingly for one of the Colony's wicker light-baskets. A hundred strange sounds and smells assaulted her senses in the vaultway girdling the trunk. There was the dry, musty odor of pith-wood gone to powder, and the sour-sweet hint of wetness that clings to the tunnels of burrowing things.

She was sure there were large insects or other creatures about—rapid chitterings started ahead of her, then sank into silence at her approach.

She never stopped to see what they might be. She bit her lip and kept moving.

If I stop, she told herself, I'll never move again.... I wouldn't know which way something was waiting for me so I couldn't go any way at all.... !

Before the last of the light was gone, she hurriedly gathered great armfuls of bark shaggings that littered the tunnel floors. They weren't much, she knew, but better than nothing, and they might cover her against the worst of the night temperatures. There were small berries on brittle vines along the trunk's inner wall. She decided they were a smaller, withered version of the healthier variety common in the Highwood. She ate as many as she could find, gagging at the taste, and was immediately dry with thirst.

There was water nearby, but she knew she would never be able to keep it down—even if she could force herself to drink it.

Before she drifted into sleep under the thick shaggings she tried to tell herself they were very much like pine needle beds back in the woods on Earth. Only it wasn't true at all. She thought once of Ham Flagg, and dreamed lightly of people and places that were only dim memories now. She thought about Erfedrie, and wondered if the Lemmit might still be standing where she had left her. Kearney pictured her there, staring into the darkness. Doing—what? She turned over and made a face. Justifying freezing her silver butt off with a nice piece of Lemmit logic, no doubt.

She sat up quickly and thought of morning and knew instantly it wasn't morning at all.

There was light, but it wasn't the right kind of light at all. Amber didn't belong in the chromatic order of the Highwood, and that meant—

She stood, shivering in the deadly night air. It had dropped at least another eight or ten degrees.

Wynn, she told herself crossly, you've lost the *rest* of your senses. If it's not natural light then it's artificial, and whoever or whatever's out there can't be any friend of yours! It's probably a pack of male Lemmits—maybe they've already *found* Erfedrie.

She walked carefully, feeling her way along the inner wall and trying to remember what the tunnel looked like in daylight. There should be a turn somewhere—there! It had been in shadow when she'd passed before and she had deliberately avoided the place. The light was coming from one of the rifted passages, then. It was almost bright enough to mark her steps now.

She ran forward quickly. The glow outlined the edge of a natural cavity off the larger passage. She moved more cautiously. She was sure whoever was in there could hear her heartbeat. She

bit down hard to still her breath and listened.

Nothing.

But she almost felt a presence close by. And she was certain now the amber glow came from a Lemmit cage light. She swallowed the quick surge of fear. It couldn't be anyone *but* the males....! She forced herself to peer into the rift.

The scream caught in her throat—escaped as a hoarse cry before she could call it back. Erfedrie jerked around, faced her with terrible, empty eyes. Kearney shrank back. Erfedrie moved and Kearney caught the flicker of light on the bone knife. It was an ugly talon in the Lemmit's hand, dark-wet under amber. Kearney stared past it and got one numbing glimpse of the knife's work—

It was a male. It sat against the rear of the rift, legs stretched before its body, arms limp. She knew, instantly, the creature had been dead for some time. The ruined face was already covered with death-frost. Sick-sweetness punctured the night air. Kearney's stomach knotted in warning—

She stumbled, fell through darkness, picked herself up, then doubled in pain. Her stomach gave way and she went weakly to her knees and wretched. The stench of her own sickness started the cycle again.

Thoughts came in blurred, indistinct flashes of fear—

They're the same, she thought numbly. *Oh God, one's alive and one isn't and they both—looked at me the same....!*

She struggled to her feet, again. Her legs folded like water. She cried out in new pain and sank to the ground. The acrid odor of sweat mingled with bile-sour sickness hit her like an overpowering wave. Night wrapped her in cold armor and tossed her heavily against the ground.

Finally, one chilling image broke through with vivid, terrifying clarity:

.... There's no place to run no place on this whole alien world to hide and this is where it ends, Kearney Wynn....

Soft hands touching.

No—!

Mind screams. Body shrinks back.

No! No! *NO!*

Sudden strength. Surging up through watery muscles. Then—pain. Clutching at her stomach. Rising to her throat.

The soft hands moved with strong, terrifying, practiced authority. She listened with growing horror from some distant place—

The sharp sound of snaps falling away with ease.... rustle of clothing.... cloth over skin.... then the sudden, paralyzing shock of cold air against nakedness—

Kearney cried out—fought against patient hands. Worlds crashed around her in a burst of sound-color and her mind pulled away, rejected sensory brotherhood with her body, locked itself in a plush chamber of disassociation and the body arched up with a mindless cry to pull in the strong hands, the silk-warmness—

Kearney gasped. Heat-points of pleasure raged through her legs and thighs and circled about her breasts—

Her mind gave a final, hollow cry of protest from its tower of noninvolvement and fear-terror-loneliness died under a wave of liquid silk that swept all else away.

NINETEEN

"they've been here," Ham said quietly.

He straightened, squinting at the gray bulk of Chrestigho almost lost in deep shadow.

"I'd guess two, three days ago. No more than that."

He bit his lip thoughtfully. "The Lemmit's still with her and I'm sure it's a female. Hell, it has to be a female."

"It couldn't reasonably be anything else, could it?" the psychBear put in. "If a male had found her—"

"Yeah, I know." Ham cut him off and moved up the dark branch. If there had been any questions in his mind before, there were none there now. He knew the males had spotted the girl, probably after the confusion of Vherakhensel's fall. He'd found the branch himself where Jhavhat

had fallen, and picked up the Lemmit party's odor, and then, surprisingly, the smell of the girl herself.

His stomach had tightened at that, and he raced quickly after them, half expecting to find the death-smell somewhere on the path ahead. Instead, he discovered that the girl wasn't alone anymore—there was a Lemmit with her.

His hopes rose for a moment, then died quickly. Kearney Wynn would have a chance if the female was guiding her— but it wouldn't be much of a chance, he knew. The females were just as woods-wise as the males, but Kearney's presence would turn the odds against them. Not even a lifetime on Sequoia could bring a human up to more than a fraction of the Lemmits' inborn abilities.

Kearney and her friend might evade their pursuers for a few hours—a day at the most. After that...

By the second day, he knew they were still alive, and he knew what the males had in mind. The realization brought a sudden surge of anger. The little bastards had worked out the problem in true Lemmit fashion!

Killing females implied that such creatures were worthy of attention, that their existence was recognized by the males. Definitely minus points in the ego game. Even deliberate negation of that existence imparted a dignity that couldn't be tolerated.

But if they could be *guided* toward negation—if death happened to come through some other source—

It was fairly clear, and he wondered if the girl knew enough about the Highwood to see it. Certainly, the female with her would know. He hoped the creature had enough sense to keep that bit of lore to herself. Knowing how it was going to happen to you couldn't make it any easier.

At the wall of Sherandhel he stopped and brooded a long moment, and let his eyes run up over soft shadows.

"She wouldn't go up again, if that's what you're thinking, and you are," Teddi broke in.

Ham frowned. "No? Why the hell not?" he said crossly. "She doesn't know anywhere else to go."

"But the female with her knows the males led them down here, and knows why, too—whether she'll admit that to herself or not. Probably the girl knows too by now."

"You're projecting without facts," Ham muttered stubbornly. He knew the psychBear was probably right, but he wasn't ready to face that prospect just yet. He hung onto the possibility that the cul-de-sac had worked effectively, as the males had figured it would. That the female Lemmit knew that neither Chrestigho nor anything else above Last Branch was attainable. That there was no direction left but down.

And there's not a Lemmit on Sequoia who'd consider that as an alternative, he told himself. This is where the world ends, and the female would starve before she'd consider the one way out.—And Kearney Wynn would starve with her.

Ham frowned, a sudden question narrowing his eyes. Would she, though? The Lemmits had lumped a human into their logic this time, and they had just possibly made a very shaky assumption. Humans had a way of hanging on with thickheaded stubbornness—particularly after you told them to stop, that the game was over and they had lost. The girl wouldn't want to go on alone, but she'd want to survive, too. And she wasn't bound to Last Branch by any restrictive ritual. Only fear of descending down into that blackness would hold her back—and fear, he knew, usually ran a poor second to hunger.

He shook his head and brushed the thought aside. She wouldn't be quite that hungry just yet. If she hadn't gone up Sherandhel, and he was almost sure she hadn't now—then she was still at Last Branch.

He grimaced at the thought. The Tree was only three hundred yards wide at this point, no broader than the length of a good-sized ocean liner on Earth, and maybe three *thousand* feet around.

Hell, he ought to be able to find her easily in a good six months or so.

"There is no logical reason to go more than a determined distance down any one series of clefts," the psych-Bear told him. His voice carried the irritating quality of electronic smugness that Ham found particularly unpleasant.

"If she's here, she took a certain pathway and stopped at the nearest area providing shelter that suited her needs as she saw them. The *rational* thing to do—"

Ham jerked around and the Bear subsided into silence.

"Now, look—" Ham warned. "We had an agreement."

"All right. That slipped out. It wasn't meant in a disparaging manner."

"I don't give a damn *how* it was meant," Ham said evenly. "You keep your comments confined to logic and the state of the bloody scenery. Understood?"

"Understood," Teddi mumbled.

"You got any psychological observations, keep 'em to yourself. You can *use* 'em, by the way. And don't get the idea I have to have someone to talk to. I can do without that, too, if I have to."

The psychBear wasn't doing badly, considering. Ham had to admit that. His pattern had changed radically, and he had done a fair job of clearing the electronic aberrations from his system. But it was still a patch job, with bypassed circuits only temporarily blocked from usage, and Ham wouldn't trust him entirely again until a complete reprogramming had been arranged.

Even then, he was sure he'd never feel quite secure with one of the Bears. He had slipped too easily into an unnatural dependency on Teddi's companionship. What began as a mirror-image, a deeper clarification of his own thought patterns, had come close to a reflective psychosis that could easily have destroyed him. Instead of helping him maintain an even keel in his loneliness, Teddi had reinforced his own fears and magnified them in the direction of madness.

That was a scar that would take a long time healing. And he knew he was lucky to have a second chance at all. Fixing a psychBear's tin innards was one thing—reprogramming a human brain was something else again. Science had come a long way in the past three hundred years, but as far as Ham knew, no one had yet figured out how to unscramble an egg.

Ham raised his eyes from the pathway and frowned thoughtfully. He reached into his backpack and flicked the power-flash briefly on and off.

"You see any better than I can?" he asked quietly. "I don't want to waste these cells unless I have to. There's not enough spit left in 'em to talk about."

"I can see about as well as you can—maybe a little better in the red end," Teddi told him. "It all looks the same, anyway—open-top tunnels with bark walls. You can't tell by *looking* whether they came this way or not. Like I told you, the thing to do is settle on a logical pattern—"

"I don't need a logical pattern," Ham said patiently. "They passed here. I know that. I can smell them. But I smell something else, too, and I don't like it. That's why I risked the light. I'd be a lot happier if I knew what I was going to meet in the next twenty yards or so."

"Well, what do you *think* it is?" asked the Bear. "As I understand it, human olfactory memories can usually pin down this sort of thing to a general category, anyway."

Ham wasn't listening. The evening was bringing strong hints of the strange odor on chill breaths of air, and the hair at the back of his neck was starting the long crawl upward. In spite of Teddi's protests, he jogged quickly through the darkness until he came to the rift off the main pathway.

Nobody had to tell him he'd found the right spot.

"Great God Almighty," he whispered. He took shallow breaths through his mouth and flicked the light on and then off again.

"*They* didn't do that," Teddi observed clinically. "The females, I mean. It happened some time before they could have arrived. Disintegration is advanced."

"Thanks for the diagnosis," Ham said dryly. "I noticed that."

The psychBear made a sudden, garbled exclamation, like a short burst of profane static. "I don't have the equipment to judge properly, Flagg, but—*damn!* When biological types go, they let everybody know about it, don't they?"

Ham ignored the Bear. He was used to Teddi's oblique and none too thinly veiled jibes at the frailty of organic life. It was a favorite theme of electronic companions.

"They didn't do all of it," Ham said grimly, "but you can bet the female Lemmit had a hand in *that*."

He nodded at the ragged wound between the dead creature's thighs, and shuddered.

"Ritual emasculation," the Bear observed. "Not uncommon among primitives, I shouldn't think."

"You hit it," said Ham. "You shouldn't think." He had a roiling, uneasy feeling in his groin. Teddi's scientific analysis was no comfort at all. He turned quickly out of the rift and took broad strides toward clean air.

That answers one question, anyway, he thought soberly. If you like answers to questions. Now we know what happened to brother Karajhak....

He had recognized the Lemmit hunter immediately, in spite of what Teddi called "advanced disintegration." Ham shook his head. Poor dumb bastard! He could make a fair guess at what had happened. Karajhak had been drawn tight as a hot wire, anyway, for reasons of his own. Then the Mothering had come along and it had been more than Karajhak could handle. It had pushed him over that dark edge where Lemmits teetered all their lives, and he had fled to Last Branch to die.

Starvation had to be a terrible way to go, Ham thought grimly. But maybe it was worse to flee demons down the hallways of your mind.

And there was another thing, too, he remembered. Maybe Karajhak had paid a heavy price for being *Dhaj'sai*—the one who sees Death in the Highwood.

He picked up the trail easily in the dull light of morning. There was no real need now to sniff the trail for direction. Two sets of footprints sank deeply into the powdery detritus and drifted shag.

He found the spot where Kearney had gotten sick, and guessed the story behind that. Then, a few steps away, there was something else, and he went to his knees again and touched his face to the ground.

He raised up, finally, puzzlement spreading over his features. The scent was nearly gone, and he couldn't place it—but it lingered with him, bringing up dormant emotions to play upon his senses, and leaving him with an unexplainable sense of excitement, anticipation.

"They've headed down," said Teddi, "unless my directional gear fails me."

"It doesn't," Ham told him, "Only I'm surprised as hell, I'll tell you that."

"Because they started down the Tree? Why should that surprise you at all? They didn't have any choice, did they?"

Ham shook his head. "That's not the point. The girl went on. She had to, and I figured it would come to her eventually. Only she's got more sense than I gave her credit for. She figured it out for herself: move on while you've got the strength left to make the try—strike out for food *before* you're too weak to travel."

Ham paused. "What I can't see is the Lemmit. The female held back after the girl went on. But not for long. That one's got guts, I'll tell you—getting a Lemmit past Last Branch is like teaching pigs to fly!"

"Sorry, I'm not familiar with the analogy," said Teddi. "If you can give me the basics from which the comparison is taken—"

"Forget it," said Ham. He stared at the psychBear a long moment, then let out a short breath.

"You're a hell of a lot of fun on trips," he said dryly. "You know that, don't you?"

TWENTY

There's no difference at all anymore, thought Kearney. *It could be morning or midnight, and I'd never even know.*

And that's not quite true, either, she corrected herself. The darkness above was as black as any sky naked to the heavens, but now it was punctured by tiny points of amber-green light.

Kearney laughed to herself.

It was about par for the course on Sequoia. The "stars" came out in the daytime, here. She supposed the fact that any light at all could avoid strangulation through five miles of growth was some sort of accomplishment.

She hadn't really avoided thinking about Erfedrie.

She had simply set the subject aside—locked it away for the moment. It was an ugly package that would rest uneasily on some dark mental shelf until it could be taken down and opened and examined and put in its proper place.

There was a time for things like that. This very definitely wasn't it.

Bits and pieces of vagrant thoughts fluttered like uneasy birds through her head. There was no stopping that. She knew enough about the mind to understand there were automatic processes at work there—carrying out the continual job of rationalizing thought and action with the more or less permanent guidelines filed in neat cortical cabinets.

There were phrases and heading and subheadings: *fear warps judgment.... shame is relative to recorded experience experience establishes value....*

The mental mites that spin webs of justification were working overtime to get her off the hook. She watched them for a while with grim amusement, then waved them away. Some would fall apart through poor design, and others would undoubtedly grow stronger.

Or, maybe, she decided, the whole thing will turn into one of those to-hell-with-its that blow all the fancy constructions out of the tub:

I got scared and sick and lonely and stuck up in this Tree and had a thing with this very silky female. To-hell-with-it.

At any rate, it was a subject easy enough to put aside for the time being. There were other things to do, and plenty of things to avoid doing. By the fourth day—it was probably the fourth day, anyway—the pseudo-stars had all but disappeared, and she began to notice the faint beginnings of another kind of light below.

It was less than a suggestion of light, at first—a pale shadow of phosphorescence no brighter than an afterimage. Later, she began to pick out distinct bits of the new light all around her. It clung to the pathways and the walls of the bark crevasse leading down and around Sherandhel. She touched a spot once, and came away with a ghostly hand. Several times tiny things trembled in her path then scurried away in dull blurs of movement.

She was sure the atmosphere was getting wetter and warmer, and decided that meant she was getting closer to ground level. If she remembered her botany, the luminous side effects she was witnessing now came from that natural organic process known as rot.

Kearney wondered, not for the first time, what Erfedrie thought of the world below Last Branch. There was no use wondering, of course. She wasn't even sure where the Lemmit was. She was around, somewhere—she hadn't stayed above—but she was definitely traveling in an erratic manner. Sometimes she was a pale image yards away, sometimes she was nowhere at all.

Eventually, Kearney stopped looking. Erfedrie would follow, or she would stiffen into catatonia and become a glowing attraction along the way.

It was an unfeeling, callous attitude, she knew—but the thing was, she was frightened, apprehensive, and fresh out of empathy.

Objectively, she had to give the Lemmit a great deal of credit. Erfedrie had overcome a much greater barrier than she could ever know. She, Kearney, could at least pin down her fear and label it. She was going somewhere she hadn't been before and didn't want to go and she was scared stiff. Erfedrie was certain she was moving closer to a nameless Gehenna with every step—a no-world that couldn't even exist within the Lemmit concept of the universe.

Okay, Kearney muttered to herself. So she gets a pat on the back. Sometime. Sometime when I don't have imported spooks of my own flapping about from that charming graveyard heritage all us Earth-children carry about in the big black cosmos.

And there was another thing, too. She wasn't too anxious to dwell on Erfedrie's problems. *That* brought up unhealthy images of the other event concerning Erfedrie that she had temporarily shelved. It forced her to think about the disturbing—and very likely—reason Erfedrie was following her at all....

She was too tired to go farther. She was a few degrees past exhaustion, and running into the red. And that was the reason she had grown careless and forgotten to test the pathway with the toe of her boot, and keep her eyes open for subtle differences in feeling and texture.

Differences like emptiness—and one step forward where there was no pathway at all.

She flailed out in blind panic, felt her hand claw wood and come away with wet, pulpy stuff that flaked away through her fingers.

She hit bottom and was instantly surprised at its softness. There was no shock at all except for the jarring of muscles tensed and expecting the worse. She pulled herself up out of rotten wood and took a deep breath and gagged.

Oh, no, she moaned. I won't! There's nothing there for that kind of business, anyway!

She clamped her nose shut and drew in foul air through her mouth. It wasn't good, but it was better. God, it *had* to be better!

Kearney stood, reaching as high as she could without toppling back into the unsteady foundation beneath her. She ran her arms in ever-widening circles, searching for something that felt like the top of a hole.

It wasn't a long fall. She knew that much. The only thing was, it didn't *have* to be very long. Just

long enough to be an inch higher than she could ever hope to reach.

Her heart sank momentarily, then her thoughts whirred into life again. If there was anything else in the hole, and it was solid enough to stand on ...

She moved carefully about, going to her hands and knees this time, thinking how ludicrous it would be to fall from one hole into another. It wouldn't be impossible here, she realized—or even unlikely. For all its size Sherandhel had a great deal in common with the trees of Earth. Insects, and the perpetual dampness of the ground kept the outer layers of bark here in a state of continual decay and disintegration.

She wasn't surprised to find there was nothing on the floor of the hole more solid than wet pulp. Anything that might have had body had long since vanished into—

Kearney let out a small cry and shrank back. She had touched—something. It was solid enough, but she had an idea it was nothing she'd care to stand on. Her hand came away feeling wet and unpleasant. A numbing sensation of cold lingered in her fingers.

She sat very still and listened. The odor in the hole was even more foul than before. The mouth-breathing business didn't help her at all—the smell penetrated everything.

Something moved....

Kearney tensed—her flesh crawled at the sound. It was like wetness sliding over wetness. She remembered what she had touched and backed away until her back met the damp wall.

The sound came again—closer this time.

Something's down here with me, she cried out silently. *If it touches me again...!*

She sensed movement, caught a blur of phosphorescence and lashed out savagely with her boot.

The thing pulled back with a slurring hiss of surprise and pain. Kearney's blood ran cold. The kick had accomplished one thing, at least. It had set off some bodily reaction and made her enemy visible. She could see it clearly—a pale, shapeless blob of luminosity twice her size.

If it comes again, she told herself, *I won't be able to do that.*

The thought dropped into her consciousness with calm, deadly finality, and she shoved it aside. It was self-defeating and dangerous and downright ridiculous. You'll kick or scratch or Indian wrestle with the damn thing if you have to—do you understand?

She nodded to herself. *I won't, though,* she answered stubbornly. *I couldn't touch it again—I simply couldn't and that's all!*

It came toward her quite suddenly, flowing close against the floor of the hole with unexpected speed. She cried out aloud, jerked back. It moved blindly past her. She stared at it with horrified fascination. It was like running from an overturned glass of milk or something! It literally *spilled* out from itself, and as she watched, the "spill" reversed itself and shrank back to where it—

Kearney let out a high-pitched scream. She lashed out blindly. You dumb broad, she cursed herself, you watched the *wrong* spill!

Another arm of the thing nosed wetly against her. It tightened about her legs with patient strength. Kearney kicked, pounded and cried out until her lungs ached. Her feet were numbly mired in coldness. She struggled against the chill coils with her hands. Fingers slid away ineffectually. Suddenly, it gripped her under her arms and about her breasts.

My God, she cried out silently. *It's got hands.... !*

She felt herself rising and wondered distantly where the thing was taking her. It pulled until her arms ached, held itself tightly against her. She screamed, pummeling the thing with her fists. It was trying to make its face look like Hamby Flagg's now, and she wouldn't be taken in by *that*, either—

"Damn it, girl, stop that or I'll toss you back in the bloody pit, d'you hear!"

Kearney ignored the voice. She lashed out hysterically and he slapped her hard across the face.

She stopped, blinked back tears, and stared.

Ham's face wrinkled into a scowl. "What the *hell* were you doing down there?" he demanded. He held her away from him. "God, you smell like last years's—"

"Oh, *Ham!*" she cried out, gripping him tightly. She let all the tears come out.

Ham wasn't sure what to do. He patted her gently and said, "Now, now, it's okay," and then he said it again, and decided her head crushed against his shoulder was a pleasant sensation, smell or no smell. And, after all, you couldn't expect a person to wallow around with tree slugs and come up like a summer rose.

"I knew you'd come. I did, really!" Her voice came up to him in muffled tones. "You just had to. And when the Tree fell I thought—I thought—"

She stopped, let her eyes rest on his face. "You've lost weight."

He shrugged. "Well, I don't know. Maybe I have."

"No, it's all right. You look better that way."

He caught the cool appraisal in her eyes and swallowed. "You look fine, too," he said lamely. "I guess you're—kind of tired. I thought maybe I'd get to you sooner, but—"

"It's all right," she said softly. She smiled at him. "Oh, God, it's all right because you're here *now!*"

Her arms went around his neck and the tears started again. He liked the feel of her against him. It was— He felt a sudden longing, a growing memory of loneliness, desire. He ran his hand gently over the curve of her back and marveled at how tiny her waist was. He could almost reach around her back with both hands and—

The slap stung across his face.

"Don't *touch* me, you bastard!" she yelled.

"Huh?" He shook his head and blinked.

Her eyes flashed anger. "You left me *hanging* in that goddamn cage and didn't even *try* to get me out or anything!"

"Hey—" He spread his hands and shook his head. "I couldn't do anything. I—"

"Couldn't, hell!" she spat. "You were *afraid* to do anything, Flagg. That's what it was!"

Ham's features tightened. "Listen, Kearney," he said hotly. "You were safe there. If I hadn't known that..."

Tears welled up again. "You knew," she cried. "But I didn't, Ham! *I didn't know*, don't you see that? Are you so goddamn stupid—!"

He reached out suddenly and pulled her tightly against him. She struggled, beat weakly against his shoulders, then rested in his arms. He held her and let her cry herself into exhaustion. Then he lowered her gently to the pathway and laid his jacket over her.

He sat beside her, watching her sleep. He closed his eyes once himself, then opened them quickly. He wasn't sure whether or not he had slept.

Then he remembered, and came stiffly awake. Something had stood over him in the darkness. It lingered there a moment, watching, then vanished as quickly as it had come. It left him with the vague memory of a slender shadow and golden eyes nearly closed in hatred and loathing.

He felt a sudden, cold tightening in his groin, as if a chill blade had reached out and touched him.

TWENTY-ONE

"we'll take the closest Tree we can find," Ham said quietly. "It shouldn't be more than a mile or two in any direction we happen to go. All I want to do is get *up* there and out of here. I'll feel a hell of a lot better when I can see green again!"

Kearney nodded and tightened her hand in Ham's.

"It sounds quite reasonable," Teddi said evenly. "But it's an illusion, Flagg, to assume you'll simply stumble over a Tree because you want to. It could happen that way, of course. But you could just as easily miss the first half dozen. The law of random distribution—"

"You know what you can do with the law of random distribution," Ham said narrowly. He looked warily over his shoulder, then glanced briefly at Kearney. Kearney followed his gaze.

Erfedrie stood twenty or thirty yards behind them. It was a distance she had established and maintained since Ham had joined them.

Kearney shuddered. She couldn't read the Lemmit's expression, but she could guess her thoughts. They wouldn't be pleasant. There would be hatred, certainly—a terrible, unreasoning hatred, mixed with fear of the human male-thing.

But that emotion, Kearney knew, might be no more than an angry flicker now against the dark cage of Erfedrie's mind. A world that couldn't exist had already swallowed the Lemmit and drowned her in emptiness.

Maybe she doesn't even see Ham, thought Kearney. Maybe she doesn't see anything at all.

It was of no importance now, but the thought kept peering over her shoulder and she couldn't

help but wonder—how far had Erfedrie drifted into madness the night Ham had found her?

The Lemmit had been close enough to hear her cries for help. Kearney was certain of that. And she had either been capable of doing something—or not. Kearney wasn't at all sure she wanted to know the answer to that one.

She shivered and pulled closer to Ham. Maybe Erfedrie's right, she decided. Maybe the world does end below Last Branch.

She glanced over her shoulder. One of Sherandhel's immense roots loomed up behind them. It could have been the spine of a low range of mountains. It had taken the greater part of a day to descend from the bark crevasses down the long slope to ground level.

It might as well be a different planet, Kearney thought. It was a world bathed in pale, ghostly phosphorescence. They moved silently over a million years of moist, spongy leaves, and the air was pungent with strange, musty odors. A new forest surrounded them now—pallid lichens and fungoids that reared shapeless forms stories above their heads. It reminded Kearney of trips below the Water Worlds—vague shades of blues, greens and pinks glowed and shimmered in not-quite colors.

There were few signs of life—the low thrum of insects and the occasional flash of a bird-sized glow-fly.

Kearney looked back once. She picked out Erfedrie from pale patches of color.

Ham stopped, studying the path ahead, sorting the luminosities for a Tree-sized image. He caught Kearney's glance.

"She's still with us. I've been checking." His face grew dark for a second. "Be better if she'd stayed where she was. You know that."

Kearney looked up sharply. "She would have *died* there, Ham!"

He nodded stoically. "She'll die here, Kearney. She's been dead since we started down the ridge, and maybe before that." He touched her. "Kearney—"

She shook her head. "I know what's happened to her, Ham. I see it. I saw it when it began."

He looked at her curiously. "Karajhak."

"What?"

"The male at Last Branch. That was his name. The one she—" He stopped.

"It's all right," she told him. "I know what she did there. And, Ham—maybe if we get back up in the Highwood...."

"Maybe she'll be all right?" he finished. He shook his head. "I don't think so. Neither do you." Then: "Hell, why not? She's no crazier than the rest of 'em. Who'd know the difference?"

Kearney flushed hotly. It was a cruel thing to say, and she would have called him on it, should have, she knew, only she held back until the timing was wrong. Something had made her hesitate, and she thought perhaps it was his voice, or the way he had looked at her, or maybe it was just Ham himself. She would have torn into him before; but that was another Hamby Flagg, not this one.

She let out a sharp cry of surprise and Ham jerked her back. He quickly brushed dry flakes of dead growth from her arm, and she looked up and saw she had daydreamed herself into one of the huge fungus-like trees.

"Watch it," he told her. "Anything that awful looking can't be healthy to touch."

She laughed lightly at his words. "Ham, that's almost a scientific analysis coming from you."

"What?" He looked at her curiously, and too quickly, she thought, and she knew whatever it was had been the wrong thing to say. And then she remembered.

"We—had discussions about scientific things, didn't we?" she said quietly.

He shook his head. "We didn't have any such thing. We had something like a near-brawl, and a couple of shouting matches, but we never *discussed* anything. Not that I remember."

She caught a half-smile on his face. After a moment, she said, "Did you see it, Ham?"

His face clouded. "You mean what happened at Vherakhensel. Uhuh. I saw it," he lied. He didn't see any reason to explain all that—not just now, anyway, and he wasn't sure he wanted to pursue conversations that moved in that particular direction. Damn it—they were getting along fine! Why did women always want to talk about times when you didn't?

He stopped, looked down at her. "What is it you're trying to say, Kearney?"

She saw lines of anger tighten about his eyes. His features were brushed blue-white in the pale light.

She had felt comfortably close to him moments before. Those feelings dropped away. The

petulant, little boy look she had despised in the beginning was mirrored in his features again.

She started past him and he reached out and pulled her to him.

"I'm not trying to say anything!" she snapped sharply. She jerked away and glared at him. "Evidently, nothing *needs* to be said, does it?"

"Look, Kearney," he said earnestly. "We got off to a bad start. There were—a lot of things I should have done, and didn't. I'm sorry. There was a reason."

"I'm sure there was," she said coolly.

"Listen, damn it—!"

"Your voices are carrying too far," said the psychBear. "We are not totally aware of our environment here. I'd suggest—"

"You shut up!" yelled Ham.

Kearney gave a tight, scornful little laugh. "Ham, your Teddi's *only* trying to help."

He turned on her, his face flushed, and she was suddenly sorry. There was more pain and disappointment there than anger.

"Ham—"

He stared at her another moment, then walked stiffly past her.

Tears blurred at the corners of her eyes and she bit her lip and cursed herself soundly.

Good show, Kearney Wynn, you and your big stupid mouth.... !

She ran after him, caught at his arm. "Oh, Ham, I didn't—"

He turned and clamped his hand painfully across her mouth and in the same, swift motion pulled her roughly to the ground. She gasped for breath, stunned. She stared up at him, wondering just what he had in mind. This was hardly the time for—

She suddenly realized he wasn't really watching her at all. He was looking past her, at something else. The hand came slowly away from her face and he brought a single finger to his lips. He nodded slightly, and she raised her hand and followed his eyes.

At first there was nothing. She squinted into the pale light for a long moment. Then Ham touched her lightly and she almost jumped. She looked again. A quick breath caught in her throat.

Something was out there something was moving....

She couldn't make out an actual shape or form in the impossible light. All she knew was that a shadow had passed before them, blotting out for an instant the pallid glow of a fungus tree a few yards away.

TWENTY-TWO

ham gave her a brooding glance. "I'm not sure what you're trying to say, Kearney, but I'm pretty certain the answer is no."

He raised himself slowly on his hands and squinted cautiously into the darkness.

"Ham," she whispered. "Listen—I know what you're thinking and I won't *have* it. I won't, that's all!"

He frowned at her, then grinned slightly. "I thought you were very big on the Directive. If I remember—"

She opened her mouth and he cut her off quickly.

"No, just listen," he told her. "There's something out there. A life form. Life forms are our business. It's as simple as that."

"It could be just an—animal, or something," she said stubbornly. "You don't *know* it's anything else, Ham."

"You know it is, Kearney."

"I couldn't see that well," she insisted. "Not in this light. I don't think you did, either."

Ham took a deep breath. "It walked upright, Kearn. My God, I don't have to tell you any more than that!"

"No, you don't," she said soberly, "and I don't want to hear it, either. Oh, Ham, all I want to do is climb a Tree!"

"Good," he said evenly. "That's exactly what I had in mind."

Kearney almost came off the ground. "*What!*" She suddenly understood. "Oh, no." She showed him a firm, solid chinline. "Not on your life, friend. I don't take to the woods while you chase after mysterious creatures."

"You do, Kearney."

She ignored the conviction in his voice, pleased with the strength there, all the same—and surprised that she was a little afraid of it, too.

She leaned closer and put her arms around his neck. The reaction in his eyes pleased her.

"I just *told* you, Ham. I made the big confession, only you weren't listening. I'm a female in case you didn't notice—and I know you have—and I claim all privileges accorded to that sex. Namely, the inherent right to change my mind in midstream. I came on very strong with you, and I am reversing my field—just as strongly, and not at all gracefully, I'm sure. To put it bluntly, the indefatigable socioecologist is copping out."

She paused, looked at him curiously. "Does that shock you? I don't *want* to know any more about Lemmits, Ham. I don't want to quote—save new races for the Federation—unquote. I'm scared stiff. I'm in over my head and I want to go home. And most of all I want to go home with you—wherever that is; we never really got around to things like that. What I'm saying is I don't want to be a non-Kearney anymore. I want to be a real-Kearney."

Ham raised a brow. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Simply that I'm very, very tired of the act—the brave, self-sufficient little girl bit. It means I don't want to compete, and particularly not with you. I don't *have* to do that anymore, Ham."

Ham smiled at her and kissed her lightly. "I know that," he told her.

"Good!"

"—And that's precisely the reason you're going to wait about fifty yards up the nearest Tree while I take a closer look at our upright friends."

She grinned at him, mischievous sparks in the corners of her eyes. "Just so you insist upon that. That's what's important. I'm *not going*, of course. But I'm glad that you want me to. I love you for that, Ham...."

There was no problem following the shadowy creature's direction. A crude pathway wound through the lichen forest, circled back across their own course, hugging the base of the high root they had descended earlier.

Maybe that's what's wrong, Ham decided. Maybe it's a little too easy.

He glanced warily up at the dark wall to his left. There were entirely too many hiding places there. Too many spots for something to crouch and wait for the right moment when intruders happened by.

He quickly changed course, guiding Kearney off the path and back into the thickness of phosphorescent growths. He could keep an intermittent eye on the path from there, and get some idea what they might expect around future corners.

There was no reason to assume the stranger had spotted them. And no reason to assume he hadn't, either. Any way you cut it, he decided, it was the wrong time to push their luck. For the fifth time in five minutes, he wished to hell he had bodily upended Kearney and stashed her in the reasonably safe confines of a Tree. Only, he thought sourly, they didn't know where said Tree was at the moment, and he wondered whether he'd worry more about her there than here—where he could keep an eye on her. She was definitely a female that required supervision. And he was looking forward to giving a great deal of personal attention to that....

"You tired?" he asked her. "We could stop. There's no hurry. And it's warm enough down here to sleep without freezing to death."

Kearney smiled painfully. "I'm not at all tired. I'm exhausted. Out on my feet. Dead to the world, et cetera. And I couldn't sleep *here*, Ham, if my life depended on it!"

She shivered against him. "*That's* a lousy choice of words. Just hold me a minute and tell me it's almost over and everything's going to be all right."

"It's almost over and everything's going to be all right."

She smothered a laugh into his shoulder, then held him, digging her fingers into his arms. She looked up, her smile suddenly gone. "Oh God, Ham—I think I'm getting hysterical or something!"

"No you're not," he said soberly.

She frowned. "Why not?"

"Because if you do, we're all dead. Period. So you won't."

"Oh."

"Uhuh. Oh."

"Ham?"

"Yes?"

"We got it all mixed up, didn't we?"

"How do you mean?"

She hesitated a long moment "Nothing. Forget it. Okay? I'm doing the hysteria bit again."

You *know* better than that, Wynn, she told herself darkly. There are things he doesn't want to go into now—and one of those things is who said what, when and why. And you want to talk about that because you *can't* talk about the now part—what's going on here and what's out there in the shadows. And the fact is you know damn well neither Ham nor anyone else can tell you "everything's-going-to-be-all-right" and you don't like that little truth at all....

"Hold it," snapped Ham. He gripped Kearney to a stop. "Something. Up there, to the right."

They had passed under the high ridge of the great root, where it loomed above them to flow into the heart of Sherandhel. Now they were following a path around the immense base of the Tree itself.

"I don't like it," Ham muttered. "It's not right—doesn't belong here."

Kearney looked past him. A pale glow. Just beyond the curve of Sherandhel. Faint. Warm. And Ham was right. It didn't fit the wan no-colors of Ground/Sequoia. It was like—what? Last embers. Dying coals. And something else.

"Give me a guess, Teddi," said Ham.

"I have a recorded thermal level that fits," the Bear began.

"No—" Kearney cut him off. "You see, don't you, Ham?"

He caught the strain in her voice, looked beyond her again. "Damn," he said finally. "Glow-flies, right? The wicker cages."

He was right, then. They weren't mindless things at all. A stage above, anyway. A big step on Sequoia. Light-tamers. On Earth they'd be fire-masters. Things with the capacity to raise themselves to tool-chippers. And after that—

He looked at Kearney, traded glances. She understood. They couldn't be counted out now. The Federation had very strong thoughts about that. Whether they liked it or not, Sequoia's "Grounders" had joined the club....

Ham led her well away from the base of Sherandhel. Now that it was fairly clear the creatures had a settlement or village flush against the Tree itself, he felt the safest approach lay through the lichenlike forest. The first Grounder he'd seen hadn't wandered far from the shadow of the looming root structure; hopefully, that indicated a cultural habit of some kind. Ham fervently prayed that it was a strong one.

"I've been getting sound for about ten seconds," the Bear reported. "You picking up anything physically?"

Ham bent his head, closed his eyes. "No. Kearney? Oh, wait a minute. I am now. Just indistinct, though. What do you make of it?"

"Knocking. Hammering. Building. Construction," Teddi said positively. "They are putting something together."

Ham's brow rose.

"Give 'em another star," said Kearney. "That's very big on the socioecological ladder."

Ham peered ahead narrowly. "Well just hold onto your star," he said grimly. "I haven't seen anything yet."

A gnarled segment of root had pushed itself head-high out of the soil and mold, nosed along the surface, then burrowed underground again. Kearney and Ham crawled low behind its length to within a hundred yards of the Grounder settlement.

Ham looked back over his shoulder. The slim gray shape was still with them—still maintaining her cautious distance. Ham frowned to himself. He wished the Lemmit had decided to cower back on the path somewhere, or curl up into a ball, or anything. Her presence made him edgy.

He waited, listening a long moment. The sound was clear enough now. And Teddi was right. It did sound very much as if someone was building something—only there was no discernible rhythm or purpose to what he heard. It was a wild cacophony of disjointed efforts. An assault on the senses. It didn't feel right at all and it made Ham uncomfortable to listen to it.

He shrugged, signaled silently to Kearney to stay where she was for the moment, then crawled the last few feet to a better vantage point.

He raised himself cautiously and looked. Then he blinked, took a deep breath and looked again.

A network of vast, secondary roots snaked down from darkness along Sherandhel's wall. The

roots clawed and strangled their neighbors for growing room, and in the tight knuckle-space between them, the Grounders had built their settlement.

"Good God," muttered Ham. "Built" was the wrong word....

Drab hovels were scattered over Sherandhel's hide in dark clusters. They seemed to Ham like carelessly-formed mounds of mud crudely braced with bark and shag scrappings. A webwork of vines wove tangled strands across the face of the settlement, and the Grounders moved precariously along these lines to their black-hole dwellings.

Ham watched, wide-eyed. Occasionally, one of the creatures paused under the ruddy eye of a glow-basket, jabbered or grunted silently with another, then followed its gaunt shadow into the gloom.

Ham shifted uncomfortably. The whole scene reminded him of a somber painting of some medieval Hell. The total lack of unity or purpose was vaguely disconcerting. If there was any pattern to the Grounder settlement, it was the pattern of chaos and disorder.

"I don't like this," Kearney said warily. "It gives me the creeps, Ham."

Ham faced her narrowly. "I told you to stay down. Remember?"

Kearney ignored him. She stared fixedly at the settlement. He read the fear in her eyes.

"Look, Kearn—" He turned her head to face him. "I'm with you—I'd like to be a good half dozen light-years away from here. Only I've got to know what's going on up there first."

"What's going *on*?" Kearney's voice rose. "My God, Ham, they're—they're just *there*, that's all! And it's all Federation needs to—"

Ham shook his head. "No. They're not just there." He nodded toward the top of the settlement. "See? The Grounders are all over the place, Kearney, but the main activity's centered upward. That's the focal point—of something. The lanterns end about a hundred-fifty yards from ground level. That's where everyone's going—or coming from. And that's where the noise comes from, too."

"Well, we know about the noise," Kearney explained quickly. "Teddi says they're—what? Building something?"

He gave her a half-smile. "Sure. But what? You can see what kind of things they *build*, Kearney—mud huts a sick wasp wouldn't claim. If that's the extent of their talents, well, hell—I don't think they've got the sense to build a pile of wood chips!"

"I was wrong."

"What?" Ham looked down.

"I was wrong," said Teddi. "I can achieve a few degrees more visibility than you can now, Flagg. I have also re-analyzed the noise factor."

"So?"

"The noises have varied origins, but they are all related to the same basic task. Mineral compounds striking organic material. Stone against wood, to be less precise. The stone is crudely sharpened and I would guess the lifetime of any randomly-sampled tool is about eight minutes. They are not, as I thought, building anything at all. As irrational as it might seem, Flagg, they are trying to cut down Sherandhel."

TWENTY-THREE

"that's ridiculous," Ham blurted. He stared suspiciously at the psych Bear. "You don't know what the hell you're talking about!"

"I know," Teddi said stoically. "Only the Grounders don't realize that, obviously. They do not have the benefit of either your logic or mine. And of course it's not impossible. Just quite unlikely. You quickly say 'impossible' because you think of such a project within reasonable subjective limitations of time and effort. It doesn't fit those limitations, naturally. But then," he added smugly, "it's not your project, either."

Ham was badly shaken. He could ignore Teddi's logic. It was stuffy, imperious, and loaded with the easy dogma of electronic speculation.

He could set that aside. He was no longer quite as susceptible to Teddi's wide array of psychiatric ploys. If the Bear was looking for a good trigger-word, Ham thought darkly, he should have tried the one that was tying his stomach up in knots at the moment: *Vherakhensel*. There's one that shot theory and speculation all to hell.

He glanced at Kearney. She wouldn't look at him. He wrapped his arms about her waist.

"Okay," he admitted. "So maybe it could happen. Maybe it did. But something like that—"

"—Would take forever?" Teddi finished. "It's an interesting problem. Say the Tree is roughly fifteen hundred feet thick at this point. If you give the Grounder-things the benefit of the doubt they could perhaps make three inches a day. That's somewhat over sixteen years to penetrate straight through, and of course that wouldn't bring down the Tree. It would create a rather tedious termite-sized hole of no value. And paradoxical, at that—since we ignored the premise that the hole must be at least Grounder-sized to allow work to progress. To do any damage it would be necessary to increase the line of cut to half the circumference, and heighten the cutting angle to—"

"Oh God, make him shut *up*, Ham!" Kearney cried. She buried her head in Ham's shoulder again.

"Knock it off," Ham said tightly. "We don't need a dissertation. We get the picture."

"I'll never understand the human aversion to straight thinking," the Bear mused. "It's a failing of biological types, of course—the false concept that hiding the truth negates its validity."

"Look—" Ham warned.

"All right," said Teddi. "Stew in your own juices, then."

Ham took a last, wary glimpse of the settlement and moved quickly away, holding Kearney close to him. He kept low behind the ground-hugging root cover.

Vivid pictures flashed through his mind. A tiny white wound in the side of Sherandhel. A nick. No more. A pitiful scratch on the hide of an unfeeling monster. If Trees shaved, he thought sourly, it might happen every morning.

Damn! He cursed the senselessness of the whole concept. Let it bounce through his gray cells like a rubber ball: Accept-Reject-Accept-Re—

Question: How many generations of ants does it take to fell a Redwood?

Answer: The question is ridiculous. Besides, it isn't fair. The analogy won't work. The ants have superior equipment.

So how long did it take to bring Vherakhensel to the ground? —If he could let himself believe it ever happened that way.

Five hundred years?

A thousand? More than that?

And why?

"For God's sake, *why!*"

"Hate," said Kearney. "Don't you see that, Ham?"

"Huh? He blinked down at her. He hadn't realized he was talking aloud. "What do you mean?"

"Well, it's obvious, isn't it? They don't *have* anything else. So they hate. They get up in the morning—I mean they would if they had a morning—and they hate. They hate right around the clock. In shifts."

"Hate what?" He looked at her curiously. Kearney's voice was light enough, but her face was drawn, tight.

"The Trees, Ham." She laughed. "What else?"

"Now why would they hate the Trees, Kearn?" That doesn't make sense, he added, but not aloud.

"Because the Trees shut them in darkness," she said.

He turned away and rubbed his face so she wouldn't see his reaction. Okay. Why not? The whole thing was insane. Why not tag it with an insane answer?

No! He caught himself. Maybe—but not from Kearney!

He stopped, took his bearings. The lichen growths had thinned abruptly into a small, bare clearing. He turned to Kearney and gripped her shoulders and lifted her chin to face him.

"Look," he said firmly. "Stop talking like that, Kearney. I mean it. It's no good. We'll be out in a little while. Up there. And then *off of Sequoia*. It's okay. It's almost over."

Kearney tried to listen. She wanted very much to listen carefully and do what he said and most of all *believe* him. Only it wasn't that easy—he didn't understand.... he didn't—

"Kearney! Stop it!"

Kearney blinked. "Yes, Ham?" He looked worried. Why did he frown like that?

"We're almost out of sight of the thing, Kearney. We'll head straight out. There'll be a Tree. And not far, either."

She shook her head. "But they'll be there, too, Ham...."

"No!" His eyes flashed. "No, goddamn it, they won't!"

"But—"

"I said they won't, Kearney. They can't be in every damn—"

A scream. High. Harsh. Cutting the silence. Then another—and another.

Ham jerked around. Kearney gave a little cry and broke away from him. He leaped after her, threw her to the ground.

Oh, no, Ham moaned to himself. I should have known. Hell, I did know. The stupid silver-assed bitch!

See? See? Kearney's mind whispered to itself. Erfedrie knows. Erfedrie knows how it has to be ... what you have to do.... !

TWENTY-FOUR

great, thought Ham. *That* tears it.

His stomach tightened into a single knot. He jerked Kearney to him and broke from the clearing. He plunged through a thick grove of tall lichens—powder-rot branches snapped behind him in pink snowbursts of color.

He didn't stop. There's no need to tiptoe through the damn forest anymore, he told himself irritably. They know we're here now.

The lichens thinned into a stretch of waist-high circular growths. They looked to Ham like blue, stemless mushrooms that had fallen on their backs and died of something bad.

He stopped. The animal-like shrieks had subsided for the moment. Which is probably not good at all, he decided. As long as they're making noise—

Kearney shivered in his arms. He gripped her tightly. There had to be a Tree. Somewhere. He squinted into the darkness. The whole thing seemed completely hopeless. There wasn't time to guess wrong anymore. He had to be right. The first time.

He thought briefly of the light in his backpack. Rejected the idea instantly. The flash was weak already. It wouldn't penetrate far enough to do any good. It *would* provide a nice homing beacon for the Grounders—

"Botanically speaking," Teddi said suddenly, "the ground should rise slightly near the base of a Tree. At least, on Earth it should. The tendency for soil to accumulate around burgeoning—"

"I hate to admit it. You're right. But where the hell's high ground? Quick!"

"A slight rise, maybe three degrees, is indicated at eleven o'clock. It—"

Ham didn't wait for the Bear to finish. He sprinted rapidly to the left. He ran until Kearney sobbed for breath beside him, then he stopped, looked back over his shoulder. His heart beat faster. Teddi was right—the ground *was* rising! He turned, peering ahead. Now—where was the damn Tree?

"*Ham!*" Kearney dug nails into his arm. He looked past her down the slope, and stiffened.

Blood-red wicker-baskets bobbed below them. In their ruddy light he could make out the dark figures of Grounders. They ran awkwardly up the slight rise, bounding in an odd, loping gait that froze Ham's veins.

"Come on," he told Kearney. "Let's get out of here!"

Kearney's eyes were locked on the scene. Ham jerked her roughly away. The creatures couldn't be more than seventy-five, a hundred yards away at the most.

"Teddi! Which way?" Ham snapped. "You said—"

"I said the ground should rise slightly near the base of a Tree. I didn't say one invariably found a Tree in every rise. That would be faulty logic. Obviously, planetary surfaces vary with—"

Ham cursed raggedly under his breath and ran. That answered one question anyway. He knew which course to follow. *Away from the Grounders.*

Minutes later, a chorus of throaty howls reached his ears. Ham felt the short hairs climb the back of his neck. It sounded like all the vampires, were-things and boggeldy-spooks of his childhood lumped into one terrible cry.

He knew what they were saying. He understood them perfectly. It was a cry of triumph, and anticipation. They had finished their grisly business with the Lemmit. There were other choice goodies ahead.

He waited.

He guessed it had been nearly ten minutes since he had heard them, or seen one of the dim lanterns. But there was little comfort in that. He knew they hadn't gone away. They had simply given up howling and thrashing about.

He held Kearney close to him. Her body was stiff with tension. He touched her with easy pressures and she shuddered under his hands.

Ham frowned, biting his lip irritably. Damn it, he needed to leave her; belly-crawl a few yards under cover of the fungus thicket and get some idea what was going on out there. Only he knew better. The Lemmit's hairy suicidal gesture had shaken her badly. He didn't dare leave her. Not even for a minute. She was close enough to coming apart now.

Still, they had to do something, and soon, he knew. The Grounders weren't too bright, but the sheer weight of time was on their side. They could eventually figure out all the places he and Kearney *weren't*. After that....

Ham's fingers tightened around Kearney's mouth. Kearney's eyes widened. He pulled his hand slowly aside.

It was a dark, squat shadow against pale phosphorescence. The creature stood perfectly still, broad back hunched slightly forward, short, powerful arms loose against its sides.

God. Ham shuddered. *It got within twenty feet and I didn't even know he was there!*

The Grounder's small head moved almost imperceptively in his direction. In the pale light that shimmered through the ground world, Ham caught the suggestion of a long, mandril-like muzzle, wide nostrils, peaked ears. And set deep in ugly furrows, the faint hint of tiny, ball-bearing eyes.

Ham held his breath. Of course! The senses of smell and hearing would be heightened down here—but eyes would be almost useless. The Grounders were probably all but blind!

Kearney screamed and Ham sensed the blur of motion, jerked quickly aside. A dark fist pummeled past him. He felt the force of air pass his cheek. Pain hit him suddenly. His shoulder went numb. The blow would have killed him, he knew, if he hadn't moved out of its path. The son of a bitch had nearly torn his arm off as it was.

He flexed his fingers, fighting for feeling. The creature howled and was on him again. Ham caught a glimpse of the other one. It was moving in on Kearney. His had come from behind, then, while he was watching the first creature. Nice going, he thought flatly. So there were *only* two, then. Well, hell, Flagg—

The Grounder charged straight on, like an ox. No strategy or fancy tactics, Ham decided. *He simply plans to plow me under and be done with it.*

The idea angered him. He waited until the last possible second, then crouched, came in low against the short legs with a flying block just below the knees.

Clipping, fifteen yards, he thought grimly—brings the ball up to the Grounder forty-nine....

The Grounder grunted with surprise. Ham sensed his friend had paused short of Kearney to watch. The creature came clumsily back to his knees. Ham thought rapidly about a nice uppercut, a swift, dramatic karate chop to the neck. Then he remembered iron-hard flesh and pictured a grotesquely crippled hand—his—with knuckles jammed somewhere behind his elbow.

Instead, he bent low against a foul-smelling head and stuck his mouth into a bristly ear and screamed.

The Grounder shuddered, let out a pained howl and clamped giant hands to his head. Ham leaped over him, stepped between Kearney and the other creature. The Grounder stared at him, bared teeth, and blinked. Ham cupped his hands and yelled.

The Grounder took one step forward, swept his fist toward Ham in a high arc. Lights flashed in Ham's head. He felt the ground come up to meet him.

Great, he thought numbly. I get the one who's damn near deaf. He rolled away, aware of the great heavy foot coming after him. He crawled rapidly through the lichen growth, came shakily to his feet, and looked for Kearney.

She was a pale, frightened blur to his left. Ham shook his head. The Grounder swept a whole green fungus tree aside and came for him.

Ham was learning.

If he could live long enough, he knew he might learn a lot more. The Grounders weren't particularly quick. They had the reaction time of a fairly alert hibernating bear. All you had to do was avoid getting under one of those air-hammer fists long enough to lob a couple of grenades

into the thing's lap. The only thing was—

He let the Grounder get close. This time he knew what to expect. The Grounder came in on cue, raised a heavy arm, and swung. Ham came in under it, kicked the creature solidly in the crotch, threw himself quickly aside.

The Grounder squealed, doubled in pain. Both arms clutched at his groin, and one descending fist grazed Ham and sent him flying. He landed hard on the bad shoulder, rolled, and retched. End of Round Two. He knew all about Round Three. He didn't intend to be around for that one.

"Ham!" Kearney was by his side. She touched a dark bruise on his cheek. "Darling, are you all right?"

He looked up at her and grinned painfully. Now *that* was a new word in her vocabulary, he was sure. He liked the way it sounded.

Wicker-lights winked through the lichen. Hoots and howls followed. Ham pulled himself drearly to his feet and looked past Kearney.

He estimated the situation through puffy eyes. The result was disheartening. They had about a minute. Maybe half of that. He didn't know how to tell Kearney. The heroic standoff had been next to useless. All it had done was batter him soundly and give the rest of the horde time to catch up. He knew damn well he couldn't possibly face another of the monsters now. Much less whatever the count was out there. Half-blind or not, the Grounders were formidable enough. No matter where he and Kearney tried to hide, they'd smell or—

Ham stiffened. The motion sent bright red pain through his ribs.

"Ham—" Kearney gazed at him expectantly. "Don't you think we'd better—"

Ham wasn't listening. Smell. Smell them or *hear!*

He jerked the Bear off his shoulder, held him tightly at arm's length.

"Teddi," he said evenly. "I'm going to ask a very big favor of you."

"I wondered how long it would take."

"Hah!" He shook the Bear fiercely. "You knew, did you? And you didn't intend to say a thing, right?"

"Right. And the answer is no, Flagg."

Kearney looked at him anxiously, glanced nervously at the approaching lights. "Ham—"

"You'll do it, you little bastard," Ham said darkly. "You owe me that much!"

"I owe you nothing, Flagg," said Teddi. "On the contrary."

"Sorry—I don't have the time," said Ham. He gripped the end of the strap that held Teddi to his shoulder.

"I won't say a thing!" Teddi cried frantically. "It won't do you any good, Flagg. I won't open my mouth!"

"Then lay out there," Flagg told him soberly. "You're good for another five hundred years. Have fun."

"Flagg!"

"I'm truly sorry, Teddi. I hope you know that."

Ham circled the strap over his head, gathering speed. Then he let go.

"Flaaaaaaaagg!"

Ham bit his lips. There was a sudden, deep sense of emptiness he didn't have time to explore. He gripped Kearney's hand and pulled her along.

"Ham—there's something I've got to tell you."

He shook his head. "Not now." He glanced back. The lights were closer. There was no sound from the Bear.

Teddi.... Teddi.... for God's sake !

Kearney stifled a scream. The first Grounder topped the rise. It stopped, turned its ugly muzzle toward them. It seemed to sense them, suddenly, and its whole frame trembled. It howled, then charged. Ham stepped in front of Kearney.

It would have been good, Karn. Hell, it might even have been better than that....

"Flagg! Flagg, come and get me—please!"

The Grounder stopped. Its long muzzle twitched. It looked at Ham, puzzled, then in the direction of the sound.

"You son of a bitch!" The tinny voice shrieked through the lichen forest. "I've got feelings *too*, you know! And— and *clean* feelings, Flagg. Yes! Clean, *pure* feelings. My thoughts don't come to me *muddled*, Flagg! Did you know that? You don't know what it *is* to think, you poor, stink-flesh

bastard! Hah! You never *had* a thought that wasn't filtered through gristle and guts! *Everything's* dirty with gray-jelly and blood-pus when it gets to that beast-brain! What little *gets* there, I mean!"
Ham didn't move.

The Grounder had slowly turned, its thick muzzle sniffing the air. Bristly ears twitched. Past the creature, he could see the mass of Grounders a few yards away. They were frozen, waiting. Glow lanterns swung idly from thick paws.

"Flagg! Goddamn you! You're no better than they are! Do you *know* that, Flagg?"

A low growl thrummed in the Grounder's throat. The others took it up, whipped it into a roar. The creature in front of Flagg suddenly bolted to his right. The horde behind howled, thundered after him.

Ham felt limp. He stood in a pool of sweat. He turned and Kearney came into his arms. She didn't speak. He held her, then pulled her arms reluctantly away. "That way, I think," he nodded. "Hell, I don't know—it's as good as any!"

"Look what you've done, Flagg! No! You ignorant—*animal!* Not here—that way! They're flesh—like you! *That's* what you want, damn it—not *me!* Don't—you—SEE that? Flaaaagg!"

"Kearney—wait." Ham stopped, looked down at his feet. He muttered something to himself, dropped to his knees and frantically scraped at wet mold.

"It's stone, Kearney!" he said excitedly. He dug further, sprang to his feet. "Over there—quick!" He bolted off, stopped, almost forgetting he'd left her behind, gripped her hand and guided her impatiently.

"Don't you underSTAND? NO! Get your filthy *things* off me! Look—if you go now you can catch them. Don't you want to perform an exotic—rite, or *something?* You ugly bastards, go get 'em—don't just STAND there! Torture—kill—think of some nice sexual perversion—hey, that's it! Listen, I'll give you a—a *list*—all the things you need to know. You'll have a ball! The female, she's—STOP IT! GOD! LET— —mospheric pressure is determined by th— *Reeeeeaaaak!* —born 2104, one of New Kenya's most gifted—

"*Bluuuuurt! Blurrrr—*

"—*Forty-four to the tenth power—*

"Flagg! *Zzzzzrt! Flagg! FLAGG!*"

TWENTY-FIVE

Ham let out a deep breath. He had to touch the low wall, let his fingers run over cold stone. Even then....

"God Almighty," he whistled softly. "How do you figure something like this....?"

He listened over his shoulder, heard nothing. The Grounders weren't following, then—so far.

He turned back, glanced from Kearney to the crumbling steps, the faint suggestion of a wide avenue that disappeared beyond pale ghost-columns into darkness.

Kearney followed in silence. The path was littered with great slabs of stone; she held to him tightly as they climbed over black fragments that thrust brokenly through the soil. Lichen growths webbed the rocky surface and spread pallid light over the ruined landscape.

"Somebody lost the way, somewhere," Ham muttered.

Kearney didn't answer. The path leveled abruptly and showed many stones still in place. There was a faint hint of order on either side—a half-wall with a squared corner still standing a grounded column, sheared off waist-high and covered with centuries of leaf mold.

Further on, she saw the remains of an ancient arched doorway, still partially intact. She made Ham stop for that, studying the dark hole that led nowhere. Then, she let her eyes move down, past the door itself, to another, smaller opening.

Kearney frowned, puzzled. It was roughly hewn, and seemed to have no useful purpose at all. *Pets*, maybe? Did the occupants of this city, or whatever it had been, keep some small animals? Were the openings for their convenience?

Ham hurried her on impatiently. Every few moments his head turned back to study the path behind them.

But we're safe here, she told herself. *They won't come into this place—not now....*

She frowned, irritated with the thought. Now where had *that* come from? There was no reason to believe something like that—it was downright dangerous! A few ruins weren't likely to stop their

pursuers—they'd mean nothing at all to the Grounders.

But the thought persisted. She couldn't shake it off. Logical or not, it flitted darkly at the edge of her mind.

"Hard to say what it was," Ham told her. "A drainage ditch, most likely. Something to carry off water, or bring it in, maybe."

Kearney nodded absently. It was only a narrow walled ditch, a little less than shoulder-high. It ran alongside off the wider avenue. In places, it was relatively undamaged.

—And of course, she told herself, Ham's explanation is perfectly logical.

Fine.... then why does the thing give you the creeps, Wynn? What's so damn spooky about a sewer?

Because it doesn't look like a sewer, she answered herself crossly. It just doesn't, that's all, and I don't know why. —Or why nothing else in this place looks quite right and I don't know the answer to that, either....

"Hey, you okay?"

Kearney glanced up, startled. "Oh. Sure." She smiled quickly, squeezed his hand. "Really."

"The business back there, Kearn—" Ham began. He hesitated a brief second. "With the Lemmit, I mean. Erfedrie."

"No, that's gone." Kearney shrugged. "I don't mean I don't think about it, or see her—God, *giving* herself to those things—I mean it's okay and I can handle it. And I'm sorry about the female bit. I fell apart, that's all." She bit her lip. "And it wasn't just that, Ham."

"Huh?"

"I meant to tell you but there wasn't time. You were kind of busy."

He stopped, faced her.

"I told you about the idol, or whatever it was. Hell, you'll think I'm crazy. The old male. Jhavhat. The one I found after Vherakhensel."

Ham waited.

"Well—" Kearney squirmed uncomfortably. "It's just that they're the same, Ham; I mean *the idol was like they are*—the Grounders!" The words suddenly tumbled out, one after the other.

Ham raised a brow slowly.

"No!" Kearney shook her head adamantly. "Don't you see? It's *their* city—it has to be, Ham, and if it was, then they were here—what? Well, an ungodly number of centuries ago, anyway—and the Lemmits didn't spring from—from seed pods or something up there, Ham. They had to take to the Trees *sometime*—"

"Kearney—" Ham stopped her. "That's an awful lot of speculation." He forced a grin. "Particularly for a girl who's supposedly 'retired' from the profession. Anyway we can't stay here"—he reached for her hands—"we've—"

Kearney pulled away. "We're safe here, Ham." Her dark eyes flashed stubbornly. "They *won't* follow us."

Ham let out a quick breath. "Look, Kearney," he said tightly. "Soon as those pea-brains get tired of looking at the pretty bright goodies inside that Bear—"

He stopped, suddenly catching her expression. He let the smile go. "You mean that, don't you?"

She nodded. "They can't, Ham. They don't remember this place—I don't mean that—any more than the Lemmits remember why they're in the Highwood. But—they were both here, Ham. They *had* to be."

She didn't know where the thought came from. It was suddenly just there. It came to her with a quick, wintry chill.

"It all fits together like a puzzle you don't ever want to finish," she said quietly, "because you know how the picture's going to be. The little openings beside the doors.... and the thing you thought was a sewer—only it isn't, Ham."

She stared at him intently, grasping both his hands tightly.

"God, can't you *feel* it?" She shivered against him. Ham, it's a street, or a path, maybe—only it's a path where lesser things are supposed to walk so they won't be on the same level as their masters. And the openings next to the doors—"

She paused. If she closed her eyes, she was afraid she could see it, the way the streets, the houses, the high walls must have been—when? How many thousands of years ago?

"Even after the Lemmits got away, took to the Trees, they couldn't escape the Grounders. They took their slavery up with them, Ham. Only it's a different kind of bondage now. Fear. Minds locked up instead of bodies. All the rituals and prohibitions are barriers—protective barriers against something that happened thousands of years before they were born!"

"Kearney—" Ham looked at her a long moment. "Okay. And the Grounder civilization went to pot and sank back to savagery without their slave culture. Possible. If you buy all the other premises that they were both here at that particular time, and that the Grounders were city builders. Like I say, possible. The master-slave business has happened before." He shook his head. "Sorry. I can't go the rest of it. Grounders still in hot pursuit of the Lemmits. They don't remember anything else—but they still remember that. What kind of—"

"What kind of creature hates forever?" she finished for him. She looked at him strangely. "I don't know, Ham. I don't even want to think about it. Ask your friend Karajhak. Ask Erfedrie...."

When the street ended, they climbed a final thousand years out of the past, over dark rubble and up a high wall, the highest still standing in the city, and then they saw the Tree.

Pale blue lichen covered its massive trunk and Ham guessed it was no more than two hundred yards away.

Tears blurred Kearney's eyes. She wrapped her arms tightly about his neck and pressed herself close to him.

We made it, she cried silently. *It's there—what a perfectly beautiful Tree!*

She laughed lightly, held her face between her hands, looked up at him.

"Ham! Oh, Ham—"

And then she saw his eyes. Her face went suddenly slack.

Ham didn't look at her. "They're here," he said simply. "They're out there, Kearney."

Kearney shook her head dumbly. She glanced past him at the Tree, saw nothing. "You're wrong, Ham, we *made* it—"

"Kearney!" He gripped her arm tightly. His eyes blazed on the edge of anger. "We didn't make it, goddamn it, they're there. They left their bloody lights behind, that's all!"

He stepped past her to the edge of the wall, looked back at her once, then cupped his hands to his mouth.

Kearney flailed out to stop him. Ham shook her off. He yelled hoarsely, took a deep breath, screamed again.

A few low, muffled grunts answered, grew, split the darkness with deep, thrumming howls.

Kearney covered her ears. They pounded their great fists against their legs, stamped angrily at the ground. He took her in his arms. "Kearn," he said evenly. "Listen to me. There are maybe half a dozen climber vines between here and the Tree. No more than fifty yards away. The Tree's too far—we couldn't make it and find a spot to start up, anyway. There's no time. Hell, there might not even *be* a good spot. The barkways could be clogged with shag—anything. But the vines have got to go somewhere. Too low for a branch, so maybe it's the stub of a secondary root—something. It's there, and if you can get that far, you're home free. My guess is these bastards wouldn't go *near* a Tree unless it's got the right kind of—magic on it. Enough crap and garbage from above to show them Lemmits are there. The Trees don't *belong* to them, they—"

"No!" Kearney suddenly understood. "I won't, Ham. Just don't say any more, please!"

"Kearney—"

She stepped back from him, thrust her fists stubbornly against her hips. "No—you listen to me, Hamby Flagg. I didn't climb all *over* this damn planet and half a dozen others for my health—or for *science*, either, for that matter. I was looking for a man, Flagg. I didn't know that, of course, and I sure as *hell* wouldn't have admitted it to myself, but it's true, nevertheless. And now that I've found one, moth-eaten and grimy as you are, I kind of like what I've got. Though God knows you're not what I had in mind—or thought I had in mind, anyway. But I do *not* intend to waste all that time and effort just to—to provide a very unappetizing picnic for those *things!*"

He looked at the firm jaw, the dark eyes flashing with sparks of anger. He looked longingly at the black hair and the full figure and the firm fullness that began just below the "V" of her blouse.

He sighed wearily and smiled at her. "That's my girl," he said. "You tell 'em, Kearn. ..."

He turned quickly away and vaulted easily over the rubble wall and stood below her, screaming at the Grounders.

TWENTY-SIX

kearney lay flat against the high bark ridge. She stared dully through her tears at dancing red lights below. Howls of anger swept up through the darkness.

A few of the Grounders were jerking in the vines in blind rage. Others beat helplessly against the ground. She guessed they were maybe fifty feet below. She didn't really care. She didn't really care about anything.

And Ham had been right. They were mad as wet cats but they didn't even try to come after her.

Tears welled up in a new wave that burned her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. "Damn you!" she cried aloud. She beat her fists against the rough bark. "Why do you have to be *right* all the time, Ham! God, what good does it do *now!*"

Her head dropped wearily into her hands. *It's not fair*, she told herself again. *I knew him only I didn't know him at all and he didn't have any right to do that. He didn't have any right to just—*

"Kearney...."

To just—

Kearney's head jerked up. The cry started low in her throat; she was on her feet, the cry turning to joy. She stumbled, nearly threw herself off the branch, then she was down beside him, touching him, kissing bloody ears and bruised arms. She lifted his head and stared at him unbelievably.

Ham looked up at her and tried to touch her and grinned and gave up the effort.

"I—got 'em away from the vines, Kearn...."

"Yes, darling, you did that."

"Whole—pack followed," he said weakly. "—Led 'em to the ruins and—cut back on 'em."

He laughed. Pain tightened his features.

"Ham—"

"Tried the—damn flash on 'em. Figured—bad eyes. Worked fine on the first bastard...."

Then—thing went bad on me. Second one saw me—just fine."

"Ham," she said sternly, "just shut up."

"Kearn....?"

"What?"

"How come I always get—one deaf one and—one blind one, huh?"

Kearney laughed through her tears. "You big dope—you might have been *killed!* Then what would I—"

He smiled up at her, his eyes closed, and she knew there was no use talking any longer. . . .

Kearney opened her eyes and squinted into the morning. A thousand green suns, fringed with gold, filtered through the Highwood. She turned lazily and let the pleasant warmth touch the back of her legs.

My God, she thought, *there can't be a more marvelous color than green—anywhere!*

She shook her hands through her dark hair and let the long strands fall free over bare shoulders. Ham reached out and touched her waist and drew her to him.

"To answer your question—no," he told her firmly.

Kearney opened her mouth to protest.

He grinned and shook his head. "It'll take two, maybe three days, Kearn. We're well above Chrestigho already. I know that. I'll cross over to Sherandhel and leave a marker as high as I can. Period. It's a one-man job. Anyway, you'd only slow me up."

"Gee, thanks," she said ruefully.

"Besides, knowing you're here is incentive. I'll cut off maybe a day."

"Don't bother," she said, raising her chin haughtily. She ran a finger over his shoulder and down to his chest, then looked absently into the Highwood. "I expect I'll have taken up with a—a Gibik, or something, by then. The days are nice but the nights get kind of cold. A girl has to—" She let the sentence die. Her features turned suddenly serious.

"They'll find us, won't they, Ham?"

He nodded patiently. "Kearn. A skimmer will try to raise me on an orbital fly-by. Through Teddi. When they don't, they'll come down to the Homer beam for a look.

They won't find anything so they'll come down further and they'll find the marker and know

something's happened and they'll find us. Or we'll find them, more likely. They'll bring down thermal suits—"

Kearney shut her eyes and grinned. "I know. You've told me before. I just like to hear it."

Ham smiled. "You're a kook."

"I'm a retired kook," she corrected. "I've turned in my computer—remember?"

I think I have, anyway, she told herself. She wasn't sure she believed that at all now. Or whether Ham did, either. Down there, in the darkness, she was sure enough. And she was more than certain of Ham—there was no question about her feelings on that subject. It wasn't that at all.

Maybe, she decided, it's just hard to let go.

The thought irritated her. Damn it, you either *believed* in something, in what you were doing, or you didn't. You couldn't just—change your whole outlook every time something went sour—then decide everything was grand because the sun was shining again. Or kind of shining, anyway.

She couldn't talk it over with Ham. Not yet, anyway. If he thought she was going back on that, he'd be sure the other part wasn't real, either. —About not competing and looking for the right man and everything. And that *was* true!

She frowned to herself. You haven't changed a bit, Wynn. See if you can get your greedy little paws on the job *and* the man, right? See if you can screw up the whole thing!

There was so much here, so much to learn. And so much to be done for the Lemmits—if there was still time for that.

"Ham....?"

"Hmm?"

His eyes were closed, hands stretched behind his head.

"It's too late. It is, isn't it?"

His eyes opened slightly. "What? Is what too late?"

"For the Lemmits. God, Ham—they're right on the bloody edge! They—"

"Kearn...."

She stopped. She wasn't sure she liked the tone of his voice or the expression on his face. It was one of those I'm-going-to-set-you-straight-now looks and the whole idea of that infuriated her.

"How much do you love me, Kearn?"

She frowned suspiciously. "I love you a lot. So why?"

"Just checking," he said absently. "Figured I'd ask, first. Wanted to be sure I was on solid ground. I've been thinking."

"That's nice," she said flatly. "Do you a world of good."

"I've been thinking maybe we're worrying about the wrong race, Kearn...."

Kearney waited a long moment. Finally, she closed one eye and looked at him. "What are you trying to say, Flagg? And you can hold up on that promise of affection I so foolishly tossed out a moment ago."

"I'm trying to say you very quickly came to a conclusion down there that we should form a Lemmit Aid Society and write off the Grounders as prehistoric boobs. I simply don't see that now."

"You're rambling, Ham."

He shook his head. "Kearn, did you take a good look at that city? I mean a really good look?"

"I think so. As good a look as you could take, under the circumstances. The tour was rather poorly arranged."

"It's wrong, Kearney. All of it. The scale. Everything's out of proportion. Doors, streets, the slave paths and crawl-ways of yours." He shook his head and sat up and faced her.

"You got the good guys and the bad guys mixed up, love. The city didn't belong to the Grounders. The Lemmits were the masters there. It's the Grounders who were the slaves...."

Kearney stared at him. Ham didn't stop.

"You were right about what happened, I think. But for the wrong reasons. I think *guilt* forced the prohibitions on the Lemmits—not fear. Oh, they're afraid, all right. But not because of what the Grounders did to their ancestors.

"The original Lemmits who took to the Trees probably went through several generations before it became firmly entrenched. Of course, each generation piled its guilt on the next, until everybody forgot what it was they were so damn guilty about. Anyway, they couldn't live with what they'd been. They destroyed the Grounders, so they had to destroy themselves, too. Self-hatred tore the sexes apart —emasculated the males, and had an equal effect on the females. They didn't know why, but they had a horror of bringing more of their kind into the world. Did you know the

Motherings resulted in few offspring? Everything they did was a drive toward death—in one way or another."

"They—they didn't know why a Colony Tree died every few hundred years or so," Kearney said quietly. "But they—God! They *sensed* the justice in that dying, didn't they? And made sure with a ritual slaughter!"

Ham nodded. "They pretty well shaped the Grounders' future, too, if I'm right," said Ham. He looked thoughtfully into the Highwood, glanced down toward the darkness, miles below. "They must have risen all over the planet and driven the Lemmits to the Trees. And all the Lemmits left them was a legacy of hate—the drive to destroy the creatures who'd destroyed them."

Kearney was silent a long moment. "Okay," she said grudgingly. "Maybe you're right. And I don't guess it's too awful. I'd just as soon my man had *some* smart—I think."

She turned to him, gripped his hand. "Only what's it *for*, Ham? We're all set up for a perfectly lovely racial suicide—double billing." She trembled against him. "I don't think I like this business, you know that? I really don't!"

He grinned at her. "Kearney, stop it."

She looked at him blankly. "What?"

"Who are you trying to fool? You, me—or both of us?"

She held him tightly. *He doesn't mind. He doesn't really mind at all!*

"Let's not write everybody off too quickly," said Ham. "Maybe a generation of Lemmits separated from the ritual structure of Sequoia might tell a different story."

He smiled approvingly at the dark hair and the flashing eyes and the other very acceptable accessories.

"What I'd like to see, though," he said thoughtfully, "is what one of those godawful computers of yours has to say about the Grounders. Suppose we get those so-called pea-brains moving again? Wonder what kind of potential Federation would project for a genuine race of giant killers....?"