

CORDON SANITAIRE

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For Mitch Drzewicki, the day began like most of the previous hundred or so: he was ripped slapdash from a sound sleep by the screech of a tarsapien at the edge of the forest. For a few moments he just lay there, letting his heartbeat catch up with him and wondering why the hell his brain couldn't edit out the caterwauling and let him sleep through it. Certainly his subconscious had learned that trick with the dozens of alarm clocks he'd gone through in his thirty-six years . . . With a sigh he looked at his watch, decided against trying for the last hour of sleep he'd allotted himself, and climbed stiffly out of bed.

The not-quite-warm-enough shower finished the waking-up process, and by the time he'd wolfed down a quick breakfast he was almost over his grouch. Coffee cup in hand, he stepped outside for a breath of fresh air and a final settling of nerves.

A ritual that nearly always worked . . . because whatever Pallas lacked regarding the courtesy of its indigenous animals, it more than made up in beauty. The forest surrounding their little settlement had an unusual feeling of vitality about it, both in the way it pressed right to the edge of their protective herbicide ring and in its unashamed delight with bursts of color. In the six months since the four men and two women of their study team had arrived here Mitch had solved some of the botanical puzzles behind the ripples of red and pale orange that swept through the ginkgap and manzani trees' leaves every couple of weeks, but he was a long way from a complete explanation of the whys and hows of the phenomenon.

Only three months remained until the university-hired ship would come to pick them up; and despite the normal strains their group was starting to feel, Mitch almost wished it was possible to call across the light-years and ask for an extension. It was always like this, he knew from experience: study expeditions were never long enough for anything but a tantalizing taste of a new world's phytobiology. Still, it was possible that after he published the papers from this trip some other university would decide it worth its while to fund another Pallas study, and if so perhaps he could talk his way aboard. Unless a more eminent botanist decided to bid for such a slot . . . but perhaps by then Mitch would have enough prestige himself to get every field trip he wanted. *Dreamer*, he told himself; and draining his coffee cup he headed back inside to the biology lab and the day's activities.

The first and most pleasurable of which was going to be saying good-morning to Kata Belen. The petite biologist was already up, hunched in familiar posture over her work table as she fiddled with her recorder and computer terminal.

"Morning, Kata," Mitch said, coming up to her and looking over her shoulder. The computer displayed a wiggly graph; some kind of spectrum, he guessed.

Kata looked up and smiled. "Well, hi, Mitch. I thought you were going to sleep in today."

"So did I. I really think you should cancel Swizzle's wake-up service."

She chuckled, the action accentuating the tiny crinkles around her eyes. She'd once commented that the lines made her look distinguished, but Mitch thought she was much too cheerful to approach any kind of academic stodginess. "You're the only one that tarsapien wakes up," she said. "Swizzle's always up ahead of time, sitting quietly and munching his manzani fruit, for all the world like he's waiting for the morning news to start."

Mitch glanced over to the cage that dominated the far wall of the lab. Kata's pet-*cum*-test subject was anything but quiet now, his long arms swinging him through and around the makeshift jungle gym with

unlikely speed and grace. "I hope you don't intend to put leading similes like that into your report," he warned Kata. "Lyell's firmly convinced the tarsaps rate a four at the most on the Bateson-DuPre. Not high enough for anything but the most rudimentary information exchange."

"Well, Lyell's just wrong," she said firmly. "His sole criterion for that is the Bateson neural dexterity index, and all that really says is that tarsapiens aren't anywhere near the tool-building stage of development."

"I thought you'd taught Swizzle to use simple tools," Mitch said, looking back at the cage. Resembling nothing so much as a chimp-sized Terran tarsier with twin-thumbed gorilla arms, Swizzle always seemed to him more akin emotionally to a canine puppy. Certainly his face—all eyes, mouth, and nostrils—never seemed to show the seriousness Mitch had often sensed in borderline-intelligent animals. Possibly one reason the forest was so pleasant, he thought suddenly: nothing existed on Pallas capable of exploiting its resources. At least not any more. The scattered ruins . . . but those were the archeologists' worry.

"Tool use *per se* is only part of the Bateson index," Kata said, breaking into his drifting thoughts. "Most of it's concerned with cerebral and fingertip neuron density and firing speed, and in those I concede the tarsapiens rate relatively low. Besides which, whether Swizzle's really *using* those tools is still pretty debatable. *But*. Communication skill is also part of the Bateson-DuPre, and I think I've finally figured out what the tarsapiens are doing."

She tapped the pattern on her computer display. "The screeches all sound the same to *us*, but the ultrasonic pattern fluctuates like crazy as the sound hits peak volume and then trails off. I'm guessing the first, more static segment of the howl is something like personal or maybe territorial identification, and the second is then whatever message is being delivered." Tapping a key, she replaced the graph by a series of others, all showing the basic pattern she had described.

"You may be right," Mitch agreed cautiously, "but Lyell's going to want proof."

"He'll get it." Blanking the screen, she typed a short message into her private log and stood up. "I've got a new routine in mind for Swizzle, one that ought to bounce Lyell's guesstimate up at least a couple of points. Want to watch?"

"Sure." Sliding into one of the other chairs, Mitch watched as Kata crossed to Swizzle's cage and extended a hand through the mesh. The tarsapien leaned forward, his floppy nostrils molding themselves briefly around her wrist before he rocked back on his haunches. At one end of the cage was a sliding door leading to a transparent, three-dimensional maze with a small control box mounted on one wall. Kata stepped to the latter and began pressing buttons, and Mitch found himself wondering—again—what in starnation she was doing on Pallas with what could only be described as a second-class university survey team. As a botanist, Mitch's professional interests overlapped hers only slightly, but even he knew something of her reputation and wide range of accomplishments. Why wasn't she with some major planetary development corporation, or at the very least one of the top megaversities?

The answer, of course, was Lyell Moffit; but there were several different flavors to that answer, not all of them especially palatable. Certainly Lyell was one of the more gifted persuaders he had ever run into, as well as one of the most persistent; Mitch had turned down the genial biologist/physician's two previous recruitment pitches, but that hadn't kept the other from coming back a third time. Certainly too the name Lyell Moffit, though relatively fresh on the scene, was becoming more and more recognizable, and not only among the scientific community. Mitch had a sneaking suspicion that at least one of the expedition's six members had joined in hopes of slingshotting a sagging career with the aid of Lyell's growing reputation.

But Mitch rather thought Kata's reasons were more of a personal nature . . . though it was none of his business, of course. Nor likely ever would be. Kata finished her programming and moved to the sliding panel separating the cage and maze. As if that were the signal he'd been waiting for, Swizzle scampered over to the panel and sat there expectantly. "All right, now," Kata said to Mitch over her shoulder, "I've set up a path with drops of jasmine through holes in that pipe network in the plastic.

Watch."

Pulling on a rope, she raised the barrier. Swizzle was through the hole like a furry shot, his nostrils flaring like twin vacuum cleaners as he grabbed tiny handholds to pull himself up a long vertical shaft. Mitch watched him negotiate a right-angle turn, drop down a short segment—and come to an abrupt halt. "Lost?"

Kata shook her head. "He's blocked by a sliding panel. Let's see if he can figure out how to get it open."

But after a couple of minutes it was clear the tarsapien wasn't going to do so. "Oh, well," Kata sighed. "It wasn't a major part of the test, anyway." Touching a switch on the control box, she sent the barrier sliding upward out of the way. As it moved, the overhead lights reflected briefly from it, giving Mitch a glimpse of two hand-sized slots in the bottom which Swizzle could have used to raise the panel himself. With the obstruction gone, the tarsapien rapidly completed the maze, ending up at the far end and three stalks of *pōra* grass.

Kata closed off the maze and opened the tunnel that would enable Swizzle to return to his cage, then walked back to Mitch. "He'll get it eventually," she said. "And when he does, Lyell and I will have to spend another couple of days setting up nets out in the forest."

"Ah," Mitch nodded. "You'll trap another tarsap and see if Swizzle can talk *him* through the maze."

"And what exactly will that prove?" a deep voice asked from the door, and Mitch turned as Lyell Moffit sauntered into the lab.

There was no question whatsoever that Lyell was leaving in shreds the popular image of scientists as a sub-species of hominid—superhuman in intelligence and language, subhuman in personality, taste, and social skill. Even on a Field expedition a dozen light-years from the nearest newscaster, Lyell was impeccably dressed, his wardrobe complemented by his easy smile and natural charm. Mitch had been somewhat surprised when he found the other maintained his image off-camera as well as on; only gradually was he beginning to admit that Lyell's charisma was simply a part of the man himself.

All that, Mitch thought glumly, *and a top-class scientist, too. Some people have it all.*

Kata had turned toward Lyell, but at the moment seemed entirely unconscious of his charm. "What do you mean, what'll it prove?" she snorted. "It'll prove the existence of detailed communication between them, that's what."

"Like communication between bees?" he countered dryly.

"Not at all. This kind of maze and trick door are completely out of their normal experience. They'll need to exchange abstract information—and they will."

"Only if Swizzle can be persuaded to cooperate." Oddly enough, Lyell didn't seem to be worried about the threatened attack on his theory. "You'd better make it worth his while to give any newcomer the right information. A reward of his own, I'd say, for getting the other through the maze."

Kata's eyes had taken on a knowing look. "Uh-*huh*. So you *do* think they're intelligent. Your famous devil's advocate role, I suppose?"

Lyell winked at her and turned to Mitch. "Kata's worked with me before. She knows that half the results my people get are inspired by the monomaniacal urge to prove something I've said is pure Frensky moss."

"We've yet to make him admit out loud that he does it on purpose," Kata added, sending a mock glower in Lyell's direction. "Usually he tries to claim he's simply dumber than the popular media make him out to be."

"Well, I am," Lyell said, managing to look innocent, hurt, and amused all at once. "All that aside . . . when do you want to start setting the nets?"

"Any time," Kata said. "We've got room for a temporary cage in the Endurssons' lab, and if we can get a female I'll want to do some studies before letting her into the maze. A few days' worth, anyway—plenty of time for Swizzle to master the barrier trick."

Lyell pursed his lips. "Rom won't be happy if he and Shannon come back early and find a tarsap

sitting on his isotope counter."

Kata shrugged. "The only other choices are Adler's lab, the common room, or one of our bedrooms. *You* want to tell Adler he's going to have to move all those neat piles of rocks he's been making in order to accommodate a guest?"

"Besides which," Mitch put in, "the Endurssons aren't likely to come back ahead of schedule. Even if the ruins they found peter out faster than they expect, Rom'll find some reason to stay out there the full fifteen days."

"Um," Lyell said noncommittally . . . but Mitch saw the corner of his lip twitch. Rom Endursson was the thorn in Lyell's organizational flesh, the exception to the rule that Lyell's teams bubbled with harmony and professional camaraderie. Rom was a quiet, moody man who spent little of his time and even less of his attention on the others. Adler Zimmerman, the geologist, had once suggested that after twenty-five years of digging around the leavings of dead civilizations Rom may simply have forgotten how to deal with living human beings. Mitch privately thought that theory simplistic; but whatever the reasons behind his personality, Rom was very definitely the type who improved social gatherings mainly by his absence from them. Fortunately, he seemed to recognize this effect and spent as much time as possible at the handful of suspected ruins the original discovery team had spotted from space.

Mitch sometimes wondered how Shannon stood him; but then, she must have had some idea what she was getting into when she married him. The fact they'd been together for ten year's now implied she saw something in him the others were missing.

"All right," Lyell said, breaking into Mitch's thoughts. "I need to wait a couple of hours for some culture plates to come out of the autoclave, but any time after that I could give you a hand with the traps. You'll need the morning to get the nets deodorized, anyway."

"Not to mention assembling the other cage,"

Kata agreed. "We should be able to head out right after lunch, though."

"Fine. Well, if you'll both excuse me, I have some tissue samples to analyze." With a nod at Mitch, he headed off toward his own lab table.

"Anything I can do to help?" Mitch asked Kata as she signed off her terminal.

"No, thanks," she told him. "The nets and caging material's all together out in the number three shed; I can bring all of it in on a single dolly. See you later."

"Sure." Mitch watched her leave the room. Then, with a glance at the back of Lyell's head, he crossed over to his own work bench, piled high with lichen samples he'd spent the last week collecting. *Should I tell her how I feel?* he wondered for the umpteenth time—and for the umpteenth time the same answer came back. *No. I'd just be making a fool of myself. Anyone who's got Lyell doesn't need me.*

And putting Kata out of his mind as best he could, he set to work cataloging his plants.

It was actually a couple of hours after lunch before Kata and Lyell headed outside; but for Kata, as always, the joy of being out under the open sky made any and all preliminaries worthwhile. She enjoyed the lab, of course—the intellectual excitement of coaxing the secrets out of some new organism—but it was for the field work that she'd gone into biology in the first place. To tramp alien soil; to see, smell, and touch alien plants and animals in their own unique environment and ecological structure ... it seemed so natural a joy that she still found it hard to understand people like Rom Endursson, who treated all living things with equal disregard as he hunted his long-dead artifacts.

With forested areas dominating the Palladian landscape, Lyell had insisted they set up shop in that particular ecosystem, a demand that had reportedly brought frowns to the faces of those in charge of the expedition's budget. Lyell had ultimately prevailed, but the extra money for clearing out trees and undergrowth had had to come from somewhere, and the relatively cramped central building was the result. Kata had occasionally missed their usual self-contained structure—especially when sloshing

through the mud to one of the outside storage sheds—but all in all she considered the trade-off a reasonable one.

"Where do you want to set these up?" Lyell asked as they passed the circle of sheds and started across the ten-meter strip of empty ground separating the buildings from the edge of the forest. "Same places as the last time?"

"More or less," Kata nodded, wincing involuntarily as her feet crunched the dry soil underfoot. The dead ring—their "cordon sanitaire," as Adler called it—had been saturated with a potent herbicide to keep the forest from regaining its former territory. Perfectly safe; but her feet somehow refused to feel comfortable walking across poison. "I haven't seen any evidence the tarsapiens have changed their habits, so those sites should still be the high-traffic areas."

"Agreed."

The local section of forest was nearly devoid of such obvious features as streams, hills, and natural clearings, but radar and Lostproof transponder readings had long since mapped the ground's more subtle undulations. Combined with Kata's record of the original trap sites, the task reduced to little more than an afternoon's stroll in the woods. It should have been an enjoyable time . . . but somehow Kata found herself unable to relax as the two of them moved in a rough circle around their clearing. Something in the air felt odd, though she couldn't for the life of her pin down what it was. Twice she almost mentioned it to Lyell; both times decided against doing so.

They were setting the last net when a full-bodied tarsapien screech split the air from a dozen meters away. "About time," Lyell commented, glancing that direction. "I was starting to think all the tarsaps had gone on vacation."

"They *have* been unusually quiet," Kata agreed, realizing suddenly that that was what had been bothering her. "You suppose there's a heloderm loose out here?"

"Could be," Lyell said slowly, drawing the half-meter-long lightning rod sheathed at his side and adjusting its power setting. "That screech had a lot of piercing ultrasonic in it."

"Yeah," Kata said, drawing her own weapon. The single communications point on which she and Lyell agreed was that high ultrasonic content signaled the presence of an enemy. "We going to be smart and make a dignified run for it?"

"Let's take a short look around first," Lyell suggested, easing a bush aside with his rod. "I'd very much like to take a heloderm alive."

"Lyell, that's crazy. We don't *know* their poison won't hurt us."

"Oh, sure we do—the tests on that dead one's venom, remember?"

"The electric shock could have degraded the chemical," Kata argued; but Lyell was already moving cautiously forward. Gritting her teeth, she nudged her lightning rod to full power and followed.

They'd covered perhaps five meters and Kata was probing carefully into a nearby pora-grass thicket when Lyell abruptly jerked backwards with a yelp of surprise and pain. "What?" Kata snapped, trying to get around in front of him.

"My arm—*ahr!*" he grunted again, lurching sideways into her and throwing them both off balance.

Which may have saved her life. Even as she took a step backwards to try and support his weight something whistled past her ear and thumped audibly into a tree trunk behind her.

They were being shot at!

The total impossibility of it threw her muscle coordination all to hell, sending both of them crashing down into the undergrowth. "Lyell!" she hissed. "Where were you hit?"

"Right arm and shoulder," he gritted. "Feels . . . strange."

Another shot snapped at the leaves above them. "We've got to get out of here," she said, looking around as best she could without lifting her head. Her lightning rod was still gripped in her hand; Lyell's was nowhere to be seen. Not that glorified cattle-prods would be a lot of use, anyway. "Can you crawl?"

"But who—how—?"

"Never mind that," she snapped, tugging at his arm. *Don't go foggy on me, Lyell*, she pleaded silently. "Let's just get *out* of here."

Two more shots whistling overhead underlined her words and seemed to snap Lyell out of his torpor. Moving awkwardly on knees and elbows, he began to crawl back the way they'd come. Kata followed, tensing for the shot that would rip into her own body . . .

Surprisingly, the shot never came. Another tarsapien screech sounded, farther away this time, reminding Kata of the heloderm that might still be skulking about. It hardly seemed important anymore, though, and she waited until she and Lyell had traveled a good fifteen meters before wriggling her jacket off and raising it on the end of her lightning rod. There was no response, and a minute later she cautiously sat up. "Looks clear," she whispered, helping Lyell up. "Can you make it back to the camp?"

"Sure." He had a funny sort of look on his face and he was gripping his right arm with a white-knuckled hand, but he seemed steady enough on his feet.

"Okay." Kata glanced at her Lostproof for the direction and got a good grip under Lyell's left arm. "Let's go. *Quietly*."

And as they set off she sheathed her lightning rod and pulled out her communicator. The others had to be alerted.

Lyell's knees were starting to buckle by the time they reached the edge of the herbicide ring, but Mitch was watching for them and came out to help the last few meters. "Are *you* okay?" he asked Kata as he took some of Lyell's weight.

"Yeah," she puffed. "Adler make it back all right?"

"He's in the common room getting the medkit laid out." Mitch was very obviously bursting with questions, but restrained himself well. "Lyell, how do you feel?"

"Not much pain, but my arm feels funny," the other said. "I can feel something solid in there, too."

"All right, just take it easy till we get inside." Mitch opened the door and together the three of them eased through it.

Adler had finished preparations in the common room when they arrived and was pacing nervously by the window, one of the expedition's only two laser pistols belted at his side. He came over as they got Lyell seated. "Lyell, what's going on here?" he demanded. "Mitch fed me some nonsense about a *sniper*? What kind of crazy story is *that*?"

"Wasn't any of *my* doing, Adler, believe me," Lyell grunted as Kata eased his arm out of its sleeve. "Doesn't seem to be any blood, does there?"

"Not much." There was a little, though, she saw, as if he'd been poked with a needle. "Mitch, hand me the fluoroscan, will you? Thanks. Now . . . ah. Wumph." She ran the hand unit over his shoulder next, feeling her jaw tighten. "They're there, all right. Two little needles, a few millimeters long. In pretty deep, too."

"I could have told you that," Lyell said dryly, wincing as Kata probed with her fingers. "You feel up to going in and getting them out?"

"Me? I don't have a medical certificate."

"Well, I can't very well operate on myself," he countered. "Just pretend I'm a frog or rhesus."

"But—"

"Don't argue!" Lyell snapped. "My arm doesn't feel this way solely because of shock. Those needles are putting something into me, and I want them *out*."

Gritting her teeth, Kata nodded and reached for the local anesthetic.

It wasn't as bad as she'd thought it would be. Focusing on a few square centimeters of skin as she manipulated the probe, she was indeed able to almost forget it was a human being she was working on. Still, it seemed like forever before she dropped the second needle into the gauze pad Mitch held for her.

"There," she said, expelling her breath in a sigh of relief.

"Good job," Lyell grunted, touching the skin gingerly. "I think we should go to the biology lab right away and plug me into the blood analyzer."

"Right." Kata glanced around, noticed for the first time that they'd lost one of their number.

"Where's Adler?"

"Checking to make sure all the windows are latched and watching for your sniper to stick his nose inside the cordon," Mitch told her. He'd rubbed some of the blood off the needles and was holding the gauze pad up to the light. "If that's really what's out there."

"What do you mean, 'if'?" Kata snapped. "What do you think those things are, tarsapien toenails?"

"Could be the seeds of some plant," he shrugged. "Pine needle shaped, thrown from a branch by the wind or the passage of some animal. Sort of a combination samara and cocklebur."

"Ridiculous—the *speed* they must have been traveling—"

"There's an easy way to settle this," Lyell interrupted mildly, standing up. "Run the needles under a microscope and look for Palladian-type cellular construction. If there isn't any—well, maybe Adler can run a composition test on them."

"Lyell, aren't you playing the dispassionate scientist part just a little too far?" Kata asked, glancing once toward the windows. "There's someone out there *shooting* at us. Shouldn't we be doing something to defend ourselves?"

"Adler's wearing our entire arsenal until the Endurssons come back," he pointed out. "As for defenses, what would you suggest we do? Sandbag the entrance? Rig a defensive force field out of our meson microscope and centrifuges?"

Her despair must have showed on her face, because Lyell smiled slightly and laid a hand on her shoulder. "It's not as bad as it looks, though—really it isn't. I'm sure you agree our assailant could have cut us both down long before we got back here if he'd either wanted to or been able to. The fact that he didn't implies we've got some breathing space." He glanced at the bandage on his shoulder. "And in that case our top priority is to figure out just what we're up against here."

It took a few minutes for Kata to get Lyell connected to the blood/tissue analyzer, about the same time it took Mitch to clean one of the needles and get it under the microscope. "Here goes," he announced, flipping on the projector.

Palladian cellular structure differed in any number of ways from that of terrestrial flora and fauna, but even so it was instantly obvious that the needle had never been part of an organic structure. Smooth and metallic, it was equipped with tiny fins that had the look of mathematical precision about them, and despite all it had been through the tip was still perfectly sharp. Long, thin pores, symmetrically placed, seemed to lead through the skin to a darker shaft beneath.

Mitch was the first to break the silence. "I think," he said quietly, "that we're in serious trouble."

"The understatement of the day," Lyell said. He stared at the needle's image a moment, then shook his head. "This just doesn't make sense. We *know* the tarsaps haven't got anywhere near enough brains or technology to make something like that, and there simply aren't any traces of anything more advanced down here."

"What about those ruins Rom and Shannon are working?" Mitch asked.

"I mean *recent* traces," Lyell amended. "Rom dates those structures as at least three hundred years old. *That*—" he gestured at the screen—"is practically new."

"Is it?" Mitch pulled out his communicator. "Maybe Adler will be able to tell us."

The geologist, when consulted, looked skeptical. "That's a pretty small sample to get both composition and age from."

"Just pretend it's a sliver of unknown ore," Lyell said, his eyes on the blood analysis data that was starting to come in.

Adler sighed. "Ill try. Mitch, you'd better take over sentry duty. Here's the laser; keep your comm

ready."

The two men left, and Kata stepped to Lyell's side. "How's it look?"

"Strange, but so far doesn't seem all *that* dangerous." He pointed. "The stuff's getting into my red cells, but I don't see any effect on oxygen transport. Wait—here comes a preliminary molecular structure."

Kata watched with growing fascination as the foreign molecule began to appear. It was nothing she immediately recognized; and yet—"An azido group," she said suddenly, tapping that end of the schematic. "That settles it—this *is* a poison."

"Maybe," Lyell agreed, tight-lipped. "Still . . . seems pretty slow-acting."

Kata was already keying the analyzer's scrubbing capability. "Try to relax," she said, double-checking her coding. "It'll take an hour or so to flush the stuff out of your system. How do you feel?"

"Actually, a little better. I don't really think this drug was meant specifically for use against humans."

"Let's hope not." Kata hesitated, then removed Lyell's communicator from his belt and placed it on the table beside his hand. "If you feel any change, hit the emergency switch and I'll come running. I need to go see how Adler and Mitch are doing."

"I'll be fine," he assured her. "Let me know what Adler finds out."

She nodded wordlessly and left.

Adler's geology lab was just a short walk around the building's central hub, but Kata passed it by. Mitch would be circling the outer areas on guard duty, and it was Mitch whom she wanted to see.

She found him by the exit door, staring out the small window with his hand resting on the laser's grip. "Anything out there?" she asked.

"Apparently there is; but it's not showing itself." He turned to look at her, and she was startled by the tightness around his eyes. "How's Lyell?"

"The darts were poisoned, but the drug doesn't seem very virulent. It's being scrubbed out of his blood now."

Mitch nodded. "You're taking this pretty calmly," he said.

She opened her mouth to deny it, but no words came out. He was right, she realized suddenly; so far her physical and emotional responses had been totally on a scientific level. "I suppose the emotional impact just hasn't hit me yet," she said at last. "I had to get Lyell back and then take care of him . . ." She shook her head. "You've had more time to think. What do *you* make of all this?"

"Oh, hell, *I* don't know." Mitch turned back to the window. "Lyell's right—nothing that's native here could have made those darts. We've got to be dealing with an outsider, maybe a survivor of a space ship wreck or something."

"Injured, perhaps, and not mobile?" That could explain how they'd escaped so easily. But—"Surely the seismographs or weather satellites would have picked up traces of any crash or forced landing."

Mitch shrugged. "The only other options I've come up with are an old survivor from one of Rom's ruined towns—a *very* old survivor—or else someone sent deliberately to drive us off. Take your pick."

Kata grimaced. "So what do we do?—hole up here and hope he'll go away?"

"For three more months?" Mitch shook his head. "I don't relish the idea of running through a hail of darts every time we need something from one of the sheds. And that assumes he doesn't have anything more powerful."

Kata felt a shiver run down her back. "Mitch . . . I think I'm starting to get scared."

"You're in good company." Taking one final look outside, Mitch took Kata's arm and started back toward the biology lab. "Come on; let's go talk to Lyell. Guarding the door like this is probably a waste of time, anyway."

Adler had also returned to the lab by the time they arrived, his bristly eyebrows knitted together in concentration. "If I could have the other needle as well," he was saying, "I might be able to get more

information."

Lyell shook his head. "I want that one to do a better analysis on the drug it's carrying." He looked up at Mitch and Kata. "Anything?"

Mitch shook his head. "Nothing past our perimeter except forest," he said. "Lyell, it occurs to me that this place is about as defensible as the far end of a target range. Why don't we get Rom and the *Sunray* back and get out of here?"

"And go where?" Adler snorted. "We don't even know what it is you want us to run from."

"Peace." Lyell raised his hand, cutting off Mitch's own retort. "I indeed plan to call Rom and Shannon back, but not for purposes of escape. I believe what we have here is a castaway, a victim perhaps of a space accident, and I have no intention of simply flying off and leaving him."

Almost exactly what Mitch had suggested, Kata thought, glancing at him. But somehow it sounded a lot less threatening when Lyell said it.

Though apparently not to all of them. "So what're you going to do—invite him in for tea and fruit sticks?" Adler asked. "He *shot* at you, remember?"

"Perhaps he mistook the sound for local fauna," Lyell shrugged. "Or else he spotted our drawn lightning rods and thought we were coming to attack him. Either way, we can't afford to leave matters as they stand." He paused, and his face took on a thoughtful look. "I presume you all realize that we may be on the brink here of finding out why we've never before run into any intelligent species in this part of space."

"What, the old 'shy alien' hypothesis again?" Adler grunted. But even he had the beginnings of a gleam in his eye. "I suppose it's not impossible."

Lyell shifted his gaze to Kata. "You're being pretty quiet, Kata. What are your thoughts on all this?"

She shook her head. "I don't know," she admitted. "The Robinson Crusoe theory works as well as any other, I suppose, but there are still holes in it you could fly the *Sunray* through. If that dart gun of our theoretical alien is supposed to be a survival weapon, why doesn't it carry a more lethal poison?—cyanide, for trivial example; that'll kill most oxygen-breathers we know of. Furthermore, if he crashed this close to us why haven't our surveys picked up evidence of it? And if he hit far away, how in starnation did he find us?"

There was a moment of silence. Then Mitch cleared his throat. "This poison—it *is* a real poison, isn't it?"

"I'm sure it's supposed to be, but against us it hardly qualifies as one," Lyell told him. "It affects the nervous system locally to the extent of causing minor and temporary numbness, but that appears to be all it does. That's one reason I'm not especially worried about being gunned down en masse."

"I see." Mitch had a frown on his face. "Have you done any tests to see how the darts work on, say, tarsap physiology?"

Kata exchanged glances with Lyell. "Unh," Lyell grunted. "I see what you're getting at."

"I don't," Adler spoke up.

"On a biochemical level Palladian life is very similar to ours," Lyell explained, stroking his chin thoughtfully. "If the darts don't bother us much, they aren't likely to kill native animals either, at least not quickly enough to be useful for hunting or defense."

"Bang goes the survival weapon theory," Mitch murmured. "Lyell, this isn't getting us anywhere. If the drug isn't dangerous, maybe Adler and I should go out and see if we can find our trigger-happy guest. Before he figures it out and switches to a stronger weapon."

"You don't mind if I do my own volunteering, do you?" Adler snapped.

"First things first," Lyell shook his head. "No one's going back outside until we have the *Sunray* back to monitor things from the air. Kata, you and Mitch are to try and extract the main poison reservoir from the second dart and double-check the blood analyzer's chemical formula. Adler, I guess you can just go about your work. As soon as the scrubber here's finished with me, I'll give the Endurssons a call."

"If it's all the same to you," Adler said, "I think I'll continue watching the windows. Even high-impact plastic can be broken if you hit it hard enough. Mitch?"

Silently, Mitch handed over the laser. The geologist strapped it on and left the room, and Mitch stepped over to the table where the second dart lay on its gauze pad. "Come on, Kata," he said, picking it up. "Rom will have his standard snit if Lyell doesn't have some hard data to give him when he calls."

Mitch didn't hear the radio conversation Lyell had with Rom: but when the Endurssons finally arrived an hour after sunset Rom wasted no time in making his annoyance public. "All right—let's see these so-called poisoned needles," were his first words as Mitch met them at the door.

"Sure," Mitch said, swallowing the greeting he'd started to give. "The others are in the biolab."

Rom snorted and strode past him. Shannon gave Mitch a smile that was half greeting, half apology, and hurried after her husband. Suppressing a grimace, Mitch followed, glad that the conversational burden would be shifting from his shoulders to Lyell's.

Lyell and Kata were indeed waiting in the lab when they arrived, Adler with a good sense of timing having chosen that moment to be elsewhere. "Lyell," Rom nodded briskly. "What's all this fuss that you absolutely *had* to drag us away from our work over?"

Lyell flipped on the microscope projector and gestured to the screen. "I was shot with two of those darts," he told the other without preamble. "I was hoping you might have run into this kind of weapon before in your studies."

Rom stepped up to the screen, and Mitch felt a smile of admiration twitch at his lip. Only Lyell would think of drawing the archeologist into this by appealing to his professional judgment. "Composition?" Rom asked, adjusting the light a fraction.

"An alloy of nickel, iron, molybdenum, and manganese," Lyell told him. "There may be a very thin layer of a lacquer coating on it, too; Adler wasn't sure. Its main claim to fame is that it's an extremely ferromagnetic material."

"In other words, the gun that fired it uses magnetic rings instead of compressed gas or chemical explosives," Rom said, his tone implying the others should have figured that out long ago.

They had, actually, but Lyell didn't bother to say so. "Seems reasonable—neither Kata nor I heard any sound except the whistle of the darts themselves."

"Means a reasonably high technology," Rom continued as if Lyell hadn't spoken. "Could have come from the ruins, I suppose. Have you done an alloy-bond dating yet?"

"Adler couldn't get both age and composition from the other dart, and I wouldn't let him have this one too."

Rom snorted. "Adler thinks you need a kilo of sample to do anything useful. I can probably get a good approximation from whatever he's got left."

"Wait a second," Kata spoke up. "Are you saying the sniper could be a survivor from a dead civilization?"

"More likely an outcast or someone accidentally left behind," Shannon said, the quiet patience in her voice forming its usual contrast with the lack of that quality in Rom's. "Or a descendant of such a group. The people who built those ruins seem to have arrived rather abruptly on Pallas and then have left equally abruptly. There is no 'dead civilization' here, just temporary visitors."

"Visitors?" Lyell frowned. "I got the impression from your reports that these ruins were more elaborate than a simple exploration team bivouac."

"They are," Rom said. "All of them so far have shown evidence of extensive permanent buildings—one of them even has a nested series of perimeter walls, which indicates periodic growth of the settlement."

"Sounds more like a fort setup," Mitch murmured.

"Doubtful," Rom shook his head. "The walls weren't thick enough to defend against any real attack. Probably they were just decorative." He peered at the magnified needle for another minute. "I gather you want me to take the *Sunray* up tomorrow and look for whatever's out there shooting these things. Suppose he doesn't want to be found?"

"We'll just have to flush him out, won't we?" Mitch said, and immediately regretted it as Rom sent him a look of disgust that could have sterilized culture plates at twenty paces.

"I don't suppose it occurred to you that he may not *want* our company," the archeologist said icily. "If he's used to being alone or part of a small group we'd probably scare the hell out of him charging in on him like that. In fact, maybe that's what started him shooting in the first place."

"We've been tromping all around this part of Pallas for well over six months, apparently without bothering him." Lyell pointed out. "Why should he start shooting now if he doesn't want any attention? If, on the other hand, he just got here, it may be he *is* in need of help or company."

"He's got a funny way of showing it," Rom grunted. "But my original question was how you intended to locate him in the first place. If you were counting on the *Sunray*'s sensors to pick up the needles or magnets, you can forget it. A properly designed mag-ring gun doesn't leak very much field, even when it's being fired."

"Then we'll walk around and listen for the tarsapien enemy call," Kata put in.

"The what?"

"Lyell and I heard a tarsapien danger cry just before the needles started flying," she amplified. "At the time we thought it meant a heloderm was scuttling around, but now I'm not so sure."

"And why would the tarsaps identify this visitor as an enemy?" Rom snorted. "They don't treat *us* that way."

"I only meant—"

"It's as good a working assumption as any," Lyell interjected mildly. "The whole tarsap community was unusually quiet this morning, and I've never known even a family of heloderms to cause a reaction that widespread. Do you have any idea yet what the people who built those ruins looked like?"

Rom shrugged. "Bipedal, certainly; probably at least vaguely humanoid, as well. We haven't yet located any photos or sculptures that would tell us for sure, but all the more subtle indications are there." He favored Lyell with a sardonic smile. "Don't worry, I'm sure he'll be distinguishable from any tarsaps in the area. He'll be holding a gun, for one thing. When do you plan on organizing this hunt?"

Lyell winced slightly at the word *hunt* but didn't comment on it. "I thought early tomorrow morning you could take the *Sunray* up and just see if you can pick up any traces of our visitor from above. If not, Mitch, Adler, and I will go to the spot where I was shot and work outward from there. Unless you have another suggestion?"

"No, I suppose that's as good a plan as any," Rom said. "You won't object if I leave any details to the rest of you?—I've got some samples I want to get catalogued. I thought not. Good night, all." Without waiting for a reply, he turned and disappeared down the hall.

Always a pleasure, Mitch thought sourly, but he refrained from saying it aloud. Shannon was still in the room, and whatever he thought of Rom he *did* genuinely like her. So he merely gave her a friendly smile and strolled over to where Kata was tapping her fingers idly on her terminal. "Feeling any less scared than you were this afternoon?" he asked, pulling up a chair beside hers.

She didn't turn to face him, and her fingers halted their drumming only for a moment. "Yes or no," she answered over her shoulder. "I'm not as afraid of the needles as I was . . . but the rest of it just keeps getting worse."

"You mean Rom's odd-man-out theory? I agree it's shot full of holes—"

"Doesn't that *bother* you?" she interrupted, turning to give him a strange look. "This isn't some nice, safe theoretical discussion about the ecological function of Frensky moss. There is a real someone out there, shooting real needles for real reasons—and it seems to me that charging into this without knowing what we're doing could be dangerous as well as plain stupid."

The intensity of her outburst startled Mitch, and he glanced over to see if Lyell had heard. But the other was deep in quiet conversation with Shannon. "If you feel that way," he asked Kata, "why didn't you bring it up a few minutes ago?"

She shook her head and turned away again. "Lyell had his mind made up—you saw that."

"But you're—" *his lover* "a long-time colleague. Someone he trusts. You could change his mind."

She snorted. "*No* one changes Lyell Moffit's mind once he's decided on a course of action."

Her face was still turned away, and Mitch abruptly realized what she was staring at. Crouching motionlessly in one corner of his cage, Swizzle had a preternatural alertness about him. Occasional ripples of muscle sent waves through his fur, and his flared nostrils were larger even than his unblinking eyes. "How long has he been like that?" Mitch asked quietly.

"I noticed it when we were working on the needle drug analysis earlier. I don't think he's moved half a meter since then."

Mitch shivered. Generalizing from one species to another was always an iffy proposition, but he'd rarely seen a more textbook example of herbivore danger reaction. "Could he have heard the tarsap enemy cry earlier?"

"I don't know. Actually, I'm not quite sure how to read this; he *acts* nervous, certainly, but he accepted his dinner from me without any hesitation I could detect."

"In other words, it's not *us* he's afraid of?"

"I wouldn't even swear to that. I just don't *know*," Kata's fingertips slapped the console one final time and came to a halt. "Well . . . maybe it'll all prove academic, after all. If you catch the sniper tomorrow we should be able to put all the pieces together easily enough."

"Maybe." Mitch glanced once more at Swizzle and then turned away. "Might be interesting to see if his wake-up call tomorrow has any of the 'danger' overtones in it, though."

"I've already got the recorder set up."

Mitch had planned to be listening when the tarsapien cry came the next morning; but though he was up well in advance of the event he wound up missing it entirely as he walked innocently into the common room and straight into a full-fledged war of words.

Lyell, it seemed, had finally run afoul of his own abundant self-confidence. Apparently simply assuming Adler's cooperation in the morning's activities, he hadn't bothered to clear his plans with the geologist . . . and Adler was not amused at having been volunteered for such clearly hazardous duty.

"I don't care," he was saying when Mitch arrived. "I'm not going out there to be shot at on a half-hour's notice. Not without better protection than these coveralls—certainly not without a better idea of what we're up against."

Even Lyell's temper was showing signs of strain. "I've told you what the darts contain—"

"And you've assured me it's not dangerous," Adler interrupted him. "And I'm sure you're not deliberately lying to me. But what about long-term effects of the residue you can't flush out? What about cumulative effects? Face it, Lyell; you haven't got nearly enough answers yet."

"I presume we're open to suggestions," Mitch said, sitting down next to Shannon. Rom, seated alone on the far side of the table with a look of sour amusement on his face, seemed to be staying out of the discussion.

"My idea's already been trampled on, thank you," Adler said, his voice frosty.

Lyell shook his head wearily. "Adler thinks we should just expand our herbicide ring—excuse me, our cordon sanitaire—by a factor of ten or so. Keep the sniper at a distance. Be reasonable, Adler; even if we had the herbicide to maintain it, we couldn't begin to clear that much space quickly and safely enough."

"If you say so. But I'm still not going out there."

The impasse lasted several minutes longer, with Lyell running through an amazing repertoire of persuasions and inducements before giving up. "All right, then," he said, standing up. "I guess Mitch and I will have to do it alone. You ready, Rom?"

"Whenever you are," Rom said. "If it would help, though, I suppose I *could* let Adler take the *Sunray* and go with you two myself."

You might have suggested that ten minutes ago, Mitch thought—and was opening his mouth to say so when Lyell beat him to the draw with a far more diplomatic comment.

"That's very generous of you, Rom; thank you. Well, Adler?"

Adler shot an irritated glance in Rom's direction; but having basically painted himself into a corner he had little choice but to accept the offer. Lyell pretended to take it all at face value, but even he couldn't quite carry it off, and it was a quiet group that headed out into the forest.

The forest, too, was quiet—quieter than Mitch had ever known it. He felt the eeriness of it all as he, Lyell, and Rom fanned out toward the spot where the mysterious sniper had first struck. Overhead, the *Sunray* was a humming blue-and-gray shadow drifting above the ginkgaps and manzanis; behind them, unseen but ever present, Kata and Shannon monitored the Lostproof and ground-to-air equipment and directed the search. It was, Mitch thought more than once, almost as if he were back in college playing the elaborate Search and Strike games that had been all the rage then. Those had been fun . . . but in those he'd been facing only chalk-dye pellets, not high-velocity needles.

"Still nothing," Adler's voice murmured from the communicator strapped to Mitch's shoulder.

"Computer enhancement's not getting anything from the data, either," Kata put in. "Lyell, I think Rom was right; that gun's not going to show on the *Sunray*'s sensors."

"Well, we'll leave him up there—" Lyell broke off abruptly as a tarsapien screech split the air off to Mitch's left. "Report," Lyell said quietly.

"About thirty degrees left," Mitch whispered toward his shoulder, squeezing the "mark" button on his Lostproof to feed its position and orientation back to Shannon's monitor.

"Directly to my right," Lyell said. "Rom?"

"Straight ahead," the archeologist said calmly. "I guess I win."

"Stay there," Lyell ordered. "Mitch and I'll move in to flank him. Shannon . . . ?"

"Got a probable location—feeding to you." Mitch glanced at the small white cross that had appeared on his Lostproof display and headed in that direction. There was no guarantee the loud tarsapien was sitting directly on top of the sniper, and he didn't want to blunder carelessly into a couple of those needles.

He was no more than twenty meters from the spot Shannon had marked when there was a rustle of movement in the trees ahead. "Lyell?" he whispered. "Something moving up there."

"I can see it," Rom put in. "Just a tarsap."

"Okay," Mitch nodded. He took a careful step forward, eyes scanning the undergrowth—

The needle jabbed in from almost directly above him, tracing a line of fire down his right shoulder-blade. With a yelp he threw himself to the side, reflexively raising his lightning rod as if to ward off the attack. A second needle whistled down to nick his thigh as he scrambled toward the nearest tree trunk. Dimly, he heard Lyell calling his name. "In the trees!" he shouted as his brain unlocked for a second . . . and as a third needle slapped into the tree beside his cheek the forest seemed to explode with noise.

The crash of breaking branches overhead was the worst, giving Mitch the momentary feeling of being caught in a wood pulverizer. A swish of a body through the foliage and a glimpse of blue metal an instant later told him what had happened: Adler had rammed the *Sunray* through the upper tree branches in an attempt to dislodge the sniper. Simultaneously, a flash of laser light filtered through the undergrowth ahead. The scramble of something among low branches—Rom's bellow—three more laser flashes—

And with an unearthly scream something large crashed to the ground.

For a moment there was silence. "Mitch?" Lyell called, his voice echoed by the communicator jammed into his neck.

"Here," Mitch answered, struggling to his feet. There was a rustle of branches and Lyell appeared, an oddly tight look on his face. "You get him?" Mitch asked as the other gave him a hand up.

"Yeah. You okay?"

"Couple of needles—those damn things *hurt* going in. What's he look like?"

Lyell's expression tightened a bit more. "Come and see."

The body was lying on the crushed remains of a sarcacia bush, its fur marked with the red-in-black swaths of laser burns. Still gripped in its hand was a sleek, jet-black pistol—gripped so tightly, in fact, that Rom was having trouble prying it loose. For the moment, though, Mitch had little attention to spare for the weapon; his full and unbelieving gaze was on the creature holding it.

A tarsapien.

"Got to hand it to you biologists," Rom grunted as he straightened up, the pistol held loosely in his hand. "When you goof, you do it right. Canine-level intelligence, wasn't it? This one must have been a particularly fast learner."

"Lyell, what's going on?" Kata's voice said at Mitch's shoulder.

"We got the sniper," Lyell answered, the words seeming to stick in his throat. "It's—well, it seems to be a tarsap."

"*What?*"

"Yeah." Lyell shook his head in a gesture of bewilderment. "He must have found the gun somewhere; in one of the ruins, probably. Then figured out how to use it . . . somehow . . ."

"Or else won it from a tourist in a card game," Rom put in sarcastically. Hefting the pistol, he sighted down the barrel, a slight frown creasing his forehead. "Don't worry—I'm sure you'll be able to salvage your theories somehow."

"We'll certainly take a crack at it," Lyell agreed, sounding more on balance. "Mitch, can you travel under your own power?"

"Uh . . . well, my leg feels sort of tingly—"

"Never mind." Lyell stepped to his side and offered a supporting arm. "Rom, if you can carry the tarsap I can take that weapon."

"Okay." Rom raised the gun, but halfway through the gesture hesitated and slipped it into his belt instead. "No, thanks; I can handle both." Reaching down, he manhandled the dead tarsapien onto one shoulder and checked his Lostproof. "Let's go," he said, heading toward home. Traveling only a bit slower, Lyell and Mitch followed.

They were halfway across the herbicide ring when the impossible happened; and because it *was* impossible none of them reacted during the precious handful of seconds that might have made the difference. From the treetops behind them wafted down a high-pitched tarsapien cry . . . and even as Lyell paused to look around the needles began to fly.

"Run!" Rom yelled, sprinting for the safety of the building. Mitch tried to follow, but Lyell had been caught flatfooted and it cost the two of them another second to get their feet moving in synch. Mitch bit down hard as a familiar sting scratched across his arm. Lyell seemed to falter, nearly pitching them headlong onto the ground; shifting his grip, Mitch managed more by luck than anything else to take Lyell's weight and keep them moving. The last four steps seemed to take forever . . . and then they were through the open door, slamming into Rom as the archeologist was starting back out. They fell together in a heap, another couple of needles ricocheting from the floor and walls before Mitch managed to get a foot free and kick the door closed.

It wasn't until he and Rom got to their feet that they discovered why Lyell was being so quiet.

The work on Lyell was slow, nerve-wracking, and frustrating, and by the time Kata remembered Mitch's injuries she already felt as if she'd been run backwards through a faulty garbage recycler. But despite the fact he'd been left lying on the dining table for over an hour there was no anger or impatience in his face or posture when she finally looked in on him. "How are you feeling?" she asked, hoping the deadness within her didn't come across as disinterest.

"I'm all right," he said quietly. "You can leave the needles in until later if you're still busy."

She shook her head. "I can't do anything more for Lyell now except let him sleep. Where were you hit?"

"Right scapula somewhere and left thigh rectus muscle, if I'm remembering my anatomy classes properly." He paused. "How is he?"

Something in his voice made her take another look at his face, and it finally penetrated her own cloud of fear and anxiety how hard he was taking this. "He's not doing too badly," she told him. "Still unconscious, but I'd have sedated him anyway. I think he'll pull through okay."

"Shannon told me there's a needle lodged in the heart muscle."

"Near, but not actually in it," Kata corrected, silently thanking heaven for small favors. "Unless it migrates it should be all right to leave it there."

He twisted his head up to look at her. "You're not going to take it out?"

Kata shook her head tiredly. "No, and I've already gone six rounds with Adler over the decision, so please don't you start. The needle went in between two ribs, just missing the spine, and there's simply no way I can get at it with the non-specialized equipment we've got here." She bit her lip as she applied a fresh layer of anesthetic to Mitch's shoulder wound. "Not to mention my own lack of skill, of course."

"Yeah."

She worked in silence for a moment, the part of her mind not actually involved with the operation trying to come up with words that would sound convincing. But Lyell was the one with the silver tongue, and eventually she gave up the effort. "It's not your fault, you know," she told Mitch.

"Isn't it? Rom made it in without a scratch . . . but he wasn't being slowed down by someone with only one and a half legs. Lyell could have let go of me and saved himself."

"In that case, it was his decision and again wasn't your fault." Kata shrugged. "Anyway, who's to say what would have happened if he'd let go? *You're* the one who got *him* inside, remember. Without you the tarsapien might have had time to put a dozen more shots into him."

"Maybe." Mitch sighed. "Kata . . . what the hell is going *on* here? Tarsaps with guns, shooting at us—it's like something out of a plot for *City of Night*. You know—the old Natives Rising To Throw Off The Human Conquerors gimmick. *Could* the tarsaps somehow have hidden a technological civilization from us?"

"No." There was a lot about this that Kata didn't understand, but of that one thing she was certain. "Remember the Bateson neural dexterity index? The tarsapiens are biologically incapable of inventing something as advanced as a needle gun."

"But that conclusion assumes Swizzle is a typical example. Is there any chance he's the tarsap equivalent of an imbecile, deliberately planted on us to skew our data?"

"You forget I've got disks full of data on tarsapiens in the wild as well. Anyway, if they were so intelligent that they could fool us that thoroughly, why tip their hand now?"

"I don't know." Mitch hissed between his teeth as Kata began easing the needle back along its original path. "But the option is to believe that they just happened to find at least two working needle guns in some multi-hundred-year-old ruin *and* that the tarsaps that found them both traveled several hundred kilometers to this same spot *and* that they only shoot humans and not each other with them." He ran out of breath and fell silent.

Kata withdrew the needle and laid it in a culture plate. *For future analysis*, a detached part of her mind said. "It doesn't make much sense either way, does it?" she admitted, moving down to work on Mitch's leg. "Well . . . Rom and Adler are looking at the gun now. Maybe they'll come up with a better

theory. I just wish we had better deep-probe equipment for them to use."

"I wish we had a way to call out-system for help," Mitch retorted. Grimacing, Kata nodded. *If wishes were horses*

It took another half hour to remove the second needle and clean the wounds, and afterwards she helped Mitch to the bio lab for a session with the blood scrubber. She had finished the connections and was thinking about lying down for a while herself when Lyell woke up.

"I gather I took a fall," he said as Kata came over to the cot they'd set up for him.

"Of a sort," she said, checking the sensor readings and trying to keep her voice reasonably cheerful. "Tried running away from a needle that was running faster."

"So that part wasn't a dream," he murmured. "I was almost sure . . ." He closed his eyes briefly and seemed to come a bit more awake. "Did the tarsap we killed get lost?"

"No, we've got both it and the gun," Kata said.

"We need to do an autopsy on it," Lyell said. "Find out why it was different. Why it shot at us."

"It's probably not—" Kata clamped her teeth firmly across the sentence. Already Lyell's eyelids were drooping; now was not the time to attempt a rational discussion with him. "You just sleep and get yourself well," she said instead. "We can handle things until you're back on your feet again."

"All right," Lyell's eyes were closed now, but with an obvious effort he forced them open a crack. "Kata? Until I'm better . . . you're in charge of the expedition."

"Me? But—"

"Please. You're the only one who can do it."

She gritted her teeth; but the important thing was that Lyell should get to sleep without any added burdens on mind or body. "All right, Lyell, I'll do my best to keep everything running smoothly."

"Thank you." Lyell's eyes closed, and with a sigh he settled back to sleep.

For a moment she watched the sensors, wishing she knew what normal readings ought to be in this kind of situation. *We shouldn't have let him go out there*, she thought miserably. *We should have made him stay here, or at least up in the Sunray. No matter how safe the needles seemed we should have made sure our only doctor was as protected as possible.*

But with all the advances of modern technology no one had yet come up with a way to make second-hindsight profitable. Putting the chain of what-ifs from her mind, Kata went to Lyell's lab table and the dead tarsapien lying there. Her nap would just have to wait until after the autopsy.

It was a somber group that assembled in the bio lab that afternoon—an atmosphere undoubtedly not helped by the presence of Lyell lying unconscious on his cot against the wall. Kata didn't care much for the constant reminder of their danger either, but she was becoming increasingly reluctant to leave him alone.

"To start," she said, looking around the circle of people clustered around her lab table, "I'd like to get the tarsapien himself out of the way. The preliminary autopsy shows nothing especially out of the ordinary about him: no extra brain mass, no anomalies in coloration or organ size—in short, no indication whatsoever that he's a member of a theoretically superior sub-species of tarsapien. The computer's doing a detailed biochemical analysis now, but I believe it's safe to say he did *not* make the gun himself."

Rom snorted. "I told you that hours ago." Besides him, Shannon shifted slightly in her chair, but said nothing.

"It's nice to have proof, though," Mitch murmured. There was still a haunted look about his eyes, Kata noted uneasily: mute testimony to the fact that he still felt some responsibility for Lyell's injury. "How far did *you* two get with the pistol?" he added.

"Depends on what you want," Rom said. He glanced at Adler, as if expecting the other to say something. But the geologist was staring in the direction of Lyell's cot, his mind obviously light-years

away, and with a quiet snort Rom pulled the black weapon from his belt and held it up. "Length, about fifteen centimeters, main body about four by three, grip about six long and an oval cross-section about twelve centimeters in circumference. The front half of the main body contains a series of seventy rings that, judging by their reaction to applied magnetic fields, are room-temp superconductors."

Abruptly, Kata noticed that the pistol, which had started out being held by the fingertips of Rom's right hand, had slipped imperceptibly into a cozy position in the archeologist's palm. There was nothing overtly hostile about that—certainly Rom wasn't pointing the thing at anyone—but something about the action nevertheless sent a quiet shiver through her body. "Rom, can we put it under the fluoroscan here?" she cut into his monologue. "See what it looks like inside?"

He glanced down at the gun in his hand, almost as if seeing it for the first time. "No need," he told Kata, lowering the gun to his lap but maintaining his grip on it. "It's all on the computer—Datapack ALP."

Feeling vaguely disturbed, Kata reached to her terminal and accessed the proper disk. A moment later, she had an x-ray view of the pistol on the screen.

Mitch whistled softly. "Crowded in there, isn't it? What *is* all that stuff?"

"Looks like some sort of relatively simple sensor at the tip of the barrel, probably part of the firing mechanism," Rom said. "The stuff behind the rings is more electronics and what seems to be a small powerpack. That narrow thing around the inside edge of the grip is a reservoir of some liquid, probably a lubricant. The rectangular block taking up the rest of the grip—" he hesitated—"appears to be the ammunition."

"The whole thing?" Kata asked, her eyes and brain trying to reconcile the sizes of the tiny needles she'd become far too familiar with and the solid-looking mass on the computer screen. "There must be—oh, *thousands* of needles in there."

"Something under nine thousand, actually," Rom said. "The reservoir also appears to be about half empty."

Mitch was the first to break the silence. "An eighteen *thousand* shot clip? What were they fighting, anyway, the Hundred Years' War?"

"How should *I* know?" Rom retorted. "Maybe it was just their version of the disposable flashlight—a sealed unit that you throw away when it's empty."

"Sealed?" Kata frowned. "You mean you can't figure out how to open it?"

"If I'd meant that I would have *said* that," Rom said, his voice heavy with scorn. "I mean there *is* no way to open it. Not unless you want to ruin part of the mechanism getting in."

Clamping her mouth firmly shut over her irritation, Kata looked back at the image on the computer screen. "I think we're going to have to risk it," she said. "There's only so much we can learn from indirect study—"

"Well, forget it," Rom interrupted. "I know you biologists are used to cutting up everything in sight, but you're not taking your scalpels to my gun."

"*Your* gun?" Kata asked. "Since when?"

"Since when do *you* give orders around here?" Rom countered.

"Since Lyell put her in charge this morning," Mitch spoke up.

"He did *that*?" Shannon asked, frowning. "Why?"

"Well, obviously he's not in any shape to run things himself," Mitch shrugged. "He woke up long enough to order an autopsy on the tarsap and then told Kata to run things until he was better."

"Ridiculous," Rom snorted. "Lyell must've been delirious."

"Now *you're* being ridiculous—"

"Enough," Kata interrupted. Mitch had a lower threshold of irritation than even Adler, and the last thing they needed was a knock-down argument about who got the dubious honor of Lyell's hot seat. "In case you've all forgotten, there's a tarsapien out there with a gun—one of *those* guns, Rom. Wherever he got it, we need to know everything we can about the thing if we're going to come up with a defense."

Rom's face was settling in along well-defined frown lines; but before he could reply Shannon spoke up. "Surely there are other tests and studies we can do before we have to risk damaging the gun," she said. "After all, the immediate problem seems to me to be learning how to locate or defend against the weapon, not necessarily learning all the details of how it works."

Kata hesitated . . . but it wouldn't cost them more than a little time, and if they could postpone this fight until Lyell was back in charge the final decision would probably be reached with less emotional bloodshed. "All right," she said with a sigh. "Rom, why don't you take the gun back to your lab and—oh—set it up in the NMR chamber. We could have dinner while the thing's getting a good composition profile."

"I know what to do," Rom snorted, getting to his feet and starting for the door. There he paused, staring for a moment at the alien weapon still gripped in his hand. "Don't hold dinner for me—I may just wait until the analysis is finished."

He left, and Kata felt a prickling of the hairs of her neck. It was the sort of parting shot they all expected from a loner like Rom . . . but there'd been something about the way he'd looked at that pistol that bothered her. *You're getting hypersensitive*, she told herself firmly. *Hypersensitive and maybe a little paranoid.*

Beside her, Mitch cleared his throat. "Shannon, is he okay?" he asked quietly. "I mean . . . he seems a little . . ."

"Preoccupied?" Shannon suggested. Her eyes were on the empty doorway and there was a slight furrow between her eyebrows. "Yes. He does, doesn't he."

So I'm not imagining things, Kata thought. "Why did he refer to the gun as *his*?" she asked Shannon. "Because it's like the other artifacts you're always digging up?"

"Archeologists don't become attached to the things they find," Shannon shook her head. "We nearly always wind up giving them to someone else. And Rom's always been even less possessive than most of the others I know."

"He's sure making up for it now," Adler spoke up.

Kata turned to him in some surprise—she'd almost forgotten he was there—and found him still gazing at the unconscious Lyell. "What do you mean?"

"I mean he wouldn't so much as let me *touch* that damn gun while we were working on it," the geologist said. "*He* held it under the fluoroscan, *he* took all the caliper measurements, *he* moved it between machines when necessary. All he'd let me do is punch in the data."

"Um." That *did* seem excessive, Kata thought. Still, Rom had never been at his best in group situations. "Well . . . Rom doesn't ask much of the rest of us. I suppose we can indulge him this once."

"He still shouldn't carry that gun around like a personal sidearm," Shannon said, standing up. "I'll try to get that through to him, at least. Oh, and please don't wait for me, either—I'll make a private supper for Rom and me after you've eaten." With her usual half-apologetic smile she left.

"Going to be a small group for dinner," Kata remarked, trying for a light tone. "I don't know about you two, but I'm famished."

"Yeah." Mitch got up from his seat, his eyes flicking once to Lyell and then—Kata thought—guiltily away. "My turn to cook, I suppose. I've certainly had the easiest day of everyone."

"Adler?" Kata asked, turning to the geologist. "You coming?"

"In a while," the other answered. "I'm not really hungry yet."

Kata followed his line of sight. "There's nothing you can do for him right now," she said. "I've programmed the sensors to alert me in case of any change."

"I know. I just want to sit here a while." He hesitated. "I'm not afraid of dying, Kata—I'm not, really. I just don't want to die *now*, with my career and professional reputation as low as they are. I—well, I'm sure you didn't know it, but the main reason I came to Pallas was that so many of Lyell's companions have returned from these trips to publish outstanding papers. I rather hoped some of that luck would rub off on me."

"I see," Kata said. The revelation wasn't exactly news to her—Lyell had read Adler's motives correctly right from the start—but there wasn't any point in telling him that. "Okay. Call me if he wakes up; otherwise, I'll be back in an hour."

The dinner Mitch fixed for them was quick, simple, and under other circumstances would probably have tasted quite good. But with all the strains and uncertainties of the situation buzzing around her like a swarm of sweat gnats the food went down like so much untextured protein supplement. Midway through the meal Shannon unexpectedly appeared, and though she acted civil enough the single meal she heated and sat down to eat spoke volumes about how her talk with Rom had gone. *First Adler goes all quivery*, Kata thought glumly, *and now Rom and Shannon are having some kind of polemic. Please get well quick, Lyell—I can't hang onto this tiger much longer.*

But that hope proved cruelly short-lived. Four hours later the medsensor alarms signalled Lyell's lapse into a coma, and despite Kata's best efforts his condition steadily worsened.

Two hours later, he was dead.

The morning sun was filtering through the trees by the time Kata called them together again. "The best guess I can make is that the drug in the needle interfered with Lyell's autonomic nervous system enough to cause a slowdown of his heart," she told them quietly. "I don't know whether the drug also caused the subsequent metabolism drop or whether that was a reaction to the slower heartbeat—" She caught her breath as her voice began to tremble, and Mitch winced in sympathetic pain. To have had to perform even a biochemical autopsy on a man she'd loved; wondering probably the whole time whether different treatment could have saved his life . . . "Whichever," she continued, once again under control, "he seems to have just drifted off . . . and died."

"So your 'harmless' poison turns out not so harmless after all," Adler said heavily.

"We never said it was harmless; only that—" Kata waved a weary hand. "Oh, never mind. Rom? What more have you found out about the weapon?"

Kata had been up most of the night, handling what was undoubtedly the most emotionally draining situation of her life, and she looked it. And yet, as Mitch studied Rom, he decided the archeologist looked even worse. His face was drawn and pale, as if he'd spent a month with a debilitating illness, and even in the cool of the morning there was a sheen of perspiration on his forehead. He hadn't bothered to shave, and his eyes seemed unable to shift from their steady gaze at the floor. But his voice was clear enough, and the hand that gripped the alien pistol in his lap showed no signs of infirmity. "Nothing very useful," he said, staring at a spot near Kata's feet. "I've got the feed mechanism figured out—an unorthodox but straightforward scheme that seems totally jam-proof. I also took a sliver of metal from the underside of the barrel, and it looks like the gun's twenty to fifty years *older* than any of the ruins we've studied."

"It is?" Shannon frowned, and Mitch felt his eyebrows lift at her surprise. Freezing Adler out of the work had been par for the course with Rom; but Shannon's reaction meant he'd kept her out as well, and that was well-nigh unheard of. Mitch glanced at Kata, saw the same thought flicker briefly across her face.

"Yes," Rom said, "and it sort of blows the theory that that's where the tarsaps found them."

"Unless the settlers brought twenty-year-old guns with them," Kata suggested.

Rom snorted. "I thought we'd established these things were useless for hunting local animals. I suppose they brought a bunch of semi-infinite repeaters to use on each other?"

Kata flushed. "Maybe the different settlements weren't put up by the same people. You ever think of *that*?"

For a second Rom's eyes locked with Kata's and Mitch braced for an explosion. But apparently Rom wasn't in the mood. "Yeah, I've thought of that," he said, his gaze slipping to the floor again. "But the

building styles are virtually identical. Besides, the weapons don't seem very practical for warfare."

"They kill well enough," Adler murmured.

Kata seemed to wince, and Mitch hastened to step in. "What happened to Lyell was a fluke," he pointed out. "Anyway, there are other reasons Rom's probably right. Those needles have practically no stopping power, and they'd be useless against any kind of body armor. The gun's designed more like a child's toy than like a weapon for a trained soldier."

"Or like a test for civilization, perhaps," Shannon said.

All eyes turned to her. "What do you mean?" Mitch asked.

"I've been thinking over the same questions lately," she said, her gaze flickering around and coming to rest on the gun in her husband's hand. "Suppose you came upon a planet like Pallas and wanted to see how stable or adaptable the tarsap social structure was. One way you might do that would be to give a group of them superior tools or weapons and observe what happens."

"Shades of Satan in the garden," Mitch said. "What a rotten trick to play on a species."

"Is it?" Rom retorted. "Is it any different really than netting Swizzle and hauling him here to perform in a maze? You should know by now that biologists are always playing God with the things they find."

Mitch clamped his teeth together and counted to ten; but before he reached it Kata returned his earlier favor and took back the conversational ball. "You're suggesting, then," she said to Shannon, "that when it came time to collect the guns and leave they missed a couple?"

"Or else didn't bother to collect them at all," Shannon shrugged. "Mitch told me earlier that you'd never found a tarsap with needles in him, so maybe they never learned to shoot each other."

"Which again leaves us the question of why they shoot at *us*," Mitch reminded her.

"Maybe they just don't like people," Rom murmured. "I can sure understand that." He looked up abruptly, and for a long second the gun in his hand wavered like a snake unsure of its target. Mitch caught his breath, heard Kata do the same . . . and Rom stood up, jamming the gun back into his belt. "I need some air," he said and strode out of the room. Even before he was out of sight, he was fumbling the pistol back into his hand.

Carefully, Mitch let out the breath he'd been holding. "Is it my imagination, or was he really thinking about opening up with that thing?"

"He *was*." Adler's face was a dirty white, his preoccupation with Lyell's death momentarily pushed into the background. "And if he did he would have started with *me*. He doesn't like me—you all know that."

"Rom wouldn't do a thing like that," Shannon said. But her voice lacked conviction, and her face was almost as pale as Adler's. "He's not—I mean, he's not very sociable, but . . . did any of you see his face right then?"

The others shook their heads. "I was watching the gun," Mitch said. "Why?"

"He looked . . . confused, sort of. Or like he was in pain." Shannon looked at Kata. "I think he's coming down with something, Kata. I know you and Lyell said that shouldn't happen, but with the way he's acting and the way he looks—" She waved a hand helplessly. "I just think he's ill."

Kata nodded grimly. "He sure looks like someone with untreated intestinal flu," she agreed. "And it's not completely impossible for one of us to catch something here; the different surface protein cues keep the local bacteria and viruses from entrenching themselves into our systems, but the DNA and RNA structures are similar enough for a rogue plasmid or something to conceivably make trouble." She looked at the doorway. "I'd better try and talk him into an examination."

But Rom didn't like Kata much; and with the shorter fuse this illness seemed to have given him . . . "I'll go," Mitch said, getting quickly to his feet.

"You sure?" Kata asked, her voice a mixture of relief and guilty concern.

"Sure. Rom doesn't seem as angry at botanists this semester as he is at biologists. Anyway, I can always remind him I supported one of his arguments a few minutes ago. You want a full medcheck?"

"If you can get it," Kata said. "But don't push too hard."

"No kidding." Wondering briefly about the stupid things done in the name of chivalry, Mitch went in search of Rom.

He found the other, predictably enough, in the archeology lab, staring out the window and ignoring the bits and pieces of ancient rubble laid out around the room. "Mind if I come in?" he asked from the doorway.

Rom half turned, then resumed his outward gaze. "Don't touch anything," he said shortly.

Swallowing, Mitch stepped inside and closed the door. "How are you feeling?" he asked casually, moving carefully toward the other.

"Why?"

"To be honest, you look like you're coming down with something and we're worried about you."

Rom snorted. "Afraid I'll pass it on to you?"

"Not especially," Mitch said, determined not to let the other get to him. "We're more afraid of what it might do to *you*."

"Oh, come on—none of you cares what happens to me."

"Not even Shannon? She's the one who suggested—"

"Shannon can go swim an ocean with the rest of you," Rom snapped.

Surprise tangled Mitch's tongue, cutting off the rest of his sentence. As uncaring as Rom was about everyone else's sensitivities, Shannon had always before been exempted from the verbal abuse. To hear that immunity crumbling was in a way more disquieting even than the other's fixation with the alien weapon.

And Rom knew it. "Bothers you, does it?" he said as Mitch was still trying to find something to say. "Shows you've never tried marriage yourself. Half the time you'd be better off rooming with your worst enemy. At least then you'd know exactly where you stand."

If things are that bad . . . ? Mitch wondered. *No. They've just had a fight, that's all. That and/or this illness.* "Deep down you know better than that," he said, hoping it didn't sound as trite to Rom as it did to him. "We care about you—all of us—and Shannon most of all."

"Deep down," Rom countered softly, "you're all my enemies. Tell me, do you believe in ghosts?"

The verbal blockbusters were coming too fast. "I . . . don't know," he managed. "Do you?"

"Not really. But I think there are ghosts on Pallas. I can . . . I can feel them, almost. Hear them, too."

Oh, terrific. "What do they say?" he asked, choosing the safest response he could think of.

"They tell me I'm in danger." Rom's voice was calm, almost as if he were reciting from a stone tablet he'd dug up. "There are enemies here, enemies I have to try and fight. To drive away. We did that once, a long time ago."

"We?" The word slipped out before Mitch could stop it.

"I mean *they*," Rom replied. "They. The abandoned ruins are proof of that, I think. Someone tried to settle here and the ones with the guns drove them off."

Mitch's mouth was beginning to feel dry. "That's not what you were saying about the ruins before."

"I didn't know about the guns before, did I?" Rom retorted with a touch of his old acerbity.

"Anyway, it's obvious now."

"Not to me." This whole line of conversation was becoming more than a little creepy, but somehow Mitch had the feeling he'd better stick with it as long as he could. "You said the people who built the settlements were gone, but then you also said they were still here."

"No. I said there were *enemies* here. Not the same ones that were here before . . . well, sort of the same . . . no" Rom trailed off, and for a long minute stared out the window in silence. "I know who they are," he murmured at last, almost inaudibly. "If necessary . . ."

He shook suddenly, like a dog throwing off bathwater. "So what did you want, anyway?" he asked.

"Uh . . ." It took Mitch a second to remember. "I think it'd be a good idea to run a quick medcheck on you. In case you *have* picked up some bug."

"Shannon's idea, right?"

"Sort of a group consensus, actually," Mitch told him, wondering if he should be lying about such things. Rom's personality was shifting too rapidly for Mitch's meager knowledge of psychology to keep up with. "We all care about you—"

"Yeah, sure. All right; if it'll get you all off my back—" Hauling himself out of his chair, Rom swung to face Mitch . . . and froze.

For that first, awful instant Mitch thought the most horrible creatures from all the *City of Night* shows he'd ever seen had silently lined up behind him. But Rom's eyes were locked squarely on Mitch's face; and the other's look of horror, hatred, and fear was directed squarely toward him. Peripherally, he saw the gun in Rom's hand snap up into firing position, but for once even that couldn't distract his attention. Eyes fixed on Rom's, unable to move and knowing it would be useless anyway, he waited with tensed stomach muscles for the needles to cut into him.

They never did. Slowly, almost unwillingly, Rom turned his head; and as his gaze broke from Mitch's face his body seemed to sag. "No," he growled as Mitch shook off his own paralysis and took a step forward. "I'm all right—don't *touch* me. Go ahead; I'll follow you to the bio lab."

With that pistol trained at my back . . . But Rom had already had ample opportunity to gun him down. Swallowing painfully, Mitch turned and headed toward the door.

His original hope—*was that really only five minutes ago?*—had been that Kata and the others would clear out of the lab before he and Rom arrived. Now, after all that had happened, he hoped fervently that Kata, at least, would still be there. The blood/tissue analyzer, poor cousin to the Diagnizer machines in common use these days, was easy enough to set up for a medcheck . . . but adjusting it to administer medication took more knowledge than Mitch possessed.

But Kata hadn't been around to see Rom's latest reaction . . . and the bio lab was thus indeed deserted when they arrived.

The analyzer took ten minutes to collect its data, and it was among the longest ten-minute blocks Mitch had ever lived through. Rom was cooperative enough—almost docile, in fact—as Mitch got him into the chair and hooked up the twin armbands. But the other's carefully averted eyes and restless fingering of the alien pistol were continual reminders of the emotions bubbling a millimeter beneath the surface. Twice during that time Mitch reached silently for the keyboard, prepared to gamble that he could locate a strong enough sedative among the machine's pharmaceuticals and flood Rom's system with it before the other could figure out what was happening and riddle him with needles. But both times he withdrew his hand, letting it curl into an impotent fist at his side. Fast sedatives were generally dangerous ones as well, and there was no guarantee whatsoever that Kata would be able to neutralize that kind of overdose before it proved fatal.

And so he watched silently as the machine finished its job, then helped Rom off with the armbands. And then, because he couldn't think of any way to stop him, he let the other leave.

It was early evening when Kata finally pushed her chair back from her lab table and rubbed her eyes. "That's it," she told Mitch. "I'm out of ideas on what to try next."

Mitch nodded; he'd spent most of the day looking over her shoulder as she ran her tests, and he likewise saw the study at a dead end. The nucleic acid anomalies in Rom's system had shown up quickly enough, but tracking down any likely carrier—or even pinpointing the foreign molecules themselves—had proved impossible. "You're sure we're not dealing with a hitherto quiescent Terrestrial virus or something?"

"Positive—the analyzer would have picked that up right away. No, there's something new in there .

. . . and the crazy thing is it acts like it just dropped out of the sky into his bloodstream. No broken virus fragments, no plasmids or plasmid hosts—nothing."

"Could he have inhaled something?" Mitch asked, though he was pretty sure he knew the answer.

"There's no way a naked nucleic acid could survive long enough in an unprotected environment," she said, confirming his guess.

"How about dug into a crevice or something in the gun?"

"It'd still have to get through his skin." She frowned. "Maybe we should check his hands for cuts or scrapes."

"I'd recommend waiting until he's asleep tonight," Mitch said, grimacing at the memory of their last encounter that morning. "You still haven't told me what you're going to do with him, by the way."

"You mean sedate him or not?" Kata shook her head wearily. "Mitch, I know you're not given to flights of fancy and all, but you have to understand that I can't do something like that on the basis of a single subjective feeling that Rom's somehow becoming dangerous. If I can get something—*anything*—objective from this machine then maybe we can risk it. But otherwise—" She waved her hands helplessly.

Mitch nodded, tight-lipped, and stayed for a moment out the lab's window. The sun had set within the past few minutes, and the forest beyond their herbicide ring was darkening rapidly against the blue sky above. "Whatever's wrong with Rom," he said, "we still aren't any closer to solving our original problem. You given any thought to that?"

"The armed tarsapiens?" She sighed. "Yes, but you couldn't tell from the results. Every idea I've come up with so far has had one or more flaws in it. We haven't got anything that would make realistic body armor, we don't know enough about tarsapien physiology to come up with a safe repellent, and we've already proved we can't locate the guns themselves from any distance. I guess we're just going to have to hole up here until the ship comes back, dashing out to the sheds for food as we need it and letting everything else slide."

"And hope the tarsaps with the guns aren't fast enough on the uptake to pick us off each time we run outside." He shook his head. "I don't know, though. Three months cooped up here—we'll be at each other's throats within a week."

"Especially without Lyell here to smooth the ruffled feathers," Kata murmured.

He looked at her closely; but she wasn't, as he'd expected, on the verge of tears. *Holding up well*, he thought. *Unless this is going to hit her as a delayed reaction*.

Behind him the door opened, and he turned as Shannon stepped into the lab. "Have you seen Rom anywhere?" she asked, her voice tight.

"Not since the medcheck this morning," Mitch said. "What's the matter?"

"I can't find him," she said, her eyes darting around as if he might have somehow sneaked in without their knowledge. "I've been through the entire building and I simply can't find him."

"That's ridiculous," Mitch said . . . but even as he spoke that unearthly look of Rom's floated back up from his memory. "Have you tried calling him?" he asked, trying to keep his sudden chill from showing up in his voice.

"He left his comm on our bed," Shannon said. "And his Lostproof, too."

"He's gone outside." It wasn't what Mitch had planned to say, but suddenly all of it clicked together in some recess of his mind and the words simply forced their way out. "He's taken the gun to go fight the 'enemies.' Come on, Kata—we've got to get him back inside."

"Wait a minute," Shannon said, grabbing at Mitch's arm as he and Kata headed for the door. "What enemies? What's going on?"

"I'll explain later," Kata told her. "Right now we've got to act fast. The lasers are locked up in the—wait a second." She raised her communicator, punched a button. "Adler, this is Kata. Are you still carrying one of the lasers? . . . Good. Meet us at the outside door right away."

Mitch half expected to see Rom lying face-down halfway across the herbicide ring, but that fear at least wasn't realized. *Unless he's on the far side of one of the sheds*, he grimaced, studying as much of the forest as he could see through the small window. *And there's only one way to find out.* "Adler!" he shouted over his shoulder. "Hurry it up!"

"What do you see?" Kata demanded, trying to squeeze in for a look.

"Nothing—but that doesn't mean much," he told her shortly. "I'm going to go out and see if I can find him. Adler!—there you are," he added as the geologist puffed into sight behind Shannon. "I'm going out. Stand here in the doorway, and if I yell start shooting into the trees. *High* into the trees—don't forget I'll be out there, too."

"What? Wait a minute—"

"Just do it." Wondering whether he was being heroic or just stupid, Mitch eased the door open and slipped outside—

And was barely two paces away from the building when the needles began whining all around him.

The smart move, he quickly realized, would have been to beat a hasty retreat; but momentum and surprise kept him moving forward, and seconds later he was flat up against the closest shed, gulping air and waiting with itchy skin for the needles to find their mark.

But, surprisingly, they didn't. For a few more seconds the hail of impacts against his shelter continued, then ceased. Behind him, he could hear a sort of muffled confusion at the doorway, but no laser flashes lit up the dusk. "Rom?" Mitch called. "Rom, can you hear me? You're in danger out here—you've got to come back in." He paused, listening, but his bellow had silenced even the animals in the area. *Already too far away to hear?* he wondered tensely. *Or did the tarsaps already get him?* "Rom!" he shouted, louder this time. *Would he have headed for one of the ruins? And if so, which? We'll have to take the Sunray up, try to spot him—*

"You'll never get me, Drzewicki!"

The reply would have made Mitch jump if he hadn't been pressed so hard against the shed. Rom's voice was firm and clear, with nothing of an injured man about it . . . and it came from no more than fifteen meters away. "Go away or I'll kill you. I mean it!"

Mitch licked his lips without obvious effect. "Rom, I want to help you," he called. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the muzzle of Adler's laser poke cautiously around the doorway. *Not now, you idiot*, he thought furiously; but there was nothing he could do but try and hold Rom's attention. "Well help you hunt down the enemies," he improvised rapidly. "You're right, they're still out there—"

A clatter of needles on metal cut him off, and when he glanced around the laser had vanished back inside. "You must really think I'm a fool," Rom snarled. "You don't think I can recognize enemies when I see them? I'm wise to you now, Drzewicki—you won't fool me again."

This was starting to get sticky. "Rom, no one here's trying to fool you, but if you want me to go back inside I'll do so. Just hold your fire, okay?" He paused. "Okay?"

"Why?—so you can plot against me?" Rom answered, punctuating his words with a few more shots. The ricochets seemed to be changing direction, Mitch noticed uneasily. Was Rom working his way around the circle to a point where he could get a clear shot?

The unexpected beep of his communicator made him start. Moving as little as possible, he snared the instrument. "What?" he whispered.

"Get ready to move," Kata's voice said tensely. "I'm going to throw a flare out, try and dazzle him. When I do, make for the door. Got it?"

"Yeah. Hurry it up—he's getting ready to nail me to the shed."

His answer was a faint creak of hinges; and with the sputter of burning magnesium the clearing was abruptly bathed in blue-white light. Shoving off the shed wall, Mitch threw himself into a desperate sprint toward the gaping door. A wild spray of needles spattered all around him, but none of them connected, and with one final surge he hurled himself through the shadowy rectangle and into Kata's waiting arms. Someone slammed the door behind him; and for the moment, at least, he was safe.

"Mitch, what's happening out there?" Shannon asked as he and Kata regained their balance. "Did you remind him there are tarsaps with guns on the loose?"

"The tarsaps are welcome to him," Mitch panted. "I'm sorry; I didn't mean that—but it was *Rom*, not any tarsap, who was shooting at me. He's gone crazy—thinks we're his enemies." He looked at Kata. "Could you hear what he was saying?"

"I got most of it," she nodded grimly. "I'm sorry Mitch; I should have listened when you first told me about him."

"There wasn't much we could have done even then—" Mitch broke off and took a long step backwards, intercepting Shannon as she started for the door. "Hold it; you're not going out there."

"Get out of my way," Shannon said. Her voice, no louder than a whisper, had a touch of hysteria building at its edge. "He's my husband—I've got to help him."

"You can't do anything for him now," Kata told her firmly, stepping to Mitch's side. "We have to figure out what's happened before we can help him."

"What do you mean, *what's happened*? He's ill, that's what, and we have to cure him." Abruptly, Shannon pushed, sending Mitch staggering back. "Let me go to him—I'll get him back inside."

"No!" For Mitch it was a tossup whether Shannon going out or Rom coming in would be a greater disaster; but for now, at least, both would be averted. Even as Shannon tried to push past Kata, Adler reached from behind to pinion the archeologist's arms. For a moment she thrashed in his grip; but as Kata and Mitch moved in to assist she abruptly gave up and stood quietly, tears welling up in her eyes.

"Don't you understand?" she half demanded, half pleaded. "He *needs* me."

"Come on, Shannon," Kata said, taking her arm and walking her down the hall toward the bio lab. "Let me get you something to calm you down. You're not helping Rom like this."

They disappeared around the curve, and Adler turned haunted eyes on Mitch. "What the hell's *happening* here, anyway?"

"You know about as much as I do," Mitch answered shortly, stooping to study the door's latch mechanism. It should be possible, he decided, to jam the thing well enough to keep Rom from sneaking in in the middle of the night. "I'm going to need some wire and a flat chunk of metal the size of a—"

"First Lyell gets killed, and now Rom goes totally rock-happy," Adler went on as if Mitch hadn't spoken, "and all on a supposedly safe world. How are we going to look to the rest of the scientific community?"

"We're going to look dead if we don't get this door sealed," Mitch snapped. "Now go get me—"

"Better dead than having to live through the end of a career," Adler murmured. Mitch opened his mouth, but before he could speak Adler's eyes seemed to refocus on him. "What did you say you wanted?"

"Some strong wire and a chunk of metal the size of a microscope slide," Mitch repeated. "Try Rom's tool kit—and leave the laser here."

Adler nodded and headed off. Clutching the laser like a good-luck talisman, Mitch waited tensely by the door, belatedly wishing he'd sent Kata for the equipment instead. But Adler was back within five minutes with a double handful of wire, metal chips, and tools, and in ten minutes more the door was as secure as Mitch could make it. "At least he won't break in without making a lot of noise," he concluded, testing the latch one final time. "Come on—let's go find Kata and Shannon and try to figure out what we're going to do."

"If you don't mind, I think I'll check first to make sure Rom didn't unlatch one of the windows for himself," Adler said, that distant look drifting onto his face again. "I'm . . . not likely to be much help just now."

With an effort Mitch controlled his tongue. "All right. But don't take too long. We're going to need your help."

A bitter smile tugged briefly at Adler's lips. "Sure. I'll do what I can . . . whatever little that is."

Hiding his grimace, Mitch nodded and left. He could vaguely understand the demons Adler was wrestling with, but the geologist would just have to handle the battle by himself.

Kata was alone in the bio lab when Mitch arrived, staring grimly at her computer display. "Shannon?" he asked, pulling a chair up beside her.

"I gave her a strong sedative and put her to bed. What's the situation out there?"

"Not good," Mitch admitted, eyeing the screen. "We've got the door sealed against casual entry; but with Rom in a position to keep us away from our supplies, locking him out seems sort of futile. I've been trying to figure out a way to sneak out in the dead of night to collect some food, but if Rom anticipates us properly whoever goes out there won't have a chance."

"Well . . . we've got a few days' worth of food already inside—more, if we ration it. Rom's got to sleep *sometime*."

"Does he? We don't have any idea yet what's happened to him. If he could be turned into a homicidal maniac, why not into a sleepwalker with the same qualities, too?" Mitch nodded at the screen. "Rom's psych profile?"

"Yes," Kata nodded. "I was hoping to find some basis for his actions—some latent paranoia that had cancered out of control, maybe. But aside from his well-known loner tendencies nothing seems particularly abnormal."

"I doubt if Lyell would have brought him along if there'd been anything obvious." He hesitated. "Stop me if this sounds weird . . . but we know those guns were made by some alien race, and I told you Rom thought he was hearing ghosts. Could . . . well, *something* have entered him and taken control?"

Kata shook her head. "I don't believe in ghosts, alien or otherwise."

"Maybe they weren't a corporeal race to begin with," he suggested, a bit warmly. It wasn't *that* ridiculous an idea. "It's possible they were pure spirit or pure energy or—"

"They fought with needle guns."

"Oh. Right."

Reaching forward, Kata blanked Rom's medical record from the screen and typed up a new file. "That gun's the key, Mitch—it's *got* to be the gun." On cue, an x-ray view of the pistol appeared on the screen. "He's the only one who ever touched it, and all this started at the same time." Abruptly, she called up a file index and leaned forward to study it. "On a hunch . . . Rom must have taken some ultra-high-resolution pictures. Let's see . . ." A new picture appeared and she centered the screen on one edge of the grip. "Let's try about a thousand magnification . . ." She pressed some keys, the picture changed—and Mitch inhaled sharply.

The smooth edge had become a gently curving hill forested with squat but exquisitely sharp needles. A glance at the scale confirmed his first guess: Rom would probably never have felt them poking into his skin. "I think," he said, "we've found the delivery system for those nucleic acids in Rom's blood."

"I think you're right," Kata agreed. "That angle must mean we're focused on one of the indented finger grips. Let's just confirm . . ." She tapped controls and the image rotated a few degrees. "Yeah, the needles are hollow, all right. Probably take from that reservoir around the magazine. Damn! Well, I guess that answers the *how*. All we need now are the *what* and *why*." She drummed her fingers against the table. "And for at least the *what* we're going to have to figure out what that reservoir contains. I don't suppose you have any idea of how to write an interior-analysis program for x-ray diffraction data?"

Mitch snorted. "Not hardly. But maybe we can get a sample directly."

"From where?"

"From the gun's previous owner." Mitch waved back toward the lab's refrigerator.

"The tarsapien! Of course—I'd forgotten all about him. As a matter of fact . . ."

She busied herself with the keyboard again. Mitch, too, hadn't thought about tarsapiens lately, but now he looked over at the corner where Swizzle was squatting in a precarious-looking position on top of his jungle gym. "Swizzle seems to have loosened up from a couple of nights ago," he commented.

"Yes," Kata agreed. "Whatever was in that danger call he reacted to, he's apparently decided since then that we're okay." Her fingers paused, and Mitch looked back in time to see her blink something from her eyes. "More evidence of intelligent modification of instinctual patterns . . . but I'll never get the chance to convince Lyell now. Never mind. Here's the biochemical comparison of the dead tarsapien with Swizzle . . . yes! Look—nucleic acid differences. Now, if only the molecules didn't degrade too much before the data was taken . . ."

In that, though, they were only half lucky. The odd nucleic acids had indeed begun to unravel, and their concentrations were far too low for a composite/extrapolation to be made. "Well?" Mitch asked as a diagram of an incomplete molecule slowly rotated on the screen. "Can you make any guesses as to what it's supposed to do?"

"I think so," she said slowly. "That tail looks like a tag to get the molecule through the tarsapien brain-blood barrier, which implies we're on the right track. I've got a reasonable data base on their brain chemistry; and if worst comes to worst I suppose we could try and synthesize some and give it to Swizzle."

"And then we come up with a way to block whatever it does?"

"Starnation." Kata shook her head. "I can't even think that far ahead right now. Let me do what I can with this and we'll go on from there." Abruptly, she looked around. "Where's Adler?"

Mitch frowned, glancing back at the door. "I told him to join us here. He's probably still wandering around pretending he's on guard while he tries to figure out how he's going to explain all of this to his colleagues."

"What's to explain? None of this is his fault."

"I know that. But *you* try telling him his life is more important than his reputation."

Kata said a word Mitch had never heard her use before. "Great. Just great. Between him and Shannon we're really rising to the challenge. Well, Mitch, until the rest of our team get their brains back on-line I guess it's up to us."

"Looks that way," he agreed. *So here we are, he thought, thrown together in battle against something that'll probably kill us if we cant figure it out damn fast. How the hell do fiction writers make this sort of thing sound so romantic?*

But he had too many serious questions on his mind to bother with trivial ones as well. "Okay," he sighed. "What can I do to help?"

Kata had known on an intellectual level since her senior year at college—and on a far more personal level since her first grueling year of grad school—that even the safest of sleep-substitute drugs extracted their price in both subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Once she'd finally accepted this truth she had made it part of her personal rule book to avoid such drugs like Sirian leopard snakes. But rules were servants, not master, and it was almost without notice—let alone qualm—that she spent the next day and a half drugged to the eyeballs as she worked to reconstruct and understand the enigmatic molecule that seemed to be at the bottom of Rom's psychotic behavior. On one level, the results were worth the price, as her studies began to bear fruit . . . but on another, it meant that when Adler's fuse ran down that afternoon she was in the worst possible shape to handle it.

The explosion occurred an hour after lunch—a meal which Kata had taken care not to dawdle over. Adler's growing touchiness and barely controlled nervous energy were hard enough to take by themselves, but when contrasted against Shannon's almost ghostly quietude the effect was to leave Kata feeling positively twitchy. Mitch, who usually managed to be an island of relative stability at such gatherings, was back in his room catching a couple of hours' sleep, and Kata had therefore stayed in the common room only as long as basic civility and hunger required before escaping back to the lab.

She was at her table, sweating over a particularly tricky simulation, when Adler stalked in. "I need

some ten percent hydrochloric acid," he growled, walking over to the chemical cabinet. "Where do you keep it?"

"Number six locker; out the door and turn left," she replied without looking up. "Help yourself."

A second later she literally jumped out of her chair as the crash of the cabinet door against the wall echoed through the room. "Adler!" she yelled.

He was fumbling with the back row of bottles, his hand trembling. "The hydrochloric, damn it!" he demanded.

"I told you I don't have any," she snapped, dimly aware that she was losing her temper but not really caring. "What are you trying to do, earn yourself a vacation in a psycho-ward snuggly?"

His face darkened. "You'd like that, wouldn't you? You'd like to be able to spread the blame around to the rest of us. You imply in your report that I went rock-happy and maybe they won't notice how badly *you* botched things."

"I botched things? What are you talking about?"

"Not so eager to be in charge now, um? Now that Lyell's dead and Rom might as well be and you've got us cooped up in here like your pet tarsap while the whole project turns to organic fertilizer?"

"I am trying," she said icily, "to keep all of us alive. If this double-damned project and your triple-damned reputation are that important to you, then why don't you go out there and bring Rom back in?"

"I might just do that," he snarled. "You'd at least have to list me as a hero if I did." Turning, he stomped back out.

Slowly, the blind fury died within Kata, and as it did so she started to shake with reaction and guilt. *Some terrific leader I am*, she berated herself. *Lyell wouldn't have blown up like that—he'd have let Adler drain off some of his tension and that would have been the end of it. Obvious thing to do.* But instead she'd fought back, and in the process simply added to both parties' resentment. *I can't believe I did something that stupid. Stupid and—*

Did I really suggest he go out after Rom? Oh, my God—

She didn't even stop to put her half-finished program on standby as she took off toward the exit as fast as the curving corridor permitted. If Adler was feeling as irrational as he'd sounded . . .

But the exit door was still sealed when she arrived. For a moment she leaned against it, catching her breath and feeling a little silly. *Of course* Adler wasn't crazy enough to—

"Out of my way, Kata," a voice behind her growled, spinning her around and kicking her heart back into high gear.

Adler had put on gloves, hat, and the heaviest coat he had, and had a hip pack belted to his left side. With the laser riding his other hip he looked like a child's version of a Starlane Patroller, and under other conditions the effect might have been laughable.

But there wasn't anything amusing about the expression on his face.

"Adler, this isn't going to do any good," Kata said carefully, staying where she was. "You don't know anything about hunting animals, let alone people; and even if you did Rom's got a flashless weapon and his pick of places to ambush you from. All you can possibly do is get yourself shot."

"You agreed yourself that what happened to Lyell was an unlikely accident," Adler pointed out. There was a deadly calm to his voice that suggested reasoning with him was a waste of time. "A few needles, if he gets that lucky, won't slow me down much—and my weapon *is* ultimately superior to his."

"Lyell's death was an accident because tarsapiens don't have the eye-hand coordination to be marksmen," Kata retorted. "Rom does. Furthermore, he also knows where the vital organs are, and he's had plenty of time to practice his shooting. Chances are good he'll kill you before you even get a shot off."

Adler's lip twitched. "And if he does? My career will never have time to recover from this trip, Kata. I might as well die here as live out my last few years in some tenured dead-end position

somewhere."

"Adler, that's—" She broke off before the work *crazy* could slip out and tried again. "Look, this isn't going to be nearly the drag on your reputation that you seem to think. The alien gun actually qualifies as pretty exciting stuff—"

"For you, Mitch, and Shanon, perhaps," Adler interrupted her. "But for me? No. I'll just suffer under the sensationalistic hammer without so much as a new geological formation to balance it with." Again, his lip twitched in an almost-smile. "I've seen it happen before; been the target of it, in fact, more than once. Colleagues—people you thought were your friends—concentrating on everything but the paper you're presenting or the results you're reporting on. 'But what *really* happened on Draconis Minor, Dr. Zimmerman?' 'Do these two really fight as much in private as they do in the journals?' " 'How were *you* involved in that incident with the site break-in? I can already hear what they'll ask me about Pallas: 'So things were falling apart, eh? What did *you* do to help out? Oh, you stayed in your room and sorted rocks? How *helpful* of you.' "

"Adler—"

"No, Kata. When they ask those questions I intend to have answers for them." Carefully, he drew his laser and settled it firmly into his gloved fist. "Please; just go away. I really don't want to have to hurt you."

Wordlessly, Kata moved aside. Adler knelt by the door and within half a minute had undone the makeshift lock. "Seal it up behind me," he instructed her, getting back to his feet. "If I get Rom I'll call you." Taking a deep breath, he abruptly swung open the door and slipped outside.

Only then did Kata's drug-fogged mind think to call for help.

Mitch was obviously still half asleep when he answered her call; but he wasn't that way for long. "Stay there," he told her when she'd given him a two-sentence summary of the situation. "If anyone heads for the door, holler. I'll get the other laser and meet you there in a couple of minutes."

He was there in less time than that, the weapon in his hand forming an odd contrast to his robe and disheveled appearance. "I've got Shannon warming up the Lostproof monitor," he said, glancing out the window. "Did he get to the trees?"

"I don't know—he broke to the left just past the sheds. Mitch, I'm sorry—"

"Never mind the brow-beating," he cut her off. "Get back there and help Shannon. And leave your comm open."

It was a slow and painful wait. Despite his apparent recklessness Adler wasn't simply beating the bushes and waiting for Rom to attack. His blip on the Lostproof screen showed he was in fact making his way slowly and—presumably—quietly through the forest, halting occasionally in the shadow of a tree before continuing his rough spiral around the clearing. Each time he stopped Kata's stomach tightened, relaxing again only when he started moving again.

He was almost halfway around when his blip abruptly threw itself sideways. "Mitch!" Kata barked. "I think he's been hit."

"Where?" her communicator snapped.

"Thirty-five meters by forty-two degrees," she read off the coordinates.

"Okay. Come here and take the laser—I'm going to take the *Sunray* up."

"But *Rom*—"

"If he's with Adler I've got a clear path," Mitch cut in impatiently. "Hurry up; I don't want to just leave the laser here on the floor."

She hurried, and two minutes later the *Sunray* hummed its way overhead in the direction of Adler's motionless Lostproof blip. A minute after that Mitch called in the bad news.

"There's just no way at all for me to get in on top of him," he reported tensely. "I'm going to have to put down and go out to get him."

"No," Kata snapped, the pain of the decision twisting like a knife in her gut. "It's too risky—you'd

be a walking target out there."

"Kata, I can't just *leave* him—"

"You have to. Maybe Adler's not dead; if so, you may have distracted Rom's attention enough to let him escape. But if you wait too long Rom'll have time to get back before you—and he'll then be in perfect position to shoot you when you try to come back inside."

For a second she thought he was going to refuse . . . and that she would be forced to add another death to her conscience. "All right," he sighed. "I'm coming in."

She sat in the common room for a long time after Mitch made it in, staring into a cup of coffee and trying hard not to break down into borderline-hysterical sobbing. *Those damn drugs*, she told herself over and over; but she and the others knew better than that. Kata simply didn't have what it took to play chess with people's lives.

Oh, Lyell—why did you have to will this burden to me?

"That coffee's going to curdle if you don't drink it," Shannon murmured from across the table.

The attempted humor deserved an attempted smile, which was about all Kata could manage. *At least I've got Shannon acting human again*, she thought, sipping her cooling drink. *Maybe if I'd fallen apart sooner none of this would have happened. Is that an irrational thought?*

"Nothing seems to be moving out there," Mitch said as he came into the room and sat down next to Kata. He'd dressed and run a comb through his hair, but such trappings of normalcy merely emphasized the tension lines about his eyes. "I can't tell for sure, but it looks like Adler's Lostproof blip may have moved slightly. That could mean he's still alive and conscious."

"You can't go out after him," Kata said dully.

"I wasn't going to ask." He paused, and she could feel his eyes on her. "You made the right decision, you know. Make that *decisions*, plural. There wasn't a thing in the world you could have done for Rom, Adler was stir-crazy beyond rational argument, and I probably *would* have gotten myself perforated if I'd tried to get him into the *Sunray*."

"You pointed out to me two days ago that we'd have trouble if I kept everyone indoors," Kata said, perversely refusing to be comforted. "I should have listened, tried to do something about it."

"There wasn't anything you could have done," Shannon put in quietly. "In fact, I rather think driving us stir-crazy was the basic idea behind all this."

"All what?" Mitch frowned. "You think someone's out there trying to drive us off Pallas?"

Shannon shook her head. "Not us personally; and I don't think anyone's actually watching us. What I meant was that whoever left the guns here did so specifically to keep people like us off the planet."

Kata's first reaction was incredulity . . . but even as she opened her mouth to voice her doubts the pieces started clicking into place. Multiple-shot, maintenance-free weapons in the hands of native animals; combined with the lab results of the past few hours—

Mitch might have read her mind. "Kata, have you got anything on that odd nucleic acid yet?"

"Yes." She took a deep breath. "The results aren't complete by any means, but it appears the drug is designed to teach any tarsapian who finds the gun how to use it. And, if Shannon's right, exactly who to shoot it at."

"It *what*?" Shannon whispered. "How? I mean, memory alteration methods are supposed to require huge temporal-lobe induction machines."

"Ours do," Kata acknowledged. "The—what do I call them? How about the 'Gunners'? The Gunners seem to have come up with a method using nothing but a sequence of enzymes to stimulate and guide the false memory development. How they provide the motivation I don't yet know, but it would have to couple a recognition pattern with either a glandular or mental fear reaction and then induce the proper physical motions. Probably need a reinforcement mechanism, as well—" She cut off abruptly.

"Sounds awfully dicey," Mitch shook his head. "To coordinate that many different activities within such a short time of each other?"

Kata shrugged. "I argue from the results that they managed it."

"Even worse, how could they possibly set up a recognition pattern that way? You'd need sensory input of *some* kind—" He paused. "Oh. Sure. All of that winds up as chemical signals anyway. Why not just skip the middleman?"

"That seems to be the case," Kata nodded. "Part of the molecule appears designed to break away along with one of the several tags. The tags on my sample have degraded pretty far, but the one that's most intact looks suspiciously like it should attach itself to a group of receptor sites found mainly in the brain's visual cortex."

"Human or tarsap?" Shannon asked.

"Either, as it turns out." Kata hesitated, then continued. "I'm afraid that's what's happened to Rom. We must look enough like the Gunners' enemies to have triggered the chemical sequence."

Mitch bit at his lip. "If that's true, though, why'd they wait six months before they started shooting?"

"Probably took that long for the ones with the guns to get here once they learned about us," Kata shrugged. "Remember Swizzle's morning news service? I guess the tarsapien information network is even more efficient than I thought."

"Um. That would explain why Rom and Shannon didn't get shot at out at the various ruins, too, wouldn't it? They didn't spend enough time anywhere for the gun carriers to catch up with them."

Shannon's eyes held a faraway look. "That morning—the last one he was here—Rom looked like he hadn't slept all night, and I suggested a shower and shave might make him feel better. He took a shower, but didn't comb his hair and absolutely refused to shave. I thought he was just being grouchy . . . but now it makes sense. He didn't want to look in a mirror."

"Because he knew he'd see an enemy." Mitch looked at Kata. "So you're saying what we had here was a sort of wind-up proxy war. The Gunners didn't want to risk their own lives pushing their enemies off Pallas, so they armed the local animals and turned *them* loose to do it." He shivered visibly. "What a cold-blooded scheme."

"It gets worse," Kata sighed. "Remember Rom's report?—the guns arrived here long *before* the settlements were put up. The Gunners weren't throwing anyone off; they were making sure no one showed up in the first place."

"Disputed planet? But then why didn't the Gunners move in to colonize?"

"Maybe they lost the war. Or maybe they never wanted Pallas in the first place."

"Meaning?"

"Well, one of the first things *we* did here was make sure the forest didn't get too close to our buildings," Kata said, waving out the window at the herbicide ring. "Maybe we're sitting on part of the Gunners' own cordon sanitaire."

There was a long silence. "Incredible," Mitch said at last, shaking his head. "Seal off a whole planet—maybe a whole *group* of planets—to keep your opponents off your doorstep. You know, I never thought about it before . . . but have you noticed that the gun's finger notches angle upwards, and that the angle is steeper for the lower notches? Means a creature with a small hand and thin fingers will get about as comfortable a grip as one with large hands and thicker fingers."

"Which implies they can parachute the things wholesale onto practically any world with DNA-based life and *some* species there will likely be able to use them," Kata said. "In fact, I'd bet even a tentacle or prehensile tail could get an adequate grip. Add an attractive scent or coloring to the guns to get the whole thing started, and the system probably perpetuates itself—you can just go away and forget it. Makes sense. Makes a *lot* of sense."

"So what are we going to do about Rom?" Shannon asked.

The grand vision of interstellar rivalry collapsed like a popped balloon back into the life-and-death problem at hand. "I don't know yet," Kata admitted. "Bear in mind that we're not really fighting Rom, or

even the tarsapiens—we're fighting the damn aliens who built these guns in the first place."

"But it's Rom who's actually shooting at us," Shannon sighed, adding the part Kata had intended to leave unsaid. "I understand. What can I do?"

Back to being in charge, Kata thought, the reminder an almost tangible constriction around her chest. "Stay by the Lostproof and watch both Adler and the transponder in his laser; holler if either of them moves. Mitch and I'll get back to work, see what we can come up with."

Mitch was silent all the way back to the lab, but once inside he let out a hissing breath. "The laser," he muttered. "Somehow, I never even thought of that. What are we going to do if Rom starts shooting at us with *that*?"

"I don't think he will," Kata sighed, slumping into her chair. The drug-enhanced depression was fading, to be replaced by fatigue. "Aside from the fact that carrying it lets us trace him . . . well, I didn't want to mention this in front of Shannon, but the Gunners did indeed add a cute reinforcement kicker to their training method. I've located a set of low-power electrodes on the grip and firing button that seem to send signals along the sensory nerves to the brain, where they induce their versatile little molecule to briefly jump enkephalin production."

"Like a poke in the pleasure center," Mitch grimaced. "No wonder he wouldn't let anyone take it away from him. That sort of stimulation is supposed to be pretty addictive, too, isn't it?"

"It sure is." Kata shook her head. "Mitch, we're in way over our heads here. How can we possibly fight aliens who we've never even met? We don't have anything but the vaguest idea what they were trying to accomplish with their guns."

"Well . . ." Mitch bit at his lip as he gazed out the window. "It's pretty clear that, whatever the details, the scheme *did* work—remember Shannon telling us the ruins were abruptly abandoned? Now, similar biochemistry or not, I refuse to believe we fit the target profile *exactly*. If we can reproduce the Gunners' thinking well enough, we may be able to find a loophole somewhere."

Kata snorted. "May I repeat, we don't even know what they *looked*—"

"For instance," Mitch overrode her, "they weren't trying to prevent military bases from being built here. Soldiers with body armor wouldn't be bothered by the needles. Underground or fully enclosed bases could've been built, too, but they weren't. So question: why did the—let's call them the *Rivals*—why did the Rivals need to wander around outside without armor?"

Kata frowned thoughtfully, impressed in spite of herself. In a handful of sentences Mitch had converted a seemingly infinite problem to one with almost manageable dimensions. *I should have been able to come up with that*, she grouched to herself. *Come on, brain: back to work*. "Maybe it wasn't the Rivals themselves that were the target," she suggested. "Maybe their food supply included a grazing animal that had to be kept outdoors."

Mitch nodded slowly. "Or else the targets were unarmored civilians. Either way, we're talking about a permanent colony rather than a military base."

"So point one: the scheme was directed against permanent settlements." Kata yawned widely enough to make her jaw hurt. "Pretty odd cordon sanitaire that doesn't care if the enemy brings troops through, though. Or am I just too tired to think straight?"

"It *does* seem odd; but you very definitely are too tired for a think-tank session," Mitch told her. "Let's postpone this until you've had some sleep."

"You sound just like Lyell," she sighed. "His Standing Order Number Six was always 'go take a nap.'"

A shadow seemed to pass over Mitch's face. "I'm sorry; I didn't mean to—well, remind you of—what happened."

"It's likely to be hard to forget for a while," she replied dryly.

"Yeah." He hesitated. "You cared a lot for him, didn't you?"

"Lyell? Of course. We worked for seven years and three planets together."

"I meant—never mind."

It was just one more indication of her fatigue that it took several seconds to pick up on what he was trying not to say. "If you meant on a more personal level, the answer is no," she said. "Lyell offered the best opportunities to do biology—*real* biology, not the robot-line busywork multiversity expeditions parcel out. He was a good boss and colleague, but I wouldn't have even considered any other kind of relationship with him."

That seemed to surprise him. "Why not?"

"Oh, come on Mitch—you saw how Shannon reacted when Rom first ran out on us. She was all set to go out and get herself killed. Even now she's not all that functional. That's what deep relationships do to you—foul up your mind as well as your glands."

"Well, at least she's worried about someone besides herself," he replied with unexpected heat. "What about Adler, who couldn't think of anything except his precious reputation? Is that more rational thinking?"

"No, but who said I had to be like either one? Anyway, don't we have better things to worry about right now?"

"You're right." Mitch rubbed at his eyes. "Sorry. Look, why don't you tell me what I should do here and then go get some sleep. The chance that Rom's getting addicted gives us a tighter deadline than we used to have."

"Right." *Now what*, she wondered, *was that all about?* But she was too tired to puzzle over Mitch's reaction. It was probably just the tension, anyway.

Mitch got the machine going on the simulation Kata had requested, and then sat back and glowered at the flickering indicator lights. *So much for riding into the sunset with her after all this was over*, he thought, embarrassment flooding his face with warmth. To have missed that badly on such an assumption . . . and the truth, naturally, left him in just as hopeless a position as before. Kata cherishing Lyell or his memory was bad enough; but if she hadn't fallen for *him*, then Mitch was completely out of the running. *I wonder if she noticed how close I came to making a blithering idiot of myself? Maybe Rom was right—maybe I ought to trade in the rest of my teen-age romanticism for some healthy cynicism*. It wasn't an especially original idea; he made similar resolution every time one of his castles in the sky fell on top of him. *Though if it took Rom ten years of marriage to get that way—*

His communicator beeped, cutting through the flood of self-reproach. *Kata?* he wondered, rather hoping it wasn't. "Yes—?"

"Mitch, Adler's blip is beginning to move," Shannon's voice cut him off.

The conversation with Kata was abruptly forgotten. "Which way?" he snapped.

"Parallel to the herbicide ring—the Lostproof shows a shallow furrow right there. And his laser's moving with him."

Adler trying to find cover? Or Rom dragging the body out of the way? There might be a way to find out. "Keep watching," he told her. "I'm going to the door to try and get Rom's attention."

"Be careful."

"You bet."

No one was visible through the exit door window when he arrived, but he nevertheless had his laser in hand as he unsealed the door and eased it open. "Rom?" he called tentatively. "Rom, I want to parley." He held his breath, eyes and attention focused toward the place where Adler's blip was moving.

"We've got nothing to talk about," Rom's voice wafted in from the forest.

From the forest—but nearly forty-five degrees around the circle from where it should have been.

Mitch let his breath out, feeling better than he had in hours. *Score one for our side—Adler's still alive*. *Now, what do I say to Rom?* "We're willing to leave here, Rom," he improvised, hoping their guess about the Gunners' intentions was at least close. "Would you give us safe-conduct to the *Sunray*?"

"So you can either hunt me down or just set up somewhere else? Forget it."

Mitch grimaced; but unfortunately it made sense. Whatever the Gunners' actual goal, they wouldn't have bothered programming the details into their pawns. "We don't want to hunt you down—we want to help you," he called. "The gun you've got is giving you a false set of memories and motivations, making you think we're your enemies. But we're not—"

"You think I don't know who my enemies are?" Rom cut in harshly.

"Rom, listen to me! The enemies the ghosts are telling you about?—they left Pallas hundreds of years ago. They're *gone*; *all* of them—the abandoned ruins, remember? What you're trying to do is hammer us into the mold the ghosts are giving you. But we *don't fit*; try and see that. We aren't the ones you need to be afraid of—"

"No! You're just trying to confuse me!"

"Rom—"

Mitch dropped back, losing both his sentence and train of thought as a needle ricocheted off the door jamb and whistled past his ear. Slamming the door, he hurriedly sealed it and returned to the common room.

Shannon looked ten years younger. "I talked to Adler," she announced before Mitch could speak. "He heard you and Rom shouting and decided to risk calling me."

"And?"

"He's very weak and tired, but said he'll be okay for a while unless he gets shot again. He thinks it was a tarsap that got him, not Rom, and he only took four or five needles before it ran away."

Mitch nodded; Rom would certainly have known enough to stay and finish the job. *Using herbivorous animals to fight for you does have some disadvantages*, he reminded himself. "Any of the needles hit vital organs?"

"He didn't think so, but he twisted his ankle when he fell, which is why he can't get back." She hesitated. "He also said Rom almost found him when you buzzed the area in the *Sunray*, but that he left when you did."

Mitch felt his stomach tighten. So not only had his quixotic rescue mission failed, it had nearly gotten Adler killed in the bargain. *I'd better quit trying to be a hero before I lose every friend I've got*, he thought bitterly. "Four or five needles, you said?"

"Yes. I told him he'd be able to survive that much of the drug." Her eyes were very steady on him. "Was I telling the truth?"

"I hope so." *Though on my record to date . . .* "Did you hear any of my talk with Rom?"

She shook her head.

"I tried to get him to see that the motivations the Gunners' drug is giving him don't make sense. But he wouldn't listen."

Shannon was silent a long moment. "I know next to nothing about biochemistry," she said at last, "but I wonder if it's possible you and Kata are overcomplicating things with this recognition pattern to fear reaction to specified physical response sequence. It seems to me that, since most animals already have their own inborn enemy-recognition apparatus, the Gunners could save one or more steps by linking the most obvious physical characteristic of their enemies directly into this existing pattern. That also solves the timing problem, because the memory matrix for shooting the gun can be learned essentially independently and stored away until needed."

Mitch frowned. "An interesting idea. I don't know how the chemistry would work out, but it sure *sounds* simpler than Kata's description. Though it seems to me Rom would need more than his normal dislike of us to explain the drugs's effect on him. He'd almost have to see us as enemies, wouldn't he?"

Shannon sighed. "Mitch, Rom sees the entire human race as his enemies. Not in the way you think," she added as his face apparently mirrored his reaction. "He's not paranoid in the sense that he thinks people are deliberately out to get him. It's more like he's a kitten stuck in a room with a hundred clumsy

elephants. He's convinced that, whether we mean it or not, we're all likely to end up hurting him."

"That seems a pretty extreme reaction," Mitch frowned. "Sure, we all bump egos occasionally—" his last exchange with Kata rose up to mock him—"but that's no reason to bury yourself in—well—"

"In archeological digs on deserted planets?" Shannon's smile was brief and painful. "Not for us, no. But Rom's always been hypersensitive to peer opinion and he takes such ego bumps very hard. The roots of this go back to early childhood, to times and places he won't even talk much about with me."

"Um. And that hardhead image he projects—the defense of a strong offense?"

"Yes. Actually, he was a lot worse when I first married him. He's relaxed quite a bit lately, with more habit than real intent behind his cynicism. I'm . . . worried about what this is going to do to him."

Not to mention to us, Mitch thought, but kept that depressing reminder to himself. "I'll discuss this with Kata when she wakes up, but I don't know offhand how it'll help. At the moment we're sort of trying a different tack." He started to get up, abruptly sat down again. "Frensky moss—what am I using for brains? Listen—you're the resident expert on reconstructing human and alien cultures out of minuscule pieces, right? Let me tell you what we're trying."

Quickly, he sketched out the logic he and Kata had tried to apply to the Gunner-Rival conflict and the deductions it had led them to. Shannon listened, gazing off into space, and when he'd finished she nodded. "It makes sense," she told him. "We found one ruin with an expanding series of outer walls, useless for serious defense but perfectly adequate for stopping those needles. Either your civilian courtyard or grazing area models would fit with that."

"But I keep hitting the question of why they didn't simply wear body armor outside; they *or* their animals. After all, people in cold climates regularly bundle their children into snowsuits when they leave the house. This wouldn't be all that different."

"Perhaps, but you're missing an important psychological point. Colonizing a world—*really* colonizing it—is possible only when you can live out under the open sky without anything that can be termed life-support gear. It's like that for humans, it's like that for virtually all the intelligent races we've come into contact with. You may have to import your water or flood your crops with compound nitrates, but if you can stand outside with the wind and sun in your hair you can believe down deep that the world is *yours*. If you *can't*—" She shrugged. "You wind up with a base instead of a colony. Luna was the first example; there've been dozens since then."

Mitch digested that. "So you're saying that, for some reason, the Rivals wouldn't settle for bases. Why not?"

"I don't know, and we may never find out. Perhaps they were too socially oriented to exist in small groups; alternatively, perhaps one gender or the other couldn't or wouldn't adapt to staying indoors all the time. It certainly looks like they *tried* to hold out; they were clearly here for years before giving up. There's also the possibility that the Gunners had more powerful weapons that they had qualms about using against civilians. In that case, the Rivals would know that setting up a purely military base on Pallas would be a waste of time." She thought for a moment. "Is there anything you could get on the Rival biochemistry if you assume the needle drug was more lethal to them than it was to us?"

"Mm. I don't know how we'd get anything conclusive from it. There must be hundreds of ways the drug could kill, depending on what specific part of the system it attacks. Kata might be able to narrow it down some, but I'm not sure how it would help us in any case. We already *know* what it does to us, after all, and that's the really critical thing at the moment."

"True," Shannon murmured. "I was just looking at the puzzle pieces we have, trying to see what we can do with them. Are you assuming the Gunners never intended to colonize Pallas themselves?"

"Or else that the Rivals somehow prevented them from doing so. Is it important?"

"Well . . . when an army mines a section of land, they usually leave themselves the option of locating and clearing those mines away at some future date—"

"We've already shown our sensors aren't good enough to find the guns."

"—or of deactivating them."

Mitch opened his mouth, closed it again. "Deactivating. Now *that's* an interesting thought. Any ideas how you might do that?"

"It can't be an easy method to stumble across," Shannon said, gazing into space again. "Ideally, it should be something the Rivals couldn't do even if they knew roughly how."

"A coded radio signal, perhaps? Something involving the power pack or sequencing in the magnetic rings?"

"Or maybe something involving that sensor Rom mentioned—the one in the muzzle of the gun."

"Point it at a Gunner and it shuts down?" Mitch suggested, feeling a cautious excitement growing within him. If they could figure out the mechanism and trip it themselves . . . "No, that would be too easy. A cardboard cutout, or a Rival in a Gunner costume—" He stood up. "Let's go back to the bio lab. Some more data should be ready on the instinct-drug molecule by now, and we can see what Rom found out about that muzzle sensor. Give me a hand with the Lostproof gear; we'll take it with us."

They spent the rest of the afternoon going over the gun analysis with a fine mesh, but the results were disappointing. The muzzle sensor itself showed insufficient detail on any of the x-ray photos for them to get more than the vaguest idea of what it actually did. There was an optical component to it, certainly; but there was also a magnetic detector coil and something else that Mitch couldn't even hazard a guess about. The connections between all of it and the rest of the gun were equally cryptic, and they spent a frustrating half-hour tracing one optical fiber on the high-resolution x-rays only to have it disappear into another enigmatic component.

And as the initial excitement faded into the disappointments and blind alleys, Shannon seemed to withdraw into herself, offering comments less and less frequently until she merely sat in her chair and watched Mitch work. By the time Kata reemerged from her room the archeologist had drifted even farther from both the lab table and the investigation and was standing by the window gazing outside. Kata's own initial enthusiasm slipped somewhat as Mitch described the lack of progress, but it was clear she intended to be as outwardly optimistic as possible.

"I think you've hit the nail dead-center, Shannon," she nodded. "You really wouldn't want to scatter such long-lived weapons indiscriminately around and not be able to either locate or shut them down. Why don't we start with that sensor again; maybe I'll see something you overlooked."

"Maybe." Shannon took a deep breath and turned to face them, and with a shock Mitch saw that the laser he'd left on the table beside the Lostproof monitor was now dangling loosely from her hand. "But you'd better work fast . . . because in one hour I'm going to try bringing Rom in."

She's finally snapped, was Mitch's first frantic thought; and *what the hell do we do now?* his second. Beside him Kata straightened up and he waited tensely for her reaction.

But it was far milder than he'd feared. "Be reasonable, Shannon," she said calmly. "Rom will shoot you on sight; you know that."

"Maybe not." Shannon's voice was also calm, but with an undertone of black tension beneath it. *How long since she's had any sleep?* Mitch wondered abruptly. Just because she hadn't been able to help with any of the work the past couple of days didn't mean she'd been relaxing. In fact, her forced idleness might have made things even harder for her. "If this whole enemy-recognition thing is right," she continued, "then I'm the only one among us who has any chance at all of getting to him. The only one who might register as a friend even through the drug's influence."

"And what if you're wrong?" Kata countered. "You'll be throwing your life away for nothing. At least give Mitch and me a few more days to follow this lead down."

Shannon shook her head. "We can't wait that long. Every minute we spend here means more of that drug going into Rom's blood and brain. At the moment he seems to be fighting it, at least to the extent of being willing to talk to us. But that can't last—you know that better than I. I've got to try this before he loses the battle completely . . . before the drug becomes a permanent part of him."

Mitch glanced up at Kata, saw her jaw tighten. *So much for keeping the possibility of addiction secret*, he thought. "You're still risking your life unnecessarily," he put in.

"Am I? What about Adler?"

Mitch's argument died in his throat. "Yeah. Adler."

"He's going to need medical attention soon, not to mention food, if he's going to survive," Shannon pointed out unnecessarily. "And the longer he's out there the greater the chances that Rom or another armed tarsap will come across him."

"And what if a tarsapien comes across *you*?" Kata asked.

"I'll just have to risk that, won't I?" Shannon smiled, and Mitch saw that her lower lip was trembling. "Please, Kata; I know you don't understand why I have to do this, but you're just making it harder for me to be brave. Don't make me fight you and Mitch—I can't handle that along with all the rest of it."

For a long moment the two women stared at each other across the room . . . and finally Kata sighed. "I'll compromise with you," she said. "You offered us an hour; but by then the sun will be almost down and the forest already getting dark. The last thing you want is for Rom to mistake you for me in the gloom. Give us until morning and we'll let you try it, whether we've got any results or not. Okay?"

Shannon's lips compressed into a thin line. "What about Adler?"

"My guess is that he can survive the night if he makes it to sundown. Certainly it won't get too cold for him, and the tarsapiens will be quiescent until almost dawn, as well. If he was able to move and talk soon after he was shot, I don't think the needles he's carrying are going to kill him."

"But you don't *know* for sure."

Kata shrugged. "It's at least as good an assumption as the one you're going on."

Shannon smiled briefly. "All right. Dawn tomorrow, then. Your word?"

"Yes." Kata extended her hand, palm up.

Stepping forward, Shannon laid the laser across it. "I'm going to my room," she said. "Let me know if there's anything I can help with."

"Sure," Kata said softly. "We'll be up to see you out."

Shannon nodded and left the lab. "You going to let her go?" Mitch asked Kata, not sure which answer he wanted to hear.

Kata sat down. "I promised her she could," she sighed. "Besides, she's right. On all counts."

"Except maybe the point about her being off Rom's enemies list." Mitch hesitated. "When I was doing that last medcheck on Rom he said something about Shannon being an enemy along with the rest of us. I think they must have had a fight or something."

"Oh, terrific." Kata closed her eyes briefly. "Well, that just makes it all the more crucial that we find a way to shut down those guns." For a moment she gazed out the window, fingers tapping on the lab table. "Along with all we *don't* know about the Gunners, we *do* know that they were whizzes with complex organic chemistry—the instinct drug shows that. Maybe we should be looking for a chemical cutoff switch instead of an electromagnetic one or whatever."

"You mean something you set off like a gas bomb upwind of the guns?" Mitch asked doubtfully.

"Sure. You've already admitted there's a component of the muzzle sensor you don't understand."

"Agreed; but we're back then to the question of why the Rivals wouldn't be able to do that themselves. Not to mention the mechanics of how a whiff of gas would set up that kind of signal."

"Let's forget the mechanism for now." Kata pursed her lips. "Could they never have gotten ahold of a working model . . . ? No. Even if the Rivals could be trapped by the gun like Rom was, they surely must have figured things out quickly enough to have safely studied at least a couple of the weapons. And it's practically guaranteed their equipment was more elaborate than ours—they were a settlement, after all."

"So they *must* have figured out everything about the guns," Mitch concluded. "And they gave up and left anyway. Not a good sign."

"Let's not give up ourselves just yet," Kata said tartly. "What about multiple designs? A hundred different varieties of cutoff switches, say."

"Should've just taken them longer to clear the planet. Remember, they *wanted* Pallas—they had settlements already built—and they would hardly have quit without a fight."

"Which puts us right back at square one," Kata murmured. ". . . Unless it was a cutoff the Rivals *couldn't* use."

"'Couldn't'?"

"Say the cutoff was a poison to them—a heavy, viscous chemical that'll coat the ground and foliage. That would've eliminated the guns but left them just as bad off."

"Interesting idea," Mitch said slowly. "Especially since what's poisonous to them might not be so to us. Unfortunately, that also means we don't have the foggiest idea what sort of chemical to try."

Kata sent him a tight smile and scooted her chair up to the computer terminal. "Sure we do; because the Gunners almost certainly loaded their needles with the nastiest stuff they could think of." A molecular diagram appeared on the display in response to Kata's commands, and for a long moment she gazed at it. "I suppose we could try to synthesize some of the stuff and shoot it into the forest, but I hate to do that without knowing exactly what it'll do. If we had better data on the muzzle sensor we could try a simulation. But barring that . . . wait a second."

Again her fingers skipped across the keyboard. "This is a weird idea, but since the actual mechanism is a complete unknown anyway, let's see what happens when the needle drug meets the instinct drug . . . oh, my *God*."

"What?" Mitch snapped.

Kata's face had turned an ashy white. "Wait a minute—I want to try it again with a larger target population."

The display images shifted twice. "Well?" Mitch demanded.

Kata seemed to shrink in her seat. "Catalytic reaction," she said with a shiver. "You get anything upwards of a dozen needle-drug molecules into the grip reservoir and it'll break the entire mass of instinct drug into five separate types of cyanide . . . the whole thing under pressure."

"Pressure? As in to drive it through the delivery system all the more quickly?" Mitch hazarded, a funny feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Yeah. So if you're not a Rival, all you need to do is spray the forest with Rival-killer . . . and all the tarsapiens holding the guns fall over dead."

Mitch broke the silence that followed. "Well. So much for *that* approach. Unless you think this is possibly just a coincidence?"

Kata shook her head. "The chemistry's been too carefully set up to be anything but deliberate. This is the Gunners' cutoff switch, all right. And they've got us as neatly stymied as they did the Rivals."

Unless and until, Mitch added silently, *we decide Rom can't be saved*. The whole idea made his stomach churn . . . but down deep he knew they might eventually have to make such a decision. "They must have been really great to have on your side in a war," he growled.

Kata reached over and blanked the screen. "It shouldn't be all *that* surprising a revelation, actually—if they'd cared a tuft of Frensky moss about the tarsapiens they wouldn't have turned them into cannon fodder like this in the first place. What would they care if a few more got killed?"

Another silence descended on the lab, and Mitch found himself gazing out the window. *Now what?* he wondered bleakly. *Our best chance, and the Gunners have already closed the door on it. We can't let Shannon go out there now—promises or no. If Rom doesn't get her the tarsaps will, and there's not a thing—*

The train of thought vanished, buried abruptly beneath a realization that was so obvious he was astonished it hadn't occurred to him earlier. "Kata," he said carefully. "What's keeping Rom alive?"

She turned puzzled eyes on him. "You want to specify?"

"He's been out there two days now," Mitch said, "out with one or more tarsaps who—"

"Hell and breakfast," Kata breathed. "You're right, Mitch. For some reason they *aren't* shooting at

him."

"If we can figure out why—"

"Yeah, yeah," Kata shushed him. "Let me think." She bit at her lip. "Shannon must have been right—it's the tarsapiens' enemy-recognition mechanism that's being used . . . and it's *not* a visual one. Rom surely doesn't look any different; but with a new set of enzymes in his system he must *smell* different. Enough different, anyway—and that gives us our own defensive approach."

Mitch looked over at Swizzle in his cage, for the first time really seeing the huge nostrils. "We must be right on the edge of the Rivals' scent pattern for that small a change to protect him, though," he pointed out. "The problem will be to make sure we don't use a perfume that pushes us the wrong direction."

"Oh, we can do better than that," Kata smiled—her first real smile, Mitch thought, since this whole thing had started. "We know at least one other odor the tarsapiens don't shoot at—and have the perfect template for making some up." She gestured.

"Reasonable enough, I suppose," he said. "But won't they be able to detect our scent beneath it?"

"Trust me," she replied grimly. "We'll spread it on so thick Swizzle himself won't recognize us. Even tarsapien noses can be overwhelmed."

"If you say so." He hesitated. "That's still only half of the problem, you know. Human recognition centers on sight, not smell. Unless Shannon can pull her miracle off we're still going to have Rom to deal with."

"Yes, well, I've got a couple of ideas on that," Kata nodded. "It occurs to me that there's one other human recognition system we might be able to use once we don't have to worry about the tarsapiens . . . and we've certainly got someone here who Rom would consider his enemy. Come on; we can discuss it while we work on our olfactory camouflage."

When dawn came, they were ready.

"Rom?" Shannon called tentatively through the open door. "Rom, this is Shannon. Your wife. Can you hear me?"

Behind her, Mitch shifted his feet silently, heart thudding in his ears. Artificial tarsapien odor hung thickly around them, creating the nagging illusion of being in an especially pungent peat bog. To tarsapien senses it would probably be overpowering . . . but that had yet to be tested.

"What do you want?" Rom's voice cut through the silence.

"About ten degrees right of the door," Shannon breathed.

"Got it," Mitch said tersely. "Keep him talking."

Shannon raised her voice again, but Mitch didn't wait to hear any more. If Rom stayed put, the window in the geology lab should offer an exit the other couldn't see; and if the armed tarsapiens reacted to Kata's concoction like they were supposed to that end of the forest should be safe.

Should be.

The window made only the faintest of protesting squeaks as he unlatched and swung it open, and seconds later he was striding quickly across the herbicide ring. Behind him he could hear snatches of the Endurssons' shouted conversation on the far side of the building . . . and with a feeling akin to having just walked across the Amazon he reached the edge of the forest without being shot at.

He took a moment to let his heartbeat settle down as he checked his bearings on the Lostproof. Kata and Lyell had set ten tarsapien nets on their last trapping run, and he could only hope the one or two closest ones hadn't yet been triggered. Easing the cap off the intravenous drip bottle strapped to his right boot, he made sure it was dribbling its contents properly onto the ground and started off around the circle toward Rom's voice.

In some ways, he discovered quickly, it was more unnerving than the short trek across open ground had been. Visually, he was certainly better hidden, but the advantage was almost swallowed up by the

stretches of dry leaves and the occasional brittle branch underfoot. Besides watching out for such noisemakers, he also had to trace out a reasonable route and stay alert in case Rom tired of talking with his wife and moved in his direction. Approximately once per step he reminded himself of how crazy this whole plan was.

But Rom's attention remained with Shannon, and Mitch penetrated to within perhaps ten meters before thankfully beginning a silent retreat in a direction that would take him deeper into the forest and, ultimately, to the net listed on his Lostproof.

And a few minutes later he found luck was indeed with them. The three-meter-square mesh was still stretched across a gap between two trees, waiting like a giant spiderweb for a victim to blunder into it.

It took less than a minute for Mitch to complete his job and find a hiding place behind a large sarcacia bush. Raising his communicator, he punched for Kata. "Ready," he hissed. "You?"

"I hope so," she answered, her voice betraying her own tension. "Mitch . . . if this doesn't work—"

"It'll work," he told her. "Come on now; before Shannon loses him. The trail starts between two big ginkgap trees just opposite the geology lab window."

"Right. Cross your fingers."

For a minute nothing happened. All around him were the normal chirps and clicks of the forest; in the distance he could just make out Rom's voice. *A few more minutes, Shannon, he willed silently. Just let Kata get in position—*

"All right," Kata's voice came suddenly from somewhere between Mitch and Rom. "You keep saying you want to kill us?—well, here's your chance. Come and get me."

Mitch had half expected Rom to let loose a bellow like a charging bull, but nothing like that accompanied the abrupt sound of bodies crashing toward him through the undergrowth. His hands tightened around his drawn lightning rod as he tried to guess from the noise whether or not Rom was gaining. Surely he was already shooting blindly; if any of the needles connected—or if he got close enough to see—

"Promise the others they can leave safely and I'll stop," Kata's voice came, much closer this time. Rom made no answer, but as Kata also fell silent Mitch found he could now hear the *snick-snick-snick* of needles cutting through leaves. They were almost within sight—he could see movement of low branches—

And with a final crash of leaves Swizzle burst into sight, the communicator strapped to his back bouncing wildly as he ran for all he was worth. Mitch caught just a glimpse of dilated nostrils bare centimeters off the ground as the animal followed the trail of jasmine he had carefully laid down; and then the tarsapien veered around the net and disappeared back into the forest—

Rom, bare seconds behind, had no way of detecting the safe path even if he'd known it was there. He hit the net at full speed, the alien weapon knocked from his hand by the impact as the mesh wrapped itself solidly about its prey.

Rom didn't bellow this time, either. The sound he made was much more like an anguished scream.

"Well?"

Kata sank down into the seat next to Mitch, gratefully sipping the coffee he'd poured for her. "Uncertain, but hopeful. Adler should have no problems unless the dart drug carries something potent in the way of aftereffects—his body was actually doing a reasonable job of eliminating the stuff on its own, though I'm going to leave him on the scrubber another hour to be on the safe side. Rom—" She shrugged tiredly. "No way of telling. We can keep him sedated or under restraint and try the scrubber when it's free, but we'll just have to wait and see how firmly the drug is entrenched in his system. I'd hate to keep him tied up until the ship comes, but we could do so if absolutely necessary."

"Or we could put him in Swizzle's cage," Mitch offered. "I've got a feeling we won't be needing it

again."

Kata smiled. "Swizzle still eluding you, eh?"

"Well, we might be able to trap him using the *Sunray* but even that's doubtful. On foot, forget it."

"Probably not worth the effort. Besides, we owe him a lot, and maybe letting him go free's the best way to clear the ledger. I don't think I would have liked leading Rom into that net in person."

Mitch cocked an eyebrow. "Rom's comment about biologists playing God really got to you, didn't it?"

"A little," she admitted. "But then, you already know how much I try to keep my relationships on an intellectual level. I suppose that applies to my relationships with test subjects, too."

He shrugged, looking a bit uncomfortable. "That's how scientists are supposed to be."

"Maybe. But maybe I've just been using that as an excuse."

"An excuse for what?"

Kata took a deep breath, steeling herself. This wasn't going to be easy to say, but it'd been rehearsing itself in the back of her mind for the past hour and she was determined to let it come out. "I get the feeling that you were rather upset by what I said yesterday about relationships fouling up your mind."

He waved a hand in dismissal. "Forget it. I've always had a tendency to go overly starry-eyed. Too much *City of Night* influence on my early life, I suppose."

"Yeah, I noticed. Rushing out there to rescue Rom and then Adler . . ." She smiled ruefully at the memory. "I don't think I'd like to go quite *that* far overboard."

"You don't want most of the rest of it, either," Mitch said. "Overly romantic isn't any better for getting close to people than overly intellectual. I'm forever winding up having my bubble popped."

She shrugged fractionally. *So he does it, too*, she thought. "Yours is a more subtle approach, I'd say, but it seems just as good as my method . . . or Rom's or Adler's, for that matter."

"Come again?"

"Our methods for keeping other people at a safe arm's reach," she amplified. "Don't you see? Rom's belligerent cynicism, Adler's all-consuming attention to his career—they're just different versions of what you and I are doing. We all have our own—"

"Our own personal cordons sanitaires?" Mitch offered with a wry half-smile.

"My words exactly."

"It was an obvious metaphor. Sort of makes sense, I suppose—human gregariousness *does* have certain boundaries." He looked at her curiously. "May I ask what got you started on this line of thought?"

She shrugged again. "Oh, I don't know. Probably because Shannon held up so much better than I expected her to. You know; the old problem of theory versus reality."

"Besides which, you really *didn't* understand why she was willing to risk her life for Rom?"

Kata felt herself flush. "I suppose that's part of it," she admitted. "Knowledge and understanding *are* supposed to be my stock in trade, after all. Being told I can't do something has always bugged me."

"Um." He eyed her, a touch of wariness in his face. "So now what? We break down the barriers and joyfully embrace in the clear light of the rising sun?"

She chuckled, fully aware that he was only half-joking. "I'm not ready to scrap my entire cordon sanitaire quite *that* fast, thanks. I just thought . . . well, that maybe we both ought to start re-thinking how we deal with people. Remember how hard Shannon said it was for Rom to break his antisocial image? I wouldn't want that kind of rigid attitude getting a grip on *me*." She hesitated. "Or on you, either," she added with only a little difficulty.

A twitch at the corner of his mouth showed he'd caught the small concession, but he had the grace not to push it. "Especially one like Rom's," he nodded. "That brand of active defense can be pretty hard on friend *or* foe. Or innocent bystander."

Kata looked out the window, suppressing a shiver. "We'll go looking for them, you know, once all this gets out. You think we'll find them?"

"I hope not," Mitch said fervently. "If they could do this on Pallas, who knows *what* they've done to booby-trap their own system?"

"I don't even want to think about it."