

Stranger In the House

Kate Wilhelm

ROBERT DROVE SLOWLY UP THE DRIVEWAY TO THE monster of a house, grinning at it happily. Mandy laughed aloud. The house was a joke played on a dignified dowager, after all. It was a three-story mixture of fieldstone and wide siding with a porch that ran around three sides of it. The original building had been constructed in 1820, it was thought, and the upper floors had been added later. There were two-story-high columns dwarfing the double front doors; windows on the first floor bowed outward in pairs symmetrically spaced, and the windows above had been lined up with them. But on the third floor it looked as if the builder had fallen heir to an assortment of windows of which no two were alike in size, shape, or operation. Some opened outward, others raised from the bottom up, some were louvered, there was even a pair of skinny French windows. A funny house, for God's sake, Robert thought. On the back seat the two-part sign shifted, and the chain connecting the top to the bottom jiggled. The sign read: Phillips Insurance Agency, in colonial motif; the bottom half was starkly modern: Amanda Fashions. This weekend he would hang the sign, making the move official even if the movers weren't due for six more days.

Robert parked the car around at the back of the house. He was looking past the yard to the woods beyond. "You know, sometimes it takes something awfully big to make you open your eyes and see where you are. The heart attack did it, didn't it?"

Mandy turned to him quickly, and he smiled as her gaze searched his face. They both knew that she couldn't help it; after his heart attack of almost two years ago, she found herself studying him intently like that at the slightest provocation.

"I mean pulling out of the city like this. A country house, for heaven's sake. Us in a country house!"

"It does seem out of character. It will take getting used to, I suppose. Twenty-two years in various apartments. . ." Mandy laughed again, and suddenly she flung open her car door and was out and running lightly toward the back door of the house. Robert followed more slowly, enjoying

watching her. Mandy was small and quick, with a fluidity of motion that was like liquid. She had very short dark hair, untouched yet by gray, black eyes that snapped and gleamed and teared easily, annoying for her, but keeping them sparkling and alive looking. She was all energy and tight muscles inclining toward thinness, which she fought with a diet that would have had Robert back in the hospital within a week.

Mandy hummed as she worked in the house, waiting for the neighborhood boy to arrive to help her sort junk that was piled to the ceiling in the garage. Once she looked out the window and saw Robert standing with two men in dungarees who were cleaning out the brook and repairing the dam that made a lake on the property. She watched them for several minutes, Robert so straight and Brooks Brotherish, so out of place here. She would buy corduroys for him, maybe even denims. She tried to visualize him in denims and failed. The boy arrived then.

Late Saturday night she and Robert agreed that moving was hard work. "You go on up and take a bath while I load the dishwasher," Mandy said, when Robert yawned for the third time. "I'll be up in a couple of minutes." He kissed her right eye without argument and left her, yawning again. She knew that she had wanted to be alone, tired, content in the lovely house. She wanted to touch the woodwork, run her hand over the cabinets, just gloat over it. Why hadn't either of them ever brought up the possibility of moving from the city? It seemed such a natural thing for them to do. She hadn't dreamed that Robert would be willing to move, and probably he had thought the same about her. If he had been able to peek inside her just once during those years, he would have known how she had yearned for the country, for a yard and woods and green things growing. She stopped scraping the dishes and stared ahead for a moment, then continued briskly. There were always things about people that never came out unless they were asked point blank. Why should either of them have guessed?

But it didn't matter now. They were here and loved it. Their twenty-year-old daughter Tippy loved it, and Laura would come around once she saw it, although she was very disapproving from a distance. She was studying art in Paris. Tippy was a math major at London University. If only they had had such a place while they were both children at home, Mandy thought regretfully. "Cut it out!" she said to herself sharply then and clicked off the kitchen light. The living room lamps were still on. It was the only other room downstairs that was even partially furnished. She stood in the doorway studying the green frosty-looking draperies, the gold and amber chairs and couch, and she nodded approvingly.

She swayed suddenly and reached out for support, and her hand found nothing to grasp. She closed her eyes hard. The room had become different momentarily, ugly, too garish and bright, shaped weirdly with abrasive angles, oppressively hot and airless. She opened her eyes again and looked about, but the room was completely normal. She felt curiously lightheaded. Whatever it had been, the attack was over. Indigestion? It had been so fleeting, long enough to close her eyes and open them again. Two seconds perhaps. She left the room and went to the wall panel of switches that controlled all the lights in the downstairs rooms. She switched off the lights, and with the darkness, she was enveloped in terror. Nothing else, simply terror. She jabbed at the switches again, and with the return of light, her moment of fear was gone. She laughed weakly, but when she turned off the lights again, she was careful to leave the hall lights on.

Robert was already asleep when she tiptoed through the bedroom. She relaxed in a tub of hot water and read a chapter in the book he had left by the tub. *Scandinavian Film Making*. Well, he would have space now for a darkroom, and a projection room, and his collection of 8 mm. films. ...

Robert groaned, a long, loud, wordless sound of pain, or protest, and Mandy dropped the book. She was out of the bath and standing by the bed with her robe around her dripping body without awareness of having moved. He was sleeping peacefully now. A dream? She bit her lip hard, wanting to wake him, to make certain he was all right, not willing to disturb him. . . . She became chilled then and walked slowly back to the bathroom and finished drying herself. She saw the book in the tub and fished it out. It was ruined. She dropped it into the waste basket, and then got into bed beside Robert, snuggling very close to him. She left the bathroom light on, and the door partially open.

The next morning Robert went down to the village for a newspaper while she made breakfast. While they ate they talked about the house. "Why didn't anyone live in it for the past thirty years?" Mandy asked. "People have put thousands of dollars in improvements in it, and yet none of them stayed. Why?"

"Mostly because of the thousands of dollars' worth of improvements. The last guy went stone broke. If it weren't for our combined businesses being relocated in the house, we couldn't afford the upkeep on it either, honey. For us it'll be cheaper than the offices in town, but for a private family? Uh-huh." He turned to the financial page then, but looked up and said, "Oh, Gus Farley said his kid got sick here yesterday. Did he eat anything?" She shook her head. "Well, Gus said the boy won't work here

this summer, after all. He shouldn't have said he could. He's booked solid already."

"If we can't get any local help, we'll be in real trouble," Mandy said slowly. "We can't run a house like this by ourselves."

"I'll get a riding mower and cut the grass myself."

"If you get a go-go mower, I'll cut the damned grass," Mandy said quickly.

On Monday Mandy's ad in the village weekly was answered. "Ellen Turnbull," she said excitedly, "would like an interview on Thursday. She can start immediately."

"If she can start Thursday, let her. My God! I was dreading moving without someone to help out."

"Yeah," Mandy said. "Me too. One week to go, darling, and the worst part will be over. Then all we'll have to do is find everything again."

The Groth stirred slowly with great pain and inspected the door seal when its alarm pulsated relentlessly, signaling an entry had been made. They had returned again. Every movement it made was tortuous, and it wanted only to be left alone now to die without further effort. It returned to its tank bed, a semi-rigid material that yielded to the Groth's mass, closed itself, and released a spray that soothed, but no longer healed the occupant. The Groth lapsed into an uneasy sleep once more.

The room beneath the house was filled with instruments: recording devices, a screen that was blank then, listening devices, a powerful transmitter that was hooked into a translator and coder. There was a tank filled with a murky thick olat culture—the Groth food bank—and equipment that altered the atmosphere within the sealed room; the room was almost dark, like a room seen at the last light of dusk. The temperature was held at a constant, comfortable 40° F. The Groth lacked nothing to make life comfortable during its stay on Earth, nothing but the companionship of its lifemate, long since dead now. Also, the Groth was dying, and knew that the mission to Earth was a failure, and the taste of failure was bitter. It slept restlessly, dreaming of the seas on Gron where the young sported, and in the dream it was a young Groth, diving deep to catch the lifemate that teased and eluded it again and again. The seas were alive with olat, and there were no dangerous forms, and so life there

was safe and happy. Its dreams repeatedly took it to the seas of Gron, and each time it awoke, the awakening was more painful and distressing.

This day it returned to consciousness with the memory of noises in the building above it, and with a resolve that one last effort had to be made. Arising from the moist bed dulled the bright glow of the resolution, and the hope of fulfilling the mission became once more the distant unattainable goal that the Groth knew it to be. The hope that had roused it returned to the seas of sleep while the Groth started the routine that it knew must be done.

It drew off its daily ration of olat, measured the acidity of the culture, added liquid to replace what it had taken, and closed the tank again. It sucked in the olat and then checked the life systems that kept the bed spray at the correct concentration of sulphuric acid, and the air at the correct mixture of oxygen, sulphuric acid, nitrogen, and trace elements. The pressure was holding at a constant nine pounds per square inch, and that was satisfactory. After the inspection of the systems, the Groth turned to the information gathering equipment and began feeding the data into the translator and coder. It no longer paid much attention to the data, no longer was interested in the storms of the western oceans, and the wars of the entire globe that broke out here and there like fires spotting a dry mountain slope. Measurements were being made automatically by the equipment the pair of Groth had installed during the first years of their stay on Earth; all aspects of Earthmen endeavors were being watched and recorded: rainfall, wind velocities, temperatures, population changes, mining operations, construction projects, constant wars, the change in design in automotive and aircraft industries, atomic energy research, the advancing space efforts. . . . Every spoken language of Earth had been thoroughly analyzed by them, and fed into the computer so that there could be communication when the time came. University classes were monitored daily, newspapers scanned, radio and television programs recorded for analysis, churches surveyed and the various faiths sorted one from another, cross-indexed and cross-filed in the computer, interwoven with myths and history, so that a picture would emerge when the right Groth inspected the data and studied it thoroughly.

But only nine years after their arrival, the lifemate had been injured. Unable to believe the extent of the economic depression that plunged the planet into despair, threatening war, and the ruin of the timetable of forecasts, the lifemate had gone out to inspect personally some of the unbelievable events flickering dimly on the television screen. While the lifemate was flying over the incredible dust bowl area of the southern

region, a tornado, a storm system unknown to the Groth, had swept out of nowhere, caught the tiny craft in its vortex, and smashed it to ground miles away. The terrible heat, the sun's rays, and the driving dust tormented the lifemate, desperately making repairs on the craft. By the time it was operable again, the lifemate had been mortally burned. When the Groth back in the vlen heard the agony being broadcast unguardedly, it was too late to save the lifemate. The injured Groth returned on automatic controls. It was not able to maintain mind shielding then, and the broadcast of pain had gone out into the air, into the house above the vlen, and one of the Earthmen, a female, had died, and two more had been driven insane.

The Groth had known then that it had to move the vlen away from the fragile Earthmen, who proved so susceptible to its thoughts, and the following year it had started to carry out the planned move, when mysteriously, the house was emptied. The Groth waited for developments. When new Earthmen moved in above it, again it contemplated moving. It was the summer season of the planet, however, and the Groth knew the heat would weaken it, making the move more dangerous and arduous than if it waited for cold weather to begin. It settled in and shut down its shield very tight, and simply monitored its electronic devices. But the new Earthmen, child Earthmen, also wished to avoid the heat, and they played in the basement of the building, very close to the vlen. And one of the child Earthmen reached out with mental fingers he didn't know he possessed, and he felt the stranger nearby. The child Earthman screamed in terror. The Groth staggered back from the momentary, unplanned contact, shaken by the alien mind, sickened by the images felt through it, in agony when its own nerves responded to the glare of light seen by the child. Later the same night, the Groth was pulled from a deep sleep into full wakefulness by the sudden intrusion of an unprotected mind probing into his. The Earthman child screamed in the Groth's head, and both were sickened by the unshielded, uncensored contact. The Earthman child couldn't break the contact; there was a complete lack of control, and by the time the Groth disentangled the thoughts that were its own from those that were alien, the Earthman child was seriously ill, with a raging fever. He died within the hour.

The Groth mourned the death of the Earthman child, blaming itself for the accident, even though the child had found the way to the Groth unaided. It probed gently into the mind of the sole remaining Earthman in the house above it and the Earthman became paralyzed with shock and fear. The Groth knew then that it could never again touch the mind of one of the Earthmen, and it again prepared to move to a totally uninhabited

region, far north of the present location of the vlen.

The Groth pulled its thoughts from the past to the present. There were the simple, basic problems now to settle. Earthpeople were once more in the building above it. It was being offered one last chance to salvage the mission that was of paramount importance. With the assistance of one of the Earthpeople, it might still be saved. All summer and fall it had lain on the bed, semi-aware only; it awoke each day to maintain the equipment, then lapsed back into the dream life of its youth. Winter came and the Groth knew that its own death was not far away. Its breathing was shallow and painful, unsatisfying, and the attacks of dizziness that now came to it lasted longer and were more confusing. Determinedly it again forced the past away, and it wondered if it mattered now that there were again Earthpeople within reach. It didn't know if it had enough strength remaining to it to make an attempt worthwhile now. The Groth knew that once it had accepted failure, its last acts would be of destruction. All traces of the orbiting satellite, of the spaceship on Earth, of the vlen under the building, and finally of itself had to be obliterated completely once it accepted failure.

Very tentatively it reached out and found the Earthman female, and both recoiled from the touch. It touched the male later, and left even more hastily. The male was weakened by a heart injury. He must never be touched again. The Groth mused about the female, and knew it would try again to contact her.

By Thursday Mandy felt as though she had been running a month. She drove to the house in the country through a hard rain, but once inside the rain and wind seemed far removed. Straightening from removing her boots at the back entry, she saw an oil smear on the floor, half under the basement door. She opened the door and looked at it closer. Who could have dropped oil there? She started to touch the shiny smear, but drew back her hand quickly and closed the door again. She glanced at the phone, then tried it, but without hope of finding it operating yet. They said in the afternoon. It was eleven then; Mrs. Turnbull was due at one. There was time to measure the third-floor windows and try to plan the rooms there.

The third floor had five small rooms in a row, all roughly finished: servants' rooms probably. There was also a very large L-shaped room.

Room for the sewing machines and cutting tables, for bolts of materials, and accessories, shelves, work tables, everything. Besides, there was the rest of the third floor unfinished, but with rough flooring laid, and with windows. Surveying it, she gloated again over the space, well lighted, clean, warm, airy. . . . And absolutely quiet.

She stopped moving about the room and listened. The quiet was so profound that she wished she had brought a radio with her, or that they were just a little closer to a highway, or a neighborhood playground. Or something. The house seemed to be holding its breath.

She frowned angrily. She never had been timid, or afraid of being alone, or spooky. And there was nothing about the house that was frightening. It was a friendly house, a welcoming house. She finished measuring the windows quickly, whistling between her teeth as she worked.

At twelve-thirty she made coffee and opened a can of soup for her lunch. The rain was driving against the house furiously now. She still didn't want to go out to the car to bring in curtains.

Mrs. Turnbull showed up as Mandy was washing her dishes. Mrs. Turnbull was about fifty, with obviously dyed red hair, the suspicion of a mustache that required frequent shavings, and legs like a football player. She had very blue eyes that darted about in suspicious glances all the time she talked with Mandy.

"You Missus Phillips? I'm Ellen Turnbull. Gus Farley says you're looking for a woman to do for you? Can't sleep in, though. Got a boy in high school, and a girl with a baby at home. Can't be off nighntimes." Within fifteen minutes Mandy had hired her.

"Can you start tomorrow?" Mandy asked.

"Be here at nine. Do I get a key?"

"A key? Of course. But I'll have to have an extra one made. . . ."

"Give it to me and I'll do that while you're still here. You won't be here by nine tomorrow will you? When are the movers due?"

"At one," Mandy said. Silently she searched her bag for her key and handed it to the red-haired woman. Perhaps the hair wasn't dyed, she thought suddenly.

After Mrs. Turnbull left with her key Mandy realized that she had not even asked for references. She knew she wouldn't ask for references, either. Not from her. Her presence was all the reference she needed. Mandy laughed suddenly and when she lifted the phone, the line was connected. Gaily she dialed Robert's office number, and she was humming as she

waited for his answer.

Robert agreed that she had done right to follow her instincts about Mrs. Turnbull. "I'll make discreet inquiries about her in the village," he said. "She sounds like a doll. Why don't you ask if her son can take on the yard when she comes back?"

Mandy hung up, still grinning, and decided to bring in the curtains and get them hung while she waited for the return of her new housekeeper. She slipped on her coat and made a dash for the car. The rain was not driving in an angle now but was still coming down hard and very steadily. She covered the drapes carefully with sheets and ran back to the protection of the back stoop, and she found that she had locked herself out. In exasperation she rattled the door handle, but the snap lock had set itself and the door was fast. She tapped her foot angrily, staring at the door, wondering how long Mrs. Turnbull would take, knowing she didn't want to wait out in the cold dampness for her. She knew the windows were all locked, doubly protected by storm windows. Then she remembered the basement door and she leaned over the rail of the stoop trying to see if it was locked also. They had left it open for the man to start the furnace, and she hadn't gone down to lock it again. She didn't think Robert had either. She hesitated one more moment; a gust of wind blew cold rain onto the stoop, and she made up her mind. She hung the curtains on the top of the screen door and ran to the basement door and found it open. The basement was warm, but musty smelling and unaired, with a suggestion of sulphur. . . . She hurried down the steps and across to the stairs that led back up to the entrance at the kitchen door. Halfway up the steps she felt it again.

Suddenly the view before her of steps and the closed door changed, whirling out of focus, becoming different, unfamiliar, unrecognizable, and frightening. She clutched the rail, fighting terror, and horror. She closed her eyes hard, as the angles of the steps seemed to shift, becoming sharper. She thought she was going to fall, and she heard a moan. Her head was swelling, growing larger and larger, with an excruciating pain.

Then abruptly it was all gone, so suddenly that she lurched forward and would have fallen down the stairs but for the reflexive clutching of her hands for support. She half sat, half lay there for another moment, trying to get back her breath, trying to will her heart back to normal. She was breathing in gasping, choking spasms that did little to restore her. Somehow she fell and clambered up the stairs to the door. As she scrambled through the doorway, her hand landed on the greasy smear on the floor, and it burned fiercely. She ran to the sink and washed it, and she

was sobbing by then. Her palm was red.

When Ellen Turnbull returned with the keys, Mandy was seated at the table drinking coffee and smoking.

"Are you all right, Mrs. Phillips? You sick?"

"I locked myself out and got back in through the basement and, like a clumsy horse, I fell coming up the stairs," Mandy said. She felt her hand tighten on the handle of her cup, but what else could she say? It had been so fast, and when it was gone, she was so normal again, what else could she say?

Mrs. Turnbull regarded her for another second, opened the door to the basement, and clicked her tongue. "You got mud on your shoes," she said. "Guess you slipped." She looked back at Mandy. "You sure you didn't hurt yourself? You look pretty pale." Mandy shook her head. "Well, I'd best wipe up that mud before someone slips again on it." She vanished, and presently she returned with a wad of paper toweling that she threw into the trash can. She stepped outside the kitchen door and came back in with the curtains. "You forgot these, I guess," she said.

"I ... I'll hang them tomorrow," Mandy said. "I'm through for today. I'll go out as you do."

"What else could I say?" Mandy asked herself as she drove from the house. What could she say to make Robert understand? How describe something completely outside human experience? There were no words for it, everything was an approximation only. Strange, foreign, different, weird. Terror, horror, that was closer, but still it wasn't exactly right. She didn't know what words to use. She stared fixedly ahead and let her hands and feet operate the car, and the hour drive was over quickly. Inside their apartment, she paced, and in the end she knew she couldn't tell Robert what had happened to her. He would say indigestion, or nerves. The fall, the bruises, the terror, all the rest of it was part of a reaction to a momentary delusion she had suffered. And she had suffered the delusion as a result of thorough fatigue. Moving, the show, shopping, sewing, measuring. . . She was so tired that she no longer recognized her symptoms as those of fatigue, but experienced them as something else.

When Robert arrived home, she told him merely that she had slipped on mud on the basement steps, and he commiserated with her, and later massaged her aching back and legs.

The Groth knew it should wait patiently this time for the new Earthpeople to settle into the house. It seemed assured that they would stay however, and the receptive Earthman female was back. It didn't know if it had time enough to wait. It reached for her very carefully. It had forgotten how distorted the world was through their eyes, how bright the lights were, the sharp angles they used, the shining surfaces and painful colors. It longed for the gentle seas of Gron, where it could be healed, soothed by the cool waters, lulled by the gentle shapes that were dimmed with shadows and always rounded.

The Groth had learned long ago that Earthmen used light in the same manner that the Groth used shadows on Gron. There the eyes were drawn back deeply into shadows, around forms, over curves, always seeking the deepest shadow; here on Earth light was cast from objects and surfaces, repelling the eyes, making them move from one surface to another, achieving the same end: keeping the eyes in motion, forcing them to see the whole when they might settle for a part. The difference lay in the effect of the bright, shiny surfaces on the very large Groth eyes. Immediately its eyes reacted as Earthmen's eyes do after several hours on a sun-sparkling snow field. Pain, shooting lights, blindness, sometimes permanent, more often not. The Groth couldn't control the panic feeling that the surface itself was leaping at it, not merely the light being reflected dazzlingly. But worse than the physical distress, there was the instant intense hatred its touch produced. A hatred like a powerful force that drained the Groth's energy. It had touched her, but she was suddenly the invading force. It freed itself abruptly, and watched the female collapse from a safe distance.

The Groth all possessed extrasensory abilities, but only a small percentage of them had also the ability to control and order the process on a high level. Training brought about facilitation of the neuronal pathways and synapses so that, in effect, the Groth's mind was like a room with an open door, safer from intrusion than any lock could have made it. The fully trained Groth would never enter the mind of another without invitation, unless it were for a medical purpose, or other such purpose when the mind entered was in no position to give consent. When the untrained Groth probed at the mind of one trained, it found familiar images, common elementary concepts, but no formed thoughts or organized mental conversations. There was no shock. The invaded Groth merely withdrew, if the contact persisted, and it ended there. But to be so invaded by an alien intelligence was to fill each with disturbing imagery with contorted views of the world seen differently, unfamiliar dominant fears that were

irrational but inescapable. If the invading power was great, as was that which the Earthmen possessed, then there was the danger of adding shock of the Groth to that of the invading mind before the contact could be broken. Herein lay the danger; herein lay insanity.

The Groth pulled back completely to rest and think. It didn't know if it would be possible to use this female after all. Others would come; it had heard them speak of others. It would probe them before it reached a decision. It would have to use one of them, or lose a priceless opportunity.

When the planet had been discovered, Earth year 1896, Gron year 14,395, the excitement on Gron had been rampant. Never had a world been found poised on the threshold of the breakthroughs that would lead to a technological civilization within the lifetimes of the Groth. Plans were made with dispatch to send observers, and computers were programmed to estimate the rate of progress of the newly found people. Dates were given in Earth terms for the advances expected: 1965, atomic energy discovery; 1980, first satellite in space; 1995, first orbiting manned spacecraft; 2010, landing on moon; 2040, landing on nearest planet; 2150, ready for contact with alien civilization. The first Gron observation station was planned, on Earth, with orbiting sky-spies, and data banks. Forty Gron years were to be allowed for this phase of the operation, with a discreet withdrawal to more distant points following that, possibly to the vicinity of the outermost planet of the system. In Earth terms, that would mean the first landing was to be made in 1920, the Groth to be picked up again in 1973. Forty Gron years, fifty-three Earth years. It was felt particularly necessary to have observers on the ground for the discovery and testing of atomic energy, when that breakthrough point arrived, but after that, when the Earthmen started to explore the nearer reaches of space, there could be no satellite of alien make in their heavens to confound them and make them suspicious and aggressive through xenophobic fears.

It was known that Earth was a dangerous planet for Groth; it was a hot world, and the oxygen-rich atmosphere was denser than they were accustomed to, uncomfortably dense and sticky. The excessive oxygen reacted with their body chemistry in a peculiar manner, causing them to excrete in micturation and perspiration more of the sulphur of their body liquids than was healthy. Also, the spectrum of electromagnetic waves from the star of this world was less tempered by distance—Gron was two hundred million miles from its star—so that the rays, ultra-violet, infra-red, and all between were brutal on the Groth skin, and particularly hard on the very large eyes protected only by nictitating membrane,

perfect in the Gron seas, and on its cool, dim land masses, but not suited for Earth's surface. Special contact lenses had been developed, and they helped, but they were a further irritant. The alkalinity of Earth's waters proved poisonous to the Groth, another mark on the debit side. But to offset some of the dangers, it was noted that the arrogance, typical of emerging people, of Earthmen in their belief that there were no other life forms served to protect the Groth in situations where their presence might be clearly indicated otherwise. So, while the mission certainly was one of hazards, it was also one in which the gains would more than offset any of the risks, and at the end of the period allotted by the computer schedule, another great world power would be welcomed to the interstellar families. But equally important, a race going through the greatest changes conceivable would be studied for the first time. A pair of lifemates was chosen, a pair well trained in the use of all equipment, with particular skills in extrasensory development and empathy that registered in the highest range. Now only one of them still lived to carry out the mission.

Mandy wandered aimlessly about the house, one week after moving in, waiting for Robert to finish in his office, where he was closeted with his partner, Eric, and Grace, who was their secretary. The house was aglow with late afternoon sun streaming in through the windows in the front, through the double door panes, and the wide windows above the door. The cold rain had given way to very mild weather. A memory stirred of the terror she had felt on two different occasions in the house. She shrugged. She had been so tired, was still tired, but not with the urgency of the fatigue she felt the past week. She looked in at the guest room that was ready for Dwight. The left corner room was prepared for Eric, who had stayed with them for two nights already. Eric was thirty, an easygoing bachelor, willing to work in the insurance office without pushing for a bigger business, although one day, Mandy was certain, when he became sole owner of the agency, he would expand, but easily, without strain. That was all right; she just didn't want Robert taking on any more now.

Mandy was in the hall above the offices when she heard the door open, and Grace's voice saying, "Haven't you felt anything at all, Robert? I got a flash of it as soon as I came this morning. Not strong, not really bad, but something."

"You expect a house like this to be haunted," Eric said lazily, and Grace

cut in:

"I never expected a house to be haunted in my life. I didn't say I think this one is haunted. I said I felt something strange. That's all."

Eric laughed and their voices drifted out of range. Mandy moved then, going to the rail to stare down at Grace's tightly waved gray hair and Eric's too long, almost flowing brown hair as they walked side by side toward the front of the house. She looked at her watch—four-thirty, cocktail time. Stiffly, she went down the stairs.

She went to the kitchen where Ellen Turnbull was finishing with the tray of ice, glasses, cheeses and crackers. "Thought you might like this," she said, "with the drinks."

"Thanks. I'll take it in," Mandy said.

"Mike will come with me in the morning," Mrs. Turnbull said. "You want him to start on the garage, or in the yard?"

"The garage, I think. If he can clear out enough space to park the cars, that'll be fine." She lifted the tray, and with her shoulder against the door, she asked, "How is the Farley boy?"

"Pete Farley's seen too many TV shows, that's all that's the matter with him. He's back in school. Wasn't nothing but a stomach ache, I told you. Told Gus that too. Damn fools, both of 'em."

As Mandy entered the living room, Eric and Grace were arguing over whether or not the fireplace would heat the room. Outside the office they argued almost constantly. They were both fighting Grace's maternal instinct, Mandy had decided.

Eric said, "Let me make a fire. It'll heat. In this climate they had to put out." He, unlike Robert, was quite at home in the country setting, flannels, sweater, wool socks. He was busy crumpling paper as he talked, and he added three logs and struck a match to it. The logs were nicely dried and caught without any trouble. Soon the fire was crackling. Robert joined them and mixed drinks for them all, then sat by Mandy on the couch. The fire was warming, and with the last rays of sunlight coming in almost horizontally now, the room was very alive and cheerful.

Eric and Robert talked quietly of the problems of moving the business. Grace looked resigned. She said to Mandy, "And there's really been no talk about this house? I can't imagine a house being empty so many years without rumors starting, noises, lights, something."

Robert's hand squeezed Mandy's briefly, and he said, "Of course, there was Pete Farley, last week. Worked here one day and got as sick as a dog.

Missed two days of school. Nightmares, nervousness, sick at his stomach, but the doctor couldn't find out why. Some say it was the house did it."

Mandy couldn't control the convulsive tightening of her own hand, and Robert looked at her and winked. He was teasing Grace, thought Mandy was going along with it. It seemed incredible to her that he didn't sense her distaste for talk like this. She took a long swallow of her drink and stood up.

"The question," Grace said seriously, "is not what others think, but what the boy himself thinks. Is he willing to come back and work here again?"

"His father won't permit him to return," Mandy said coolly, starting for the door. "I have to look at the roast, be right back."

Ellen had left, and the roast was quietly spewing and spitting, and smelled of garlic. Mandy closed the oven on it. She poured herself a cup of coffee and sipped it black, wishing Tippy and Dwight would get there. She wondered if Grace were off the subject of the house and its possible ghost, and she knew that she didn't want to talk about it, or hear about it at all. Ever.

Tippy and Dwight arrived shortly after that, and there was a noisy reunion, joking, college gossip, dinner, and the inevitable tour of the house. Tippy was small, slender, almost too thin, and very lovely with black hair halfway down her back and the same long eyes that Mandy had, more heavily made up, predominant in her face, which wore no other make-up. She wore a white tunic over black tights, and would have made a beautiful magazine cover girl that night. She smoked too much and had a restless energy that could become nerve wracking. She had the intuitive understanding of mathematics in practice and abstract theory that made her very impatient with anyone who couldn't understand immediately.

Dwight was twenty-four, already the author of a textbook on Spanish literature, with a doctorate in Romance literature. He worked for a publishing firm as a textbook editor. Mandy had never said it, not even to Robert, but she thought Dwight was a terrible bore. Tippy and Dwight had been engaged for three months.

Twice Mandy headed Grace off the subject of haunted houses, and as soon as Tippy took Dwight and Eric away to see the rest of the house, Mandy said, "Grace, I wish you wouldn't talk like that. Tippy is too young and imaginative. . . ."

"Tippy!" Grace looked at her incredulously. "That kid's not afraid of the devil himself."

"She's happy with the house. I wouldn't want you to start any doubts in her mind. . . ."

Grace looked dubious, then shrugged. "If she feels it, she'll start her own doubts. I did."

"You felt something?"

"Didn't Robert tell you?" Grace moved closer to Mandy and lowered her voice. "I'm sorry, Mandy. I was certain that Robert had told you all about it. I wouldn't have brought it up otherwise. I had a strange experience this morning. A feeling of panic, with things looking all wrong."

There was a sudden shrill scream from upstairs and both women jerked. Mandy moved before Grace did, was out the door and running up the broad stairs, and only dimly was aware of Tippy's voice, and behind her, of Grace's voice calling Robert, who had gone into his office.

"Tippy? Where are you?" The door from the third floor opened and Tippy and Dwight came down, followed by Eric. Tippy met Mandy at the head of the stairs and threw herself into Mandy's arms. "Mother! Something . . . touched me, inside! Something . . . hot. . . ." She was gasping and shivering, and Mandy's arms tightened around her, and she stared over her head at Dwight.

"What happened?"

"I don't know. We were looking at the unfinished part, and it was dark. Eric had matches, but we still couldn't see much. Tippy was near me, she started to moan, and when I touched her, she screamed."

Robert was there then, and vaguely Mandy thought that he shouldn't have come up the stairs so fast. He was too pale. Tippy was getting her breath back, and a little color had returned to her face. Mandy thought she must be rather white also.

"Good Lord," Tippy said suddenly, clearly and in awe, "we have a ghost!"

"We are not haunted," Robert said stiffly, fifteen minutes later. They were in the living room, Mandy and Dwight on the couch with Tippy, Eric poking at the fire now burning very low with sputtering sounds, Grace and Robert in the two gold chairs. Tippy was too restless to remain quiet. She started to pace, smoking fast, frowning.

"I don't know about you, Dad," she said, "but I sort of feel that I am, or was, haunted. I never felt anything like that before."

"See how contagious talk like that can be?" Robert said bitterly to

Grace.

"That isn't fair," Mandy said. "She didn't tell Tippy anything. No one did."

Eric was still poking the charred logs. He turned and said easily, "Unless it was something on the third floor."

"For God's sake. . ." Robert said, but Eric continued: "Come off it, Robert. Something happened." He looked at Tippy, who had stopped pacing to stare at him intently.

Robert swirled the gin in his glass, watching it. He was very angry, Mandy knew. He detested mysteries, didn't believe in them actually. Nerves or indigestion, that was his answer for anything out of the ordinary. A pill, or a check-up, or a simple act of willful amnesia, that was the solution, the only solution he would abide. Things without names, she thought, that's what he refused to admit, and those were the things that frightened. So he labeled events out of the norm and, with the label, could dismiss them.

Dwight said, "Eric, let's stop all this now. It was strange and quiet and hot up there. I felt it too, but stale air and stillness, nothing more than that." Mandy almost nodded. How like Robert he was.

"Something else," Tippy said firmly. "Eric's right. We have to look at it logically and try to understand what it was." She grinned at Robert who was glaring at her and Eric. "Relax, Dad. My game, but you don't have to play if you don't want to." She turned to Grace then. "Let's compare notes. What was it that you didn't tell me? You felt something here too?"

Grace looked from her to Mandy, who shrugged. Grace then said, "I'm not sure. Something made me feel complete panic, my head hurt, and everything seemed to go weird all at once." She took a long drink, emptying her glass.

Tippy nodded. "That's two of us. I didn't know about that. I couldn't have dittoed what I didn't know. That's how it was with me. I felt something, like a hot wire in my head. Hot and moving. The match light got all twisted and just wrong, and I had to close my eyes. I couldn't stand the way things looked." She looked at Robert. "Dad, it doesn't do any good to say it didn't happen. It did. Twice."

"Three, or possibly four times," Mandy said tiredly. She told of her two experiences, and Robert stared at her disbelievingly. "I think you might have felt it, too, darling," she said. "Last weekend, while you slept. You groaned as if with pain, or fear. Then it was over and you returned to

normal sleep."

"Good Christ!" Robert said suddenly. "You three women! Talk about nerves and mass hysteria! Look at what you're doing to yourselves! Just because some stupid neighborhood kid got sick and his father is a fool! Mandy, you know that's what started all this, don't you? That boy got sick. Probably he smoked a couple of cigarettes and got sick from them. So you let it build up to something big and mysterious in your mind, and now Tippy is feeling it, and Grace."

Mandy stared at him, wanting to believe him, willing herself to believe him. She remembered the way the stairs had gone too sharp, angled, and unfamiliar, and she looked down at her hands in her lap.

Grace stood up then. "I have to be on my way," she said. She looked at Tippy, and then to Mandy. "Are you both all right? Are you sta—?" She didn't finish the question, but said more briskly, "I have to be going."

Robert saw her to her car, and while they were gone, Eric said, "Tippy, no one is in my apartment this weekend. Why don't you—?"

"Will you knock it off!" Dwight said angrily.

"Oh, Dwight, shut up," Tippy said. She looked at Eric and grinned. "Why don't you go back if you think something is here?"

"Because I'm curious about it, I guess. You see, I don't believe in ghosts either."

"Well, that sums up my feeling exactly. No one believes in ghosts, and yet, there is something that we can't see, something horrible, completely terrible and loathsome. We are all so sane, so quietly, dependably, self-assuredly sane," she said, almost mockingly. "But something here isn't sane at all." She shivered and hugged herself, moving closer to the fire.

Robert returned and looked at them suspiciously. He poured another drink. Mandy started to protest that he was drinking more than he should, but she didn't say the words. They all needed an extra drink, or two.

They talked awhile; then they broke up the group, and Mandy and Robert went to their room. Robert was still angry with her, she knew, and they said little as they prepared for bed. She heard Eric putting another log on the fire, but gradually the house became very quiet. She lay staring at the ceiling, knowing when Robert finally fell asleep, after lying too stiff and too silent at her side for a long time. She thought of the past when such anger at bedtime would have had her in tears, and the making up would have had her in wilder tears. She smiled. Her hand touched his back gently. She dozed and woke with a start. She hadn't meant to fall

asleep at all. There was something that she had to try.

It was nearly three-thirty when she slipped from the bed quietly. She got on her robe and slippers and left the bedroom without making a sound. Eric had left the hall lights on as she had asked him, and the shadows filled the balcony with strange shapes. The other bedroom doors were closed, and the house was still. She went down the stairs, and when she got to the bottom, she began to call to it, soundlessly, concentrating on the words she was thinking at it:

You! Whatever you are, leave her alone! Don't you touch her again! I'm not afraid of you now, I can face you now, but leave her alone! You understand what I'm saying! Leave her alone. Come out now that I'm ready for you. You caught me in surprise before, but I'm ready for you....

She knew she could drive it away. She felt the same exultant thrill that she used to feel before a modeling show, that she still felt before her fashions were shown, the same challenge, the same awareness of her ability to meet the challenge. She waited, but the house continued silent and empty. She called to it again and still felt nothing. She walked into the living room where embers from the fire glowed. She would wait half an hour for it. She put a log on the embers and blew on them until a tiny flame licked the log and started to grow. She sat on the floor before the small fire and waited for it to answer her challenge.

And when it did, she was not prepared for it. She was watching the leaping fire and suddenly it was there again, something groping inside her head, making it swell, making it hurt. The fire froze and the colors went wrong, became fearful and blindingly bright, bringing tears to her eyes. She blinked hard and started to rise, but the room was tilting at terrifying angles, and the walls and floor were threatening. She felt that her head was going to burst with the presence, and the pain and terror grew and became unbearable. She felt nausea rise and ebb and rise again, and suddenly she was violently sick and still the presence grew and consumed her. It was vile and repulsive, and she screamed and fell to the floor with her eyes closed, unable now to open them at all, horrified at the appearance of the room, at the threatening walls and floor and the hideous colors and the foul air. She was sick again, heaving and retching, and sobbing, and she had to get back to the vlen where it was safe. She began inching along the floor, with her eyes closed tightly, sucking in the foul air that was aching hot now. She had to rid herself of the heavy clothing that was smothering her, and not opening her eyes she began to claw at the thick, rough material. She shrank from the contact, but with it on, she couldn't breathe. The bad air was weakening her. She bumped into

something and had to open her eyes to see her way from the oppressive room. One of *them* entered, and there was much noise, and suddenly blinding lights were stabbing her. She shrieked and rolled to protect her eyes, and one of them touched her. She lashed out at it. Unendurable pain exploded in her head and everything stopped.

The Groth had been dozing in the tank bed when it felt the pulling of the female's mind. It was as strong as a death call of a lifemate, as strong as the fear call of a young one in the seas, as strong as the birthing call of a female lifemate. It had elements of each of them, and was as irresistible. The Groth found itself dragging its painful body from the vlen, into the bad air of the lowest level of the building, its mind engaged and almost helpless under the barrage of fear and repulsion of the female Earthman. It fell to the floor writhing and hissing in agony, and did not know that the female was also writhing above it. It secreted dangerously and became weaker, less able to ward off the death wishes of the female. Abruptly the contact was broken. The Groth was unable to move afterward, however, and lay for hours waiting for strength to return.

It thought about the decision to position the vlen so near an inhabited building, and it realized that the decision had been wrong. They should have remained in the spaceship. But they had reasoned that there was a remote danger of being followed to it; also being so near the Earthpeople had been as fruitful as they thought it would be. The Groth's thoughts ranged back over the years, over all the things that had gone wrong.

The Groth had built a tunnel when they first arrived at the house and decided to use it to protect the vlen, hidden deep under the unexcavated area. The tunnel led to the woods half a mile away, emerging above-ground in a dense thicket, the opening well hidden by boulders. After the death of the child years ago when the Groth had decided to leave the vlen and live in the ship, it had waited for a dark night, then had left in the one-man craft that was kept in the tunnel. It planned to bring the ship to the woods and park it there, obliterate all traces of the vlen, then fly to the vast uninhabited lands to the north. It flew, skimming the treetops, to the site of the spacecraft that the two Groth had hidden in a valley in the woods. They had partially buried the spacecraft, covering the mound it made with earth and stones and boulders, planting shrubs over all, so that in the end, it was impossible to see anything out of the ordinary there. By

removing one of the bushes, access to the craft was simple, requiring no loss of time. The Groth flew directly to the site and stared in disbelief. Water covered the valley. It flew to the end of the valley and found a concrete dam, flew low enough over it to make out the inscription on a plaque: Falsmouth Reservoir, N. Y. C.

The Groth located the craft under forty feet of water, then returned to the vlen. It could get to it, but the water made it more awkward, made sealed clothing necessary, as well as the construction of an air lock. It worked on the arrangements, and on the next dark rainy day, knowing that Earthmen seldom ventured out in such weather, it returned to the reservoir. It almost plunged into the lake before it realized that Earthmen were there, hugging the shore line behind crude shelters. It searched its memories for a reason, and recalled that Earthmen hunted birds during this season. Again it returned to the vlen. The next visit was after the lake had frozen over, and again the Groth was frustrated. Earthmen dotted the smooth gray surface, fishing through the ice.

In the seasons that followed, the lake became more and more inaccessible to the Groth. It had become a favored resort area. In the summer swimmers and boaters crowded the shores and the surface of the water; in the fall the hunters arrived, then the ice fishermen and ice skaters; a ski run skirted it; chalets were built, and cabins, and a hotel. . . .

They were bad years for the Groth, still suffering the loss of its lifemate, and the remorse of having caused, albeit indirectly, the deaths of several of the Earthmen. The latent extrasensory abilities of the Earthmen had not been foreseen, thus not allowed for in the planning. If the Groth now moved the spacecraft, there would be more damage done to the emerging people, possibly more deaths. If only the life-mate were still alive; the two of them could ward off the untrained probings of the Earthmen through reinforcement of one another, but alone? The Groth knew that alone it might slip and allow one or more of the probes to pass through. It was not the skill of the Groth that was lacking, although thorough shielding required fierce concentration; it was the lack of training and control of the Earthmen. The use of a great latent power was as dangerous to the user as it was to the one against whom it was used, and if there were several Earthmen probing randomly, the Groth feared that it would not be able to withstand their combined force, nor would they escape unscathed. Many of them would die, others go mad. It could not move until the last possible moment had arrived, and perhaps by then, it would be in contact with the Groth ship due to pick it up, and a new plan would be forthcoming.

So the Groth settled back into the vlen under the house, and monitored

its equipment. From time to time Earthmen had come to the house, and often building had been started, but always they had left again. In 1957, Earth year, the Groth made another attempt to leave Earth and wait in a distant orbit for the ship from Gron. The Earthmen who called themselves Russians had orbited a satellite, years ahead of schedule.

The Groth retrieved the air lock bubble it had constructed years before, and donned the two-fabric suit that would allow it to work under water, waterproof on the outside, sulphuric-acid proof inside, and it went once more to the lake, choosing the hours before daylight as the least likely of all to be interrupted. It slid into the water unobserved, and went directly to the spacecraft, now covered with several feet of silt. The Groth tested the waters, only to find them even more strongly alkaline than it had believed, and it knew it would have to work fast. There were bits of jagged containers in the area, both glass and metal, and it removed them carefully: the suit would rip with ease. The Groth swam around the ship then, inspecting it, and suddenly felt a tug on its suit and investigated to find that a small barbed piece of metal was stuck on its leg. It didn't attempt to remove it, still fearing a tear, but broke the line that was attached to it, and continued to inspect the area around the ship. It located the door and started to remove the silt there.

On the shore, a man nodding over the fishing line jerked awake when there was a tug on the spin rod lying across his knees. He reeled in the broken line and studied it intently. A grin split his face, and whistling softly, he tied a new hook to the line, added a heavier weight and a small minnow, and cast it to the exact spot where he had got the strong strike.

The Groth worked hard and finally uncovered the metal of the ship. It was pitted with corrosion, but the Groth knew that was the outer layer only and was not concerned. It didn't see the weighted line sinking through the water behind it, coming to rest on the bottom, with the minnow swimming vigorously in circles that were within inches of the Groth's legs. The minnow twisted back on itself and got loose from the hook, darting away. The hook came to rest then, and the nylon line blended with the water so that no part of the rig was visible, except the dull hook two feet above the floor of the lake. The Groth turned to get the air lock, and as it brushed by the hook, it was snagged. There was an immediate reaction from the man on the shore, who jerked the line hard, ripping a straight tear eight inches long on the leg of the suit. The Groth felt the sting of the alkaline waters and writhed from the touch. The reaction of the water with its acidic perspiration caused steam and clouds around it, obscuring the line even more, and the Groth fumbled about

with both hands searching for the thing that had caught it. The man tried to reel in, and again the fabric tore, but this time the Groth found the line and broke it, and it was yanked away with the sudden release of tension. The Groth was weakening quickly, and it swam back to the small craft that was also full of water now. It closed the door and started the pump, and even before the craft was dry, it started to move through the water. The Groth located the Earthman on the shore and searched the area, but no one else was there. The Earthman might be curious about what was down there. . . . He might dive down and find the bared metal of the spacecraft before the silt again crept over it. The

Groth didn't want to think about the Earthman and his possible actions, didn't want to have to injure him, didn't want to have to touch his mind at all. It was getting out of the soaked suit as fast as it could, but it continued to watch the Earthman, who was standing on the shore now, staring at the water over the spacecraft. Bubbles, the Groth thought. There were bubbles. The Earthman waded out into the water, and the Groth reached out and touched his mind. The man staggered and fell in the knee-deep water. The Groth made him move back to the shore, rolling him gently, then left him. The Earthman was dead.

The Groth was weakening too fast then to pay any further attention to the Earthman, to the lake, or other possible observers. It left the water, flying almost straight up, turned to the woods, and flew back to the tunnel and the vlen and the life-giving bed tank. It lay there resting for days, hovering between dreams and reality, finding itself in the dream life on the seas of Gron, then again in the tank bed, then again in the corrosive waters of the reservoir lake killing the Earthman, over and over.

The Groth had made its report, had sent the message aloft to the data bank in orbit, and it knew that its action would be exonerated. One of the worst things a civilization could do to another was to divert it from its own development through the premature disclosure of techniques far in advance of its own, and the discovery of the Groth spaceship would do that, so the death had been necessary. Still the Groth suffered. It decided not to try again to leave Earth unless that was the only way to avoid being discovered.

Its recovery was slow and less than complete, and it knew that until it returned to Gron and received the care of healers, it would continue to bear the effects of its exposure to the lime water of the lake, and the inhalation of the gases that had formed from the reaction of the acid and alkaline.

Events were moving very fast on Earth, and the Groth was forced to

redesign its spy mechanisms several times. Finally it fashioned bee-like, remote-controlled units that it could send to any point undetected. The unit landed on a tree when it reached its destination, bored into the trunk, and reported to the Groth all that went on within its range. This proved satisfactory, and the Groth's trips beyond the vlen became less frequent. Each trip now was a major risk; Earthmen had developed uncanny methods of detection, and there were constant sky watchers on duty everywhere. The Groth was content not to have to risk exposure, and each year the thought of venturing outside became less desirable. Periodically, however, it did fly over the lake and check on the position of the spaceship under the water, and twice it went into the lake and inspected the hull of the ship. The corrosion was increasing, but still not dangerously. The silt was much deeper, and with each year the possibility of discovery of the ship became more remote. The Groth was satisfied with the arrangement.

Then, almost ten Earth years after its accident in the lake, the Groth was again shocked into action. The data-bank satellite was being scanned. It sent the message to the vlen, and the computer there interpreted the scanning as a search operation being carried out, with the probability high that all foreign objects were being sought out and marked for destruction as hazards to the fast growing space developments of the Earthmen.

Again the Groth had to go to the lake and enter the poisonous waters to gain access to the ship, where it had equipment to change the orbit of the satellite. It worked quickly in the dark, but as it worked it became aware of the images pressing against its brain: fear, hatred, dread, disgust. ... It had been seen this time. A score of men were on the shore, most of them armed, all of them certain something had entered the lake. The Groth withdrew without entering the minds of any of the men; it was enough that they were there, and that they were broadcasting to it. There was no need to probe further. It hastened its own work; its first duty was to alter the orbit of the satellite. It worked on the new course, deciding on an orbit far beyond the moon, and within an hour it was reassured that the satellite had moved out and away from the questing devices that had found it. Then it turned its attention to the activity on the shore. The men had been joined by others, and the entire south shore of the lake was buzzing with excitement. If necessary, the Groth would leave the area in the spaceship, but not yet. The vlen had to be dismantled also. It would wait and take action that seemed appropriate when the men moved.

Daylight came, and the men sent divers into the lake. Three of them fanned out in the direction of the ship, and the foremost of them carried a

metal detection mechanism that was crude, but effective. The Groth neutralized it; the ship had been on power since its arrival in the area, so that no metal detection device yet known to man could have found it. What the Groth feared was their visual ability to spot the metal in the water where the silt had been removed for entry. The Groth continued to watch the progress of the Earthmen.

In the afternoon the divers departed, and a few surface swimmers appeared on the scene. The Groth ignored them. The next day, there were only three of the men on the alert, and at night they were relieved by two others, who were also wary. The Groth probed very gently; these two were of a different nature. It didn't want to enter either of them, so it simply watched them from a distance throughout the night. It learned that they were private investigators who made a practice of running to earth flying saucer reports. The Groth permitted itself to relax once more. No Earthpeople paid very much attention to them and their kind. The danger was much less than it had assumed at first. The following night it would leave the area. Its spy system would alert it to any danger to the ship, and it could return if it appeared necessary.

The next night the Groth exchanged water for air in the lock very slowly, so that the bubbles released would be minute, unnoticeable. Outside the ship, it waited for the silt to recover the ship, and it inspected the hull carefully to make certain that it was not visible. Above the quiet water, a faint odor of sulphur floated softly, crossing the lake, rousing one of the men who refused to admit that nothing had entered the lake. He jerked wide awake. The same smell he had noticed the other time!

He jabbed his elbow into the ribs of his companion, and together they left their sleeping bags, and crawled to the edge of the woods and watched. The first man pulled a walkie-talkie from his pocket and whispered into it excitedly until he received an answer. He hefted his rifle and waited. When the snub-nosed capsule slid from the water, spotlights flared, and there were sounds of rifle fire.

The Groth almost fainted from the excruciating pain of the explosion of light that blinded it. Planning to work at night, to fly only at night, it had not provided itself with the dark contact lenses, and it could not protect its eyes against the glare. It groped for the control to opaque the windows of the small craft, and it accelerated blindly, hearing rifle fire at the same moment; it felt the impact as projectiles struck the craft. It flew straight into the woods, hoping it was high enough, not able to see at all now. It careened off the topmost branch of an ancient pine tree, and the craft reeled, but didn't go out of control. The Groth climbed again. There was

more rifle fire, and this time one of the projectiles did damage the craft, but it was still climbing, and no more of the shots reached it. The Groth leveled out after another moment, and still flying blindly, waited for its eyes to recover.

Several minutes later the Groth was turned and heading back toward the vlen. It could see again, blurrily, but enough. Pressure in the craft was dropping. There was a tendency to list to the left. Daylight was coming quickly now, and it knew it had to seek cover within the next few minutes or risk being seen in daylight. Also, the leak in the craft was admitting the heavy oxygenized air mixture that brought about dizziness. The Groth didn't dare put the craft on automatic in order to search for and mend the leak; the craft might be heavily damaged and the automatic controls out of coordination with the vlen. Even as the Groth thought this, the craft lurched and dropped in altitude. The Groth fought to right the craft, tilting dangerously to the left, and finally knew it had to land short of the safety of the tunnel. The craft was going to crash if it wasn't taken down now. There was sluggish response to the controls, and again the lurching drop. The Groth landed precariously in a small clearing and sat for several moments until his whirling thoughts focused once more on the problem at hand. Hide the craft in the tunnel. Get out of the thick atmosphere, back to the good air in the vlen. Two objectives. The sun came out dazzlingly. The objectives might be insurmountable.

For two hours the Groth struggled with the disabled craft, guiding it on low power around trees, over rocks, up and down ravines. The Groth wore a hood over its head, made by tearing up the protective garment and carefully peeling away one layer of material. The hood helped protect its eyes, but there was no protection against the rich air, and the heat of the sun. The air was damaging its lungs, perhaps beyond repair this time. The effects of the old accident added to its discomfort. Breathing was a torture, and the loss of body fluids was alarmingly high. The heat of the sun, poorly screened through the trees' branches, was devastating, and it excreted more and more fluids to protect its outer skin layers. The craft got away from it suddenly and skittered over the ground, bearing to the left constantly, and vanished over a cliff. The Groth staggered after it, not seeing the edge of the cliff until it could no longer stop, and it too tumbled over and down, and when it regained consciousness, some minutes later, it knew that it had broken inside.

Delirious, only half aware of what it was doing, the Groth continued to grope for the tunnel and its safety. The next time it was fully aware of its actions, it was within the tunnel, gasping and choking on the good air it

was sucking in. It left the craft behind the first screen in the tunnel and staggered to the tank bed and collapsed into it. The tank bed sealed, bathed the Groth, cooled down to the lowest permissible temperature, and started to cure the many superficial cuts and scrapes and bruises of the Groth. The interior wounds could not be healed by the tank bed; they required a doctor's probing thoughts and fingers.

The Groth knew now that it could not reach its ship at rest under the lake. The small one-man craft that made possible its visits to the lake had been damaged too badly to be repaired, first by the rifle fire, then even more by the fall over the cliff. It could only destroy the ship from the vlen, and with it destroy much of the lake and many of the Earthpeople in the vicinity. Then it would have to set the automatic destruct controls of the satellite, and finally eradicate all traces of the vlen and itself along with it. Or train an Earthperson so that there was real communication, so that the Earthperson could be sent into the lake and bring the ship out and back to the woods near the vlen. The Groth then could depart in it and leave no traces of its visit on Earth behind to befuddle the Earthmen. But first it had to train one of the wild Earth minds to communicate. It would take the same kind of orderedness that the lifemate had developed, thinking not in primal images, but in controlled symbols so that the Groth could see through the Earthman's eyes, think with his brain. It had thought the female would do, but at its touch, the female's rational brain was instantly submerged by her hatred and fear. It probed the others and found the same reaction. It brooded over the latent power they had, and their inability to use it. The female's latest assault, almost successful, proved to the Groth that they were still savages, all of them, who would kill without thought any other being they encountered. Its thoughts became more and more despairing as it rested and waited for strength enough to return to the vlen.

Mandy opened her eyes and stared about her in bewilderment. Eric's room, his apartment. She had found it for him. She tried to recall the night before, her childish challenge to the . . . thing: a blank. Silently she got out of the bed and crossed the room to the only door, which was slightly open. She looked through to the living room beyond, and then she breathed in relief.

Robert was asleep in a deep chair, and beyond him there was Tippy

with her dark head close to Eric as they conversed in tones too low to catch. Mandy pushed the door open more, and Tippy's face lifted and she ran across the room when she saw her mother standing there.

"Are you all right? How do you feel?"

"I'm fine. Weak, and starved, but all right." Mandy stared at her daughter and asked slowly, "What happened?"

Eric had joined them, and now Robert stirred and came wide awake in a second, with a look of fear and anxiety on his face such as she never had seen there.

"Will someone tell me what happened?" she said again. Robert caught her in his arms and held her close to him so hard that it hurt. That bad, she wondered. What could have been that bad? She pushed back gently and stared at his gray face. "I'm all right, darling. Really, all right. Relax now, okay?"

Robert didn't release her, but his arms loosened a little, and she twisted to look at Eric. He said, "We found you in a faint on the floor of the living room, near the hallway door. We couldn't wake you up, so we brought you here."

She knew that wasn't all of it, but she accepted it for the time being. She didn't know if she wanted to hear any more of it than that, not right now anyway.

"Where's Dwight?" Mandy asked.

"He wanted to go back for some clothes," Tippy said. "He'll tell Mrs. Turnbull that we won't need her today." She grinned briefly and added, "The story is that I had an attack of appendicitis, and we'll be tied up at the hospital for the day."

Eric brought coffee then and they all sipped it silently. It had to have been dreadful, Mandy thought. They were all terrified, and Robert and Tippy couldn't keep their eyes off her. What had she done?

Eric stood up. "I'll go help Dwight," he said.

"I'll come with you," Tippy said quickly.

"NO! Not you!" Mandy heard the strident tone of her voice. Her hand clamped on Tippy's wrist hard and the girl sat down again, the color drained from her face suddenly. "You mustn't go back, ever," Mandy said, forcing a normalcy she didn't feel.

"Then you do know ..."

"I don't remember what happened last night, but I know that you can't

go there. Promise me."

"I'll stay with you here until they get back," Tippy said. She looked up at Eric. "Call us when you get there, will you?"

"I'm coming with you," Robert said heavily. Mandy half rose and he pushed her back down gently. "It'll be all right, honey. I'll pack enough for a few days, and we can get rested and then decide what we want to do. Meanwhile, no one is going to stay there overnight again, and we won't go there alone."

Dwight saw Mrs. Turnbull standing outside the garage talking to a leggy boy whose red hair claimed him as her son. He hesitated, then went inside the house. Probably she didn't realize that no one was there, he thought. She probably thought they were all sleeping late. He glanced toward the living room, saw again the writhing figure on the floor, hissing and shrieking, and he shuddered. He had seen people acting like that in his abnormal psych lab, and he knew that sooner or later Tippy and her father would have to face up to it. Poor Tippy. He got his things quickly, then went back down the stairs. Mrs. Turnbull would have to get Mandy's clothes.

At the kitchen he called her, but there was no answer. Then he heard the boy's voice yelling. He ran outside and saw the boy racing across the yard. The tall red-headed woman met him at the door to the garage and shook him hard. The boy was pointing toward the house and talking. Dwight left the stoop and approached the door standing open, leading down to the basement. The boy and his mother came up to him. She said, "He says there's some kind of a big animal down there, dead, or hurt. He says it ain't nothing he ever seen before. You'd best not go down alone, mister."

"There's no one else here," Dwight said, pausing at the top step. He couldn't see anything in the gloom of the far end of the basement. "Where is it?" he asked the boy.

"Way back, by the dirt cellar back there. It's breathing hard, like it's dying." He breathed hard himself. "I don't know what it is."

Dwight shrugged and started down.

"Where's the Phillips?" Mrs. Turnbull called.

"Tippy got sick, and they had to take her to a doctor," he said, remembering the story they would give out. He stopped to let his eyes adjust to the darker, shadowed area, "Where are the lights?" he called up.

"I'll get them on," Mrs. Turnbull said. "They're at the head of the steps."

Dwight walked a few feet into the gloom, and it wasn't as dark as he had thought at first. He saw nothing, but there was a curious odor in the air. Not like the zoo, but musky, like an animal in the wilds, where the body odor was mixed with pine scent, and earth smells, and sulphur. He sniffed and took several more steps. There were deeper shadows along the wall, around the furnace, and there was a lot of junk piled there. He saw the door that must lead to the dirt cellar and wished Mrs. Turnbull would hurry with the lights. The shadows were just boxes and bundles of rugs, he decided, kicking one of them. There was no sound, no heavy breathing, nothing but the odor. He took another step and at the same moment the light came on.

Something screamed, a hoarse, inhuman sound of agony, and one of the bundles writhed and streaked out, striking Dwight on the leg. His entire leg burned and he stumbled, yelling also then. He rolled, trying to get away, and his hand touched it, and he screamed again with pain and fear. It was seven or eight feet long, and gray. He could see great, round eyes then, and a mouth opening and closing, uttering the agonizing cries, and long arms sweeping toward him, clutching the air with too many, too flexible ringers. He struck at it, and the thing swept over him, mingling its screams with his, bathing him in fire. Dwight convulsed in terror and pain that was unendurable; he stiffened, then went limp.

When Eric and Robert arrived, Mrs. Turnbull had already sent her son home, and the sheriff was at the house waiting for the state troopers. They reconstructed the events as best they could, deciding that there had been an animal, that it had lunged at Dwight, and in his efforts to elude it, he had upset acid on himself. They could find no such animal, nor did they find a container for acid, but, neither did they find anything else to fit the facts. Dwight had died of heart failure, the medical examiner said at the autopsy later that week, but he had suffered acid burns over most of his body.

A group of troopers searched the house, they tore open all the boxes and bundles in the basement, they examined the walls for seams that would indicate other rooms, they poked rods into the dirt walls of the wine cellar to make certain the unexcavated portion was actually unexcavated, and they found nothing. The case came to an uneasy conclusion which satisfied nobody.

The Groth had wanted only to be left alone then, but instead of peace another of the Earthmen had come. First a child, then a male adult Earthman. And the Groth had killed the male adult Earthman. Again it mourned for another's death, and again it knew there had been nothing else for it to do; their own hatred killed them.

Quiet descended on the house after a hectic period during which many Earthmen with much noise searched for the vlen. The Groth didn't sleep during that time, didn't monitor its equipment; it did nothing but concentrate on keeping the probes away, keeping its presence concealed. The Earthmen left once more. And while the Groth recuperated, it made plans for the next arrival of Earthmen.

Mandy lay on the hot sand listening to the endless surf, trying not to think any more. She pleaded with something, herself? Please no more, let me be for a little while, let me rest for a little while. The thoughts didn't go away. She could feel the presence of Robert, but they didn't speak then. Why don't you hold me just once, she thought, and tell me it wasn't my fault. Just once. Even if you don't mean it. She didn't know what Robert thought any more. She didn't know what she thought most of the time. If only they would get a letter from Tippy. If only she would write and let them know she was all right now, that she was having a good time, or at least a busy time. Next week they would go back to Manhattan, and Laura would return for the summer, and they had to tell her something, but not the truth, not the false truths that no one told any longer. The lies and half truths and the silent lies were so much more real than the simple truths, now that they wove stories and tried to remember the details of the falsehoods, and tripped and stumbled their way through them, and never looked directly at each other any more.

She wondered if Robert had any idea that she had overheard him on the telephone with their doctor, asking advice on her behalf. She had listened and his words had filled her with ice. Because she couldn't tell him in words, couldn't make him understand that something had happened; he assumed nothing had. The walls around other people always seemed so obvious, she had believed none existed between her and Robert. But it was there, invisible, unbreachable. The thoughts whirled and her tense body

didn't relax at all until she became very hot and had to return to the ocean to cool off again.

Robert watched her walking back, and she knew that there was fear behind his gaze, fear for her, for them. They had to talk about money, about plans for the house now, about Tippy. . . . They had to talk. Maybe tonight, she promised herself. Maybe they would be able to break through the silence that had enveloped them, and worse than the silence, the meaningless chatter that they engaged in while dining or doing any of the things where silence would draw attention to them.

Tippy walked back and forth before Eric's apartment for almost an hour before he appeared. When he saw her, his face set in hard lines and his hand on her arm was rough. "Where the hell have you been? Don't you know your mother is almost crazy worrying about you?"

"But I told her...." Tippy pulled away and looked about the people passing them, and she said, "Let's go inside. I have to talk to someone."

Eric made her a drink and she sipped it, not knowing now where to start, what to say. She was grateful when Eric broke the silence.

"First, have you been in touch with Mandy recently? She got a letter returned after you left your apartment in London. No forwarding address."

Tippy said, "Damn, I asked my friend to save any mail until I told her where to send it. I didn't know that." She looked at the phone, but didn't go near it yet. "I'll call them in a few minutes," she said.

"Have you been all right? You look like hell."

Tippy touched her face wonderingly. She hadn't noticed particularly. She shrugged. "I'm all right, I guess. I got through the finals okay, so I must be all right." Suddenly she jumped up and went to the window and stood looking out, with her back to Eric. "What happened back there? What was it?"

"I don't know," he said. He finished his drink.

"Dad thinks Mother communicated her own nervous breakdown to the rest of us somehow, made us experience it with her. Somehow." Tippy's voice held disbelief.

"That was easier for him to accept than the thought of a ghost," Eric

said. "Pathological telepathy has been written about in the journals, and even if you don't want to believe in it, it's easier to buy than the return of the dead."

Still not looking at him, Tippy said in a very low voice, "But what if he's wrong?" She turned then and her voice was vehement when she continued. "Something killed Dwight. It wasn't a projected nervous breakdown! It wasn't! He was as unaffected by Mother's attack as if it hadn't happened at all. He was beyond touch as far as her supposed telepathy is concerned."

Eric poured himself another drink, a small one, more to be doing something than because he wanted it. He said, "I didn't tell you before, Tippy. I'm sorry about Dwight. It was a tough thing for you. . . ."

She shrugged. "I don't know what would have happened with us. I think, when I can think about it, that eventually we would have broken apart, but I'll never know." She looked at her glass and drank from it slowly.

They were both silent for several moments. Then Eric said, "What are you going to do now?"

"I don't know. I feel like I have to find out what happened at that house, and I don't know how, or where to start. If Dad is right, it should be perfectly safe to go back, but if he's wrong . . . then something murdered Dwight, and that something is driving my mother crazy. Either way, I have to find out."

Eric said emphatically, "You can't go back there."

Tippy looked at him strangely. "Why? What do you know? Has something else happened?"

He hesitated only a moment, then he pulled papers from a drawer and began spreading them out. "I've done some investigating," he said. "The house was perfectly all right until about 1920, give or take a year or two. In newspapers at that time there were stories about strange lights, and the owners of the house wrote that they had acquired a ghost." Tippy shook her head, rejecting the ghost, and he said, "If you have only two theories presented, and you can accept neither of them, what next? You have to strike out to find a new theory. No nervous breakdown, no ghost, then what? Postulate an alien creature, and you can fit the rest of the facts into an intelligible pattern. Nothing else does."

Tippy stared at him with narrowed eyes, as if suspecting that he was joking with her. Her gaze became more concentrated, and finally she nodded. "Okay, go on. I don't know if I can believe that or not, but I like it

better than a haunt."

"Right. So everything settled down again, and the house remained peaceful for twelve years. The family, a Dutch importer and seven kids, servants, relatives, were very happy in the house. Then in 1932 something happened to shake all that. According to the accounts I could find, the wife died of a heart attack and two of the kids became raving maniacs overnight practically. Six months later he moved the rest of them, simply walked out of the house one day and never came back. People were sent to pack the furniture and take up carpets, and all the rest. A year later, the property was sold to John Prentiss, his wife, and her three children by a previous marriage. They stayed only two months. One of the children, a seven-year-old boy, died of what was diagnosed as acute respiratory infection at that time. The wife ran away with the two other children, and John Prentiss stayed on in the house for another two weeks. When someone came to see him, he was almost starved, practically catatonic—with grief, it was said at the time. He has since recovered, but has no memory whatever of those last weeks in the house. I talked to him."

Tippy was staring at him in fascination by then, and when he stopped, she sat down abruptly. "So there is something that lives in that house!"

"We don't know that," Eric said.

"And the other owners? What about them?"

"None of them ever lived in the house after that. Each time it changed hands, the new owners either planned changes, or started changes—like the new heating system—and then decided against living there. I talked to only one of them, Mrs. Herschel Myers. She is beautiful, you wouldn't believe unless you could see her. Weighs at least three hundred pounds, tall, strong, fiery black eyes. She and her husband escaped from Poland, walking clear across Europe to the Channel and crossed over on a raft made of saplings tied together with strips of clothing. Unbelievable. But they got to England, and after the war, they came here. In 1947 they bought the house and went to camp out in it for a weekend, and she says that she had a fight with the devil that weekend, and that while he didn't win, she knew that the house was his, and she didn't care to share it with him." He grinned and spread his hands apart. "They kept ownership of the house until 1959 when cancer killed the husband. She needed the money, or she never would have sold it. The Plainview Development Corporation bought it for an investment property, and they got stuck with it. So when your father came along, to handle insurance for the president of the corporation, he mentioned the house and its price, ridiculously low, as you know, and it changed hands again."

"If it lives there, we can find it," Tippy said softly. "We know what we're looking for—something long and gray. That's what Mike Turnbull said about what he saw."

"The official report says it was probably an injured dog down there, that it ran away after leaping at Dwight and spilling acid all over him, and that it took the container away with it."

Tippy didn't even bother to answer that. "We can draw it out, signal to it and make it reveal itself. . . ."

"How?"

"Mathematical symbols. There are constants that apply, no matter what system it uses. The speed of light, simple counting, π , multiplication tables. . . . That's no problem. But how to get it to understand that we mean no harm."

"Do we understand that?" Eric asked. "Remember it killed Dwight, and it had Mandy on the floor. . . ."

Tippy paled slightly, but her face lost none of its intent look. "They were both unprepared for it, but we know what we're doing. That makes the difference."

Eric stood up and stretched. "Let's go out and have some dinner and discuss this. We have to be absolutely certain of what we're up to, what we'll do if it does come out of hiding, what system we'll use, how we'll recognize its answer." He took her arm and pulled her from the couch where she was still sitting, staring in concentration straight ahead. "Come on. I think that's it, but let's go over it all first. Dinner."

It was a very warm afternoon when Eric and Tippy drove from the city to the house in the country. Eric had got off at noon, and they had done some shopping, so that it was almost three when they arrived. The house looked uncared for already, the grass slightly unkempt, some leaves plastered against the screening of the porch, the drapes closed on all the windows.

Tippy shivered. "Want to change your mind?" Eric asked. She shook her head.

"Let's go inside and have a sandwich," Tippy said. They took the bags from the car, and while Eric opened windows, Tippy made ham and cheese sandwiches. They drank beer and ate without talking. Afterward Tippy said, "Where do you think we should try first?"

"Basement, I guess. Seems the most likely spot."

She nodded. They carried the apparatus down the stairs and set up the buzzer and the recorder that Eric had bought. Tippy looked about hesitantly. The basement was dimly lighted and cool after the heat of the upstairs, and there was a noticeable lack of fresh air, but otherwise it seemed perfectly normal. They had the recorder and the buzzer on a workbench that Eric had dragged to the center of the floor. The bundles of rags and rugs had been removed, so that nothing but the bench was in sight. She started to count with the buzzer: one—one, two—one, two, three—one, two, three, four—one, two, three, four, five . . . then again and again. After the third time, they waited, Eric's finger poised on the recorder. They stayed in the basement for an hour, going over the routine six times. Eric put the recorder on automatic then, to be activated only if there were a sound. He connected a warning buzzer to be sounded in the house above if the recorder came on, and they left. Tippy was scowling in discouragement.

"Remember that we agreed that it would be pretty stupid if it came out at the first indication of awareness," Eric said.

"I know," she said. "But why should it come out? It knows that it's perfectly safe in its little hiding place, probably just waiting to attack again. I think we should burn down the house and forget the whole thing."

Eric nodded at her. If the thing was listening to them with any understanding, it would know that they were aware of it now, and that they could drive it out to the open with fire. Now they would wait and see.

The Groth listened and understood the reasoning behind the statement. They were familiar to it. It had learned the female already, and knew that she could not be used for its purpose. It would learn the male later, when his guard was down. It withdrew from the female reluctantly; she was very nearly suitable, but there was a hindrance in her mind that would require many long hours of persistent training to overcome, and the Groth wouldn't have the time for that. She had spent years learning to think with a certain logic that Earthmen believed was necessary to education, and the training was of the sort that interfered with extrasensory abilities. It could be overcome, if her latent ability were powerful enough, but only with time. The Groth examined again the crude apparatus they had assembled in the lowest level of the building, and it knew they would try again to contact it. Suddenly the loneliness of the long years without the lifemate overwhelmed it, and it let its thoughts curl about the buzzer and the recorder. It could communicate again, ease the last years, perhaps enlist their help through explanations. . . . It withdrew from the equipment and listened again to the words being spoken above it.

"How I would have loved this house when I was a child," Tippy said.

They were going up the wide stairs side by side, talking. They separated at the top of the steps to get dressed for swimming. The Groth followed Tippy to her room and examined it through a tiny part of her mind without intruding to the point of being felt. If she were the other female, it thought, it wouldn't have been able to do even that much. The other female was too receptive. It wished the other female had come back instead of this one. It left her then and found the male again, but without entering his mind at all yet. It couldn't afford to drive them away again. There might not be another chance if they left.

It watched them play in the cold water of the lake, and again it felt the pang of loneliness, stabbing harder this time, taking longer to banish. It visualized the young of Gron also at play in the water. It wanted desperately to enter one of the minds and feel the water on skin, but it resisted the urge and watched from the outside until they reentered the house, shivering.

"You go shower and get something on and I'll make a fire," Eric said. "Then it'll be time to try the beast again."

"Be right down," Tippy said. When she returned, she had her hair wrapped in a towel. It was almost six.

"Drink?" Eric asked.

She shook her head. "Coffee, maybe." She went to the kitchen to make it, and Eric followed her.

"You don't seem at all alarmed by being here," he said.

"I know. It's that old, it-can't-happen-to-me syndrome." The coffee was starting to perk. "Let's go down and try it again now," she said.

The Groth watched and listened while they buzzed and waited, and it wanted to answer them. As long as they had been unaware of its presence, it had been easy to think of them almost as animals, at least sub-intelligent, but now they were suddenly communicating beings. And the Groth was lonely.

"It isn't going to answer us, is it?" Tippy said, in the living room again. She was brushing her hair, drying it before the fire.

"I don't know."

"It isn't. Let's not go to the restaurant like we planned. I'll make us something here." She kept her gaze on the flickering fire. Eric stared at her for several moments before he answered.

"We promised each other that we would stick to the plan we made," he said slowly. "That was one of the conditions, remember?"

"I know, but— Look, it took us days to make up our minds to try this. Why should we expect it to make up its mind within minutes or even hours, to answer our signal? I hadn't thought of that until now. We have to give it a chance."

Eric lit a cigarette and studied it intently. "Have you felt anything at all?"

"Nothing. Unless just a little bit foolish."

He grinned at that. "Yeah. I know. Okay, we'll eat in. But the rest of the plan stays unchanged. No arguing about the motel later. Okay?"

"Sure."

The Groth continued to listen to them, and it came to understand that they were going away again later. It sank down in the tank thinking furiously. They couldn't leave now. It could communicate with them and possibly hold them that way. But they might have planned to call in authorities if it made such a move. It would have to probe to learn what their plans actually were. It signed.

Tippy talked as she prepared their dinner, and once when she looked up from the pot she was stirring, she caught Eric's gaze on her in a look that made her stop completely. She turned back to the stove in confusion.

"It's okay," Eric said, as she stirred vigorously. "Relax."

"I don't know what you mean."

"You know exactly what I mean. And you're stirring gravy out all over the stove."

She moved the pan. "It's not gravy. It's spaghetti sauce. You're too old for me." She looked him up and down. "You're my father's partner."

Eric laughed. "If you haven't burned the sauce completely, let's eat."

She laughed too then, and knew that he wasn't too old at all.

The Groth continued to watch them as they chatted and relaxed. The male was the one to probe for the plans they had made. He would not alarm as easily as the female, who had felt the probe once before. It waited until they were again comfortable before the fire, and it began to send peaceful rhythms and harmonies at them, such as were used for the Groth young. The male became wary and uneasy. The Groth withdrew. They had used sequence in *their* abortive attempt to contact it; perhaps sequence would quiet them. It sent a slower cadence at them, and this was useful.

The male relaxed again. When the Groth touched his mind, however, the male stiffened and sent hate and panic thoughts, and the rational mind was totally submerged. The Groth withdrew hurriedly before it was damaged again by the emotions of the Earthpeople.

"Eric! Are you all right? What happened?" Tippy shook him hard.

"It's gone now, I think. I ... I guess I know what you felt before." Eric felt shaken and curiously ashamed. His reaction had been so uncontrolled; the hatred that had poured over him left him shaken. "It's here," he said. His voice was too tight and flat. "And we've got to find it and destroy it. A thing like that can't go on living in the same world with men and women. It's pure evil."

Tippy stared at him. "Let's go," she said. "It ... it killed Dwight, and almost killed Mother. I don't know why we thought we could— Let's go!"

Her voice rose and Eric nodded.

The Groth couldn't let them leave. It was still shuddering from the emotional shock of the male's mind, but it knew that if they left now, there would be no future hope in time to save the mission. Its only hope for personal survival as well as the success of its mission was to get into space beyond the reach of Earthmen and go into suspended animation and await the Gron ship. It had to have their help. It reached out for the male. They were in the back of the building, near the outside door. It touched the male very easily, trying to do little damage and still hold him. The male fell down. The Groth knew that he was not dead, but in a deep trancelike state from which he would not awaken for hours. The female was screaming hysterically. She was not moving, simply screaming. The Groth retreated from her unvoiced screams: she was calling her mother and father. Not using her voice, not even knowing that she was calling them, she was screaming over and over for her mother and father. Then for her mother only. The Groth tried to be even more gentle with her than it had been with the male, but she too fell unconscious to the floor. The Groth felt its strength ebbing, and knew that again the contact had hurt it. It sank down into its tank. It was excreting alarmingly. It needed time to rest. The male and female would not stir now, and the Groth could rest. It let its mind go slack, and the too accessible dreams came and lulled it to sleep.

Mandy sat straight up, a questioning look on her face. Tippy? She started for the apartment door, then stopped in confusion. She heard it again. Or felt it.

Tippy! But where? Robert coughed in the other room, and she turned to go to him, to ask if he heard, but again she stopped. She was shaking hard suddenly, and her legs were weak; she almost fell before she got back to her chair. Was she really having a breakdown then? Voices in her head. A thrill of fear stirred in her loins, and vividly she recalled another time that she had heard Tippy's voice in her head. She had run out the door in time to jump into the front seat of the rolling car and put her foot on the brake before it had rolled backward off the road and over a cliff. Tippy was sitting without motion or sound on the front seat, four years old, terrified at what she had done. It was the same feeling now.

Where are you? she cried silently, and there was no answer. Nothing was there now, but her own fear. Slowly, still unsteady, she rose and started toward the door. She looked back at the bedroom door, but didn't tell Robert anything. He was reading in bed, would fall asleep soon, never realize that she was out. If she told him, he would try to stop her; he would stop her. She bit her lip hard and blinked back the tears that had come to her eyes. But it wasn't his fault. He simply couldn't stand things that didn't have explanations, and this didn't. She had to go out. She didn't know where she was going, but she had to get started.

She got the car from the building parking lot and started up the West Side Drive, still with no destination. She drove steadily and when she crossed the Tappan Zee Bridge, it was as if she had known from the start that she was going to the house. She didn't pause when the realization struck her.

She was not surprised to see the house lighted, with Eric's car in the driveway. She went to the kitchen door as if drawn there, and was not surprised to see the couple sprawled on the floor. She knelt by Tippy and felt her pulse, then Eric's. They were both unconscious only. She was starting for the telephone when she felt it.

The Groth woke with a start, chagrined to find that it had been dozing. The other female was there. The Groth had learned the way into her, but it hesitated, knowing that it had to use great caution, afraid that she would go into shock again at its touch. It used a probe that was as gentle and loving as the exploratory probe of a lifemate in its first contact.

Mandy moaned and clutched her head, swaying. Please, she whimpered, not again. Please. The fire spread and she began to weep. The Groth was

swept by anguish waves that loosened its control momentarily, and it got the force of her fear like a battering ram against its own brain. It concentrated on symbols that she could understand and found the intelligent part of her brain out of reach, dominated by the savage, uncontrollable sub-brain. It was like fighting a horde of demons that swirled out of focus to merge with one another and assume shapes even more frightening. She had closed her eyes tight at the first touch, but suddenly she opened them wide, and the Groth shrank back from the glare of the room where she was. She was sobbing and railing to it to go away. The Groth knew then that it had to take full control, whether or not she was damaged. Deep in the vlen the Groth closed its eyes against the pain of too bright light, and Mandy's eyes closed also. It willed its breathing to become slower and more regular, and her sobbing eased. The Groth knew that she would have to use its suit to withstand the sulphur atmosphere in the ship. She would need oxygen also, but that would be found at the lake. This was not what it had wanted. This was a criminal act. There was no cooperation, but simply control.

Slowly, like a sleepwalker, Mandy started for the basement steps. She was still clutching her bag. She crossed the basement and waited until she was taken inside the wine cellar to find a garment there. She dropped the bag when she picked up the suit and she turned and retraced her steps up and out of the house to her car. Her keys were still in the ignition. Her hand reached for the key, and she opened her eyes wide and started to tremble. The horror in her mind penetrated her understanding a little; she screamed and looked about wildly. Then it was back, the burning, crawling thing in her brain was there again. The look of near comprehension was replaced by the blankness of a somnambule, and she turned on the ignition and backed to make her turn and leave.

The Groth's body went hot with the realization that it had nearly lost her. It shivered in the tank and forced concentration back in full force. If only it hadn't been so weakened by injuries and the destructive invasions of its mind by the eroding hatred of the Earthpeople.... It had tried to find out from her the location of the lake, going to it by road, and in doing so, it had loosened its grip on the hind brain that was now guiding her every action. It had to rely on her own knowledge to get her there, hoping that she knew the way without direction. If only it could deal directly with her rational mind, but in the Earthmen, the rational mind was forever in danger of being eclipsed by the irrational hind brain that allowed no hope of intelligent behavior. The Groth strained to maintain the contact as distance separated it from the female, and with each mile, the difficulty increased. It was totally unaware of the stirring of the male in the building

above it.

Eric felt as though his head were split wide open. He opened his eyes warily and concentrated on puzzling out what the strange noise was that he was hearing. Then he remembered. He sat up too fast and was punished by a stab of pain. Tippy! She stirred and moaned at his touch, and only then did he realize he was hearing the buzzer they had rigged to the recorder in the basement.

"Tippy, snap out of it! Come on. You're okay. It's gone now."

She opened her eyes and panic came through until she saw Eric bending over her. She looked past him, then searched the rest of the kitchen in a quick glance, "What— The alarm! It's out!"

"I don't know what the hell's been going on," Eric said. He hauled her to her feet and pushed her toward the door. "Go get in the car and start it. I'm going to take a quick look in the basement."

Tippy drew back and held his arm. "Not alone," she said. "Let me stay with you."

Eric scowled, but together they went to the small entry at the back door and stared at the basement door standing open.

"I closed it," he said softly. "I remember that I closed it." They stared down the stairs and finally he said, "Oh, hell. I'm going to get the recorder and bring it up to see what we got. That fool buzzer is driving me out of my mind."

The buzzer stopped abruptly when he grabbed the recorder from the bench and ran back to the stairs. "The door to the wine cellar is open," he said as he rewound the tape to the start position. He turned it to play and they listened. There was a creaking noise, a soft thud of something falling, then nothing for a long time. Eric turned it faster so that the tape spun through, but still nothing was on it until pounding steps came through and the silence of having the recorder stopped.

Tippy stared at it in bewilderment. "Once more," she said. When the creaking finished she stopped the recorder. "That's the door to the wine cellar. It sticks every time. Something came out . . ."

"Or went in."

"Then the thud." She started it again and stopped it when the dropping noise played. "What. . . We'll have to go down to find out, won't we?"

They went down and crossed the floor to the wine cellar. Tippy screamed when she saw what had made the thud.

"It's Mother's bag! It took her inside with it!"

Eric got Tippy back up to the kitchen, then called Robert. To Tippy he said, "He's looking around for her. She didn't say anything about leaving." He listened again, then said slowly, "You'd better get out to the house. Mandy's been here, but there's no car here now." He agreed to call the state police and hung up.

The troopers put out an alert for Mandy's car, and then started another search of the house, as fruitless as their previous search had been. The Groth became aware of the probing in the wine cellar, and Mandy almost skidded off the road. It turned its full attention to her again. Mandy was driving well, but too fast. She slowed down. Each moment for her was sufficient to itself; there was no future, no past. It was exactly like a dream in which anything can be accepted no matter how unrelated it is to anything else. She performed well, obeyed traffic laws, was careful at intersections, and had no thought about where she was going, or why. She was driving, and that was enough. Now and again there was a flash of terror and repulsion, but always it was banished very quickly, and she no longer was aware of any physical discomfort. The Groth was delighted with the facilitation that had been accomplished so quickly. It knew that the experiences it had shared with her before had made this contact possible, and it wasn't deceived into thinking it could yet communicate with her rational mind directly. Trying that would set up such an inner conflict within her that she probably would be lost to it. It listened briefly to the searchers, and now there was added a new silent voice calling her, through the Groth, reaching for her. It tried to shut out the mental cries and succeeded only partially. It felt the impact on the female and redoubled its efforts to keep her under control.

She drove north on secondary roads until she turned to a narrow blacktop road that led to the south shore of the lake.

The Groth felt the agonized call again and again, and it knew it had to still the silent voice bombarding its brain. Mandy's car swerved and braked hard. "No!" she screamed, aloud and in her mind. She pulled away from the Groth, and there was a meaningless jumble where there had been order in her mind. She had understood its thought! The Groth brought her back, but not fully yet, and both felt the struggle as she fought to stay free. She was nearly hysterical with her effort, and the Groth was excreting so dangerously that it feared unconsciousness would end the battle. The Groth understood that it was her lifemate who was calling to her through it, and it knew that it could not harm the lifemate and still keep the female under control. With the understanding that reached the Groth, the female

became compliant again and resumed the drive toward the lake.

Mandy saw the black water before her and turned left. That was the way. She would need diving gear. That she had never dived before didn't occur to her then. She would need a tank of oxygen in order to clear the door and attach the air lock, and to breathe after she had got inside the ship. She stopped the car shortly after turning, and she parked it carefully in brush so that it couldn't be seen from the road. Then she pulled the garment from the car, and found the bubble air lock rolled up inside it. The Groth worked hard to reach out with her mind to find the oxygen, and twice while it searched, it almost lost contact with the female. Each time the primal fears rose in her; each time there was a battle again for control. The Groth knew that it was weakening rapidly. It had to finish soon, or it would lose after all. If only the pounding from the building would cease, and it didn't refer then to the physical search that was continuing. Robert was beating it down, and it would do nothing about the male adult. It had touched him once only, and it had found an infirmity that could bring about death almost instantly if the provocation were great enough. Probing by the Groth would be great enough. It located oxygen tanks finally, and again Mandy was moving with purpose. She stole a tank from a cabin, walking within feet of the slumbering occupants and out again, back to the lake. The Groth understood the principle of the tanks, but it had not used anything like them, and it was a matter of trial and error until the tank was strapped to Mandy's back. She had donned the garment without hesitation when directed to do so, and now with the tank in place, she was ready. That the suit was two feet too long for her didn't matter; she would have no real swimming to do. And her fingers could work, even though most of the digit holes had been left empty. She walked out awkwardly into the water, breathing uncertainly through the mouthpiece, but showing no fear of submerging. The Groth felt very proud of her, and she seemed to be aware of its pleasure. It felt that there was less resistance to it. But there was none of the real joy lifemates knew when they were working in harmony.

The Earthmen in the building housing the vlen had a digging machine at work. The Groth had to explore it, to assess its threat. They were going through the earth cellar, would strike the compressed soil that surrounded the vlen within an hour. It would stop them, of course, but if they decided to blast it with explosives, then they would know that it wasn't merely rock they were hitting. . . . But all that would take time, and perhaps by the time they got that far, it would be far out in space ...

Mandy sank to the bottom of the lake, fighting for air, thrashing her

arms and legs in a futile attempt to swim. She was being held down by the winding material that covered her completely, and stank, and there was no air. She clutched at the material over her face and tried to rip it away. Her lungs were bursting, and a curious lightheadedness overcame her. Her thrashing motions were weaker. The pain in her lungs and fear were all she knew, and abruptly it was back with her.

Help me, she begged it. Help me. Please.

There was no fight this time. It directed her hands to the air hose and got it in place. She choked on the first breath of air, and it soothed her and quieted her so that she could breathe normally. It wondered at the tears from its own eyes. It couldn't leave her again. If she did that inside the ship, she would die almost instantly, and her death would be ugly. It fastened all its resources on her then, and she got the air lock in place and went inside it. She turned on the tiny pump, and when the water was exhausted, she opened the door to the ship and entered that. The Groth saw it with its own eyes, and with hers, and it was shocked by the difference. She thought it was hideous, all dark and fungi-like with strange shapes that faded from sight in shadows. It took her to the controls and checked them out. . . . Why didn't someone do something to quiet that male, her lifemate? It tried to close him out, but the lifemate was getting stronger, harder to keep away. She felt his call too, and symbols unfamiliar to the Groth rose and had to be quieted again. It made her work fast, but her hands were clumsy in the suit that was not designed for creatures with only five short fingers. It wondered how they had come down from the trees with such hands. The Groth thought gloomily that it might have to abandon the ship, the vlen, the data bank in orbit, everything.

Then the ship stirred slowly away from the muck at the bottom of the lake. The Groth searched through her for observers and found the area clear, and only then pushed the control that took the ship aloft. The ship went straight up as her hands waited for it to do something else with them. The Groth realized how much flying depended on conditioned reflex, how little on conscious control. It had to think hard to keep her eyes turned in the right direction so that it could see the controls. It felt so different now to do with its mind what its fingers had done without its conscious attention. It leveled off much too high, and there was not complete contact.

Mandy stared in horror at the controls before her eyes. She knew that she mustn't let go of the air hose again, and she clamped her teeth hard on the mouthpiece when she felt a scream welling up. Not now. Where was the creature? Where was she? She didn't dare move her hands. Somehow

she found it, or it found her, and despite all her terror at finding herself alone in the ship, she found herself righting it again, trying to push it away, shrinking from the repulsive, creeping, burning probe that curled through her brain.

The Groth knew it was being too harsh with her this time. It felt it in the slump of her body, which would have fallen to the floor of the ship without its support. It had entered her again without the gentle, subtle approach, thinking that by now she should be accustomed to it. She wasn't. Never would be, it appeared. Her body responded to its commands, but there was no time now to be easy on her. The ship was turned and homed in on the vlen and the tunnel entrance. It hovered over the area and descended softly to the clearing near the boulder that concealed the entrance. The female turned the ship in the right direction and turned on the energy beam that made moving the boulder a matter of directing it only. The energy flowed into the tunnel, and at the far end of it, the Groth started the computer on its way out. The beam carried it along effortlessly, drew it up into the ship. One by one the Groth's furnishings were drawn aboard, and suddenly the female broke loose. She was standing on the ground, close to the ship.

"Robert!" she screamed. She looked about her at the strange ship, and felt the burn of the acidic air, and opened her mouth to scream again. The Groth touched her, and when she fell, it moved her carefully to where she would be able to breathe her own air. It made certain that she was alive, but it was hard to be certain that she would stay alive. It hurried and finished cleaning out the vlen. The male lifemate was leaving the building. The Groth followed him with part of its mind, and it brought the walls of the vlen inward with the remaining instruments it had with it. It backed out of the tunnel, collapsing the walls as it went. Outside, it replaced the boulder. It stopped and looked down at the female lying on the ground, and very carefully it probed her again. She moaned. The Groth examined the extent of the acid burns she had suffered, and found that they were negligible; she was in shock now. Using great care, it had her remove the suit she wore. Then it soothed her mind, giving her the image of the Gron sea with cool, dim lights playing on the surface, and gentle swells lulling one into deep, healing sleep. It gave her the feeling of love and peace that went with the image. Her breathing became less labored, and her heart became regular and stronger. It could do no more for her. The lifemate was coming toward them fast now, homing in on her with a steadfastness that was unbelievable in one so lacking in training. The Groth climbed inside the ship and took a deep breath of fresh air there. It left the spot before Robert arrived, climbing straight up and away from Earth, a dark

shadow without sound. It was so tired that it didn't know if it would recover from this ordeal or not. But that was a small matter. The mission would be successful. The Groth would be able to study the Earthmen and when time for contact came, it would be made with a minimum of strain, and a maximum of good will. That was the important thing.

Mandy woke up screaming, and continued to scream until there was a jab of a needle in her arm. When she woke again, Robert was beside her, but the room was painfully bright. She shut her eyes hard, almost remembering . . . something. It was gone. She was in a hospital room; she knew the smell of it, the texture of the sheets on the bed, the distant sounds that went with a hospital.

"You're all right, Mandy," Robert said. There was an anxious tone in his voice that said he wasn't certain that she was though. She opened her eyes again and the strangeness gave way slowly to familiarity. Robert was gray with black circles under his eyes.

"Did you see ... anything?" she asked. Her mouth and throat hurt.

"There wasn't anything there to see. You have to believe that, Mandy. You have to. We tore the basement apart, searched every inch of the woods, called in experts. Nothing was there!"

"Tippy? Eric?"

"They're fine. Mandy, they won't let me stay long with you. Please try to understand that nothing was there. Eric must have fallen and hit his head. Tippy panicked when she saw him on the floor. She fainted. We questioned them a dozen times and neither of them knows anything at all. After we finished with the basement, even Eric had to admit that nothing could have been down there. Mandy, look at me. You do believe me, don't you?"

She closed her eyes slowly, this time in weariness. There was something just on the edge of awareness, if only she could turn quickly enough she would be able to see it. "Why did you go into the woods? You found me, didn't you?"

"I don't know. I must have heard you scream. I can't remember now, but it must have been a noise you made."

In quick succession she caught snatches of scenes: a lake, black with

night, going into it; a ship of some sort; a strange creature that was hurt and lonely and terrifying and repellent. And lovely. She tried to hold onto one of the images, but couldn't. She couldn't connect them with anything.

"How did you get burned, Mandy? Do you remember?" Robert asked.

She shook her head, not opening her eyes. But it was there, too, fading away out of reach. If only he could see with her, help her understand. What little she did retain he would reject. There was no proof, no way to demonstrate it, to weigh it, measure it, compare it to other experiences. Her thoughts were becoming distorted as she drifted back toward sleep and she cried out. Robert squeezed her hand, and she never had felt so alone in her life. Where she was hurt and afraid, he couldn't reach. Then there was something else there, an image of a cool, dimly lighted sea where young played and gentle swells lulled one to deep, peaceful sleep, and where one had love and peace, and was never alone. She smiled and fell asleep again. After a moment Robert released her hand.

"There wasn't anything there," he said under his breath, looking down at her. "We would have found a trace of something." But where had she been? What had happened to her? What was causing her to smile so tenderly in her sleep now? Dully he left the room. They would call him when she woke up again. He walked silently down the empty hospital corridor to the room they had given him for the night, and he knew that the walls and doors didn't matter at all. He was no more separated from her by them than he was when he stood at her side and held her hand and failed to share what she felt, what she thought, what memories caused her first to cry out in terror, then to smile in her sleep. No matter how close they were, they were so far apart, so alone. Always so alone.

The End