

ANCESTRAL VOICES

By Gardner Dozois & Michael Swanwick

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Like all intelligent creatures, it adapted. Behind it was fire! fear! pain! horror! and it fled from them through madness and roaring chaos, fled for a long nightmarish time through an unfamiliar world, through a phantasmagorical confusion of alien shapes and lights and stinks and noises, fled until its strength was gone and it could flee no more.

After that was the black churning darkness of oblivion.

When it came to itself again, awareness returning bit by incremental bit, it was in a dank and narrow alley between the back of a decaying flophouse hotel and the side of a liquor store, lying still in the deep black shadow behind a mound of overstuffed green garbage bags.

Warily, it surveyed its surroundings, taking in the tall brick walls that rose on either side, the muddy, slime-coated pavement upon which it rested, the dull red light—from an ancient, buzzing neon sign on the corner—that ebbed and flooded rhythmically through the darkness, the thin sliver of alien sky far overhead...and again it was taken by disorientation and fear. It reached instinctively for knowledge, for connection with the flood of data that would tell it location, status, mission, and instead it touched fire! fear! pain! horror! and recoiled from the searing agony of the memory.

Cautiously, it tried again to remember, like an electric linesman testing a live wire by gingerly brushing it with his thumb, and again it was driven back by the sizzling intensity of what lurked in the recesses of its own mind. Again and again it tried to remember, until its mind was ablaze with pain, and shudders ran like waves across the long flat carpet of its body. But nothing would come.

Its past was gone. It *had* no past—it had been born in that endless moment of pain and red screaming chaos, and before that it could not go. Instinctively it knew that it didn't belong here, that the world around it was alien, frighteningly *wrong*, but it couldn't remember how the world should be, what or where home was, what it was doing here in this place whose wrongness beat in upon its senses from every side.

Trembling, it lay flat in the cold mud of the alley. Each new sound from the unknown world beyond, each metallic roar or shriek or clatter, sent a new pulse of terror through it.

And then something blocked part of the light from the alley-mouth.

A monstrous figure loomed there, huge and dark and terrible.

There was the sound of a can being kicked underfoot, sent clattering away against the wall.

The figure moved slowly closer, down the alleyway, swaying, staggering from side to side, pushing a wave of rich alien stink before it.

“Oblah-*dee*,” the figure muttered. “Oblahfucking-dee, oblahfucking-*blah*—” It crashed against the wall, pushed away again. “Life goes fucking *onnnn*, blah—” The figure coughed, coughed again spasmodically, hawked and spat. “Sonsabitches,” it mumbled. “Think they can tell me...”

Weaving. Coming closer.

It saw the wino with the colorless, directionless perception characteristic of its race, but, more importantly, it *felt* him, felt the rush and interplay of electrical impulses along the intricate pathways of the wino’s nervous system, felt the cold living fire that pulsed about the cerebrum, felt the sensuous shifting and interweaving of alpha and beta rhythms....

Suddenly, it was *hungry*.

The hunger rose in a bitter, biting flood, driving away fear, overwhelming everything. For a moment it didn’t know what to do, and then instinct took over, a deep cellular knowledge that sent it rippling silently forward, deeper into the shadow cast by the wall of garbage bags, its mantle stiffening and rising.

It melded itself flat against the cold surface of the bags.

It waited....

The wino had stubbed his toe and was cursing in a low, racking undertone. Then he stumbled forward again. “Wham-bam, thank you ma’am,” he muttered. “*Oh yeah. Oh yeah.*” He lurched against the garbage bags, almost toppling them, then ripped one open with both hands and began rummaging clumsily, spilling tin cans and bottles and soggy old paper bags to the ground. “You don’t know how lucky they *aarrree*, boys...back in the—back in the—shit!” An empty pint crashed to the ground, breaking with a flat, pinpoint spray of glass. He chuckled. “Dead soldier. Don’t make no nevermind. What I should of told her, what I *shoulda* told her....” He fished an old sneaker out of the trash, examined it, wriggling his fingers through the large hole in the sole. “*Oh yeah.*” He threw the sneaker aside, leaned forward into the shadow.

The wino’s face filled its field of vision, huge, terrifying, slathered in bristly black whiskers, eyes as big and bloodshot red as harvest moons, the stink of corruption breathing from the slackened lips....

“Molly stays at home and does her fucking face.” He dug his arms more deeply into the trash. “Oblah—”

It struck.

The derelict jerked convulsively, as if he had walked into a high-tension line, jerked again, and toppled to the ground, bringing the trash can clattering down with him.

It stretched its body into a rope to follow him down, maintaining contact, feeding, feeding voraciously....

On the ground, the wino twitched and quivered, already dead, his eyes rolled horribly up into his head, the whites gleaming in the starlight. It too quivered as it fed, its long flat body pulsing and swelling like a fire hose with a high-pressure head of water working through it.

Then—stillness. The wino's body had shrunken, collapsed in upon itself, sucked dry of all nourishment. Only the blood and bone and flesh was left behind. It spread its own body out, relaxing, allowing itself to form into a flat, almost-oval, molecule-thin carpet about five feet across.

But with the blunting of its hunger, fear returned.

Something huge and rank drifted past the alley-mouth, bellowing in a tremendous voice, making a terrible iron crash and clatter—

It started, contracting its body into a narrow ribbon again. The disturbance was only a garbage truck—but it didn't know that, and through its mind flashed again the torrent of fire! fear! pain! horror!

Without thinking, it rippled to the back of the alley and flowed straight up a wall. When it regained its composure, it found itself on a high place, empty space everywhere around it, open to the frighteningly alien sky.

Something swooped at it from that sky, shining a dazzling light. Something dark and enormous that seemed to skim by just a few feet overhead. The airport was just beyond, and to the residents of that particular flophouse hotel, it often seemed as if the big jets in the landing pattern were brushing their wheels on the roof as they went over.

Again it fled in unknowing panic, pouring itself like a tide of mist across rooftops, up walls, down rusting and dilapidated fire escapes. Instinctively seeking shelter from this nightmare place, it squeezed between the slats of a broken and boarded-up window, and found itself in darkness.

In darkness, it calmed again, its panic fading.

There were heavy, bulky objects around it in the gloom, its spatial sense told it, and gratefully it poured itself under them, working its way as far in as it could. Feeling safer for the sheltering mass above it, it let its mind drift into the neutral looping that served its kind for sleep....

Early the next morning, a neutral alarm jolted it back into active mode, and it watched from under a cluster of heavy Victorian furniture—dressers, hunt cabinets, wardrobes, highboys, roll-top mahogany desks: the sheltering masses of the night before—as a man came into the room, a bald-pated man with a frizzy halo of white hair around his ears and a hammer tucked by the claw-end into the breast pocket of his coveralls. It had found refuge in an antique warehouse, a rundown and half-abandoned brick building that had, sometime in the nineteenth century, been a harness-maker's factory. Now the downstairs floor was used as a workshop, while the upper two floors were devoted to the storage of antiques awaiting either renovation or delivery, room after room of dusty furniture, some of which had not been moved or touched in years.

Whistling, the man kicked at a wardrobe, tapped the joints a few times with the hammer, then tipped the wardrobe over so he could work the nails loose from the wood.

It had shrunk away at the close approach of the man's feet. Now it stirred and oozed forward again, sliding under a sideboard, a pharmacist's cabinet, a claw-footed bath basin, pausing finally under an overstuffed damask armchair to observe the workman.

Still whistling, the workman pulled a square of sandpaper from his hip pocket and began to rasp away at the wardrobe.

The fire-of-life was there, the crackling electric interplay of the nervous system....

Hunger stirred in it again, and it felt its mantle stiffen and rise.

Slowly it slid forward....

The workman tucked the sandpaper away in his pocket, picked up the hammer again, and tapped ruminatively at the wardrobe. The wan gray morning light gleamed from his bald head and glinted from his thick eyeglasses as he moved. He was a superstitious man, given to hunches and omens and premonitions, but now, in a supreme bit of irony, with death gliding silently up behind him, he was oblivious to its presence.

Death was a lightless black ribbon that reared up behind him, a hooded flat cobra-shaped shadow that loomed over him, paused, and with the slightest involuntary tremble prepared to strike, to reach out to claim him....

Inches from the workman, so close his internal interplay of forces was a tantalizing tickle, it stopped. It stopped, made hesitant by a flicker of the same sort of shadowy, half understood instinct or almost-memory that the night before had taught it how to kill. The pattern of the fire-of-life was complex and intensely bright—this was certainly a sophont, and somehow it knew that killing sophonts could be dangerous if other sophonts learned of the killing, if you alerted them to

your presence *by* the killing, especially if you were incautious enough to kill near your own nest or refuge. It was just now beginning to realize how much of its surroundings were artificial, *crafted*; the other night it had seen the buildings and rooftops and alleyways as natural formations, alien mountains and canyons and outcroppings of rock, and only now, replaying the thread of that memory, could it begin to guess how much of all it had seen so far had been *made*.

Created! This spoke of a world of almost unbelievable complexity, a world whose ways would have to be unraveled with patience and caution, and it dare not endanger the best refuge it had found so far just for a quick and easy kill.

It reversed direction, flowing backward as easily as it had flowed forward, disappearing under a chiffonier.

The workman continued tapping at the wardrobe, as unaware of his reprieve as he had been of his endangerment. As he put the hammer away and fished a screwdriver out of his belt, he began to whistle “Amazing Grace.” Already deep inside the warehouse, the hammering and whistling fading behind, it sped through the dim and cobwebbed spaces beneath dustcovered harpsichords and mildewing Victorian sofas and wormholed grandfather clocks, seeking out the sealed-off and deserted sections of the building where men never went, seeking safer prey.

It adapted.

There were pigeons by the dozen in the deserted attic of the warehouse, and in the long-unused belvedere, boarded-up sloppily enough to be open to the sky on three sides, there were pigeons by the hundreds. There were cats on the surrounding maze of rooftops, and rats in the alleyways and sewers it learned to hunt by night. There was a little park a few blocks from the warehouse, and there among the trees and bushes it learned to take squirrels and field mice and nesting birds of all sorts. People would bring big dogs to the park and unleash them and let them run, and it took several of those, finding them very satisfactory. It needed a good deal of nourishment, fairly frequently, and finding that nourishment kept it busy.

It stayed hidden by daylight as much as it could, although it soon realized that the native sophonts were unlikely to spot it even then—it blended well with the stained and soot-covered and moss-overgrown walls of the city, and it traveled the roofways where people seldom looked. Electrical appliances and motor vehicles made it uneasy, and it stayed away from them; it had learned early that they were not alive, but their electrical fields touched off strange longings and sudden goosed scurryings of almost-memories that disturbed the placid mental status quo it had established for itself, the easy looping of its mind in ways that did not force it to confront the fire! fear! pain! horror! that always lurked somewhere just below its surface thoughts. It also had a strange effect occasionally on the electric appliances, though it didn’t pay any attention to that.

It adapted, the weeks went by, and fall began to solidify into winter.

Prey became harder to find as the days grew colder. It often went hungry. It had made serious inroads on the local dog and cat population—although there were always a few strays drifting in to partially compensate—and many of the pigeons were nesting elsewhere now, having shifted their range for blocks and even miles to avoid the relentless horror that poured like smoke across the gables and ledges and roof-eaves. Even the rats had noticeably thinned out.

One dull gray afternoon, it took three children who were playing in the park, and that evening the park and the streets around the park were thick with men with flashlights, too many men to make further hunting possible.

There was also the night that the Northern Lights danced faintly in the sky, and it danced with them, whirling and darting madly on the deserted, icy rooftops under the cold stars, feeling the enormous magnetic fields stir and scramble its emotions even at that great distance.

In that still and freezing night, fey and hungry and half-mad, it left its usual resting place in the ruined belvedere and went down through the building to the warehouse floor, penetrating deep into the tangles of stacked-up furniture, craving the solidity of mass between it and the dancing maddening fires that flared and dimmed on the horizon.

It found a drawer left ajar in a massive dresser that stood upright inside a thick wooden box, and slithered inside. It waited there in the darkness, jittering and buzzing with sick energy, unable to loop its mind into oblivion, nearly insane, occasionally striking furiously and futilely at the smooth wood in side the drawer.

Half an hour later, the white-haired workman entered the ware house. He had had a hot roast beef sandwich and a couple of knocks of whiskey at the bar on the corner, and now he had one last task to finish up before he called it quits and went home. Taking off his overcoat, he reached over and snapped on his portable radio, but could get nothing out of it but a see-sawing squeal of static. He shrugged and switched it off—the damn thing had been going haywire off and on for a couple of months now, and the phones and the old black-and-white TV in the office had been on the fritz too, now and again. Sunspots, maybe, or some damn microwave relay tower nearby. Fry us in our goddamn jeans yet, he thought sourly, only dimly aware of the subconscious pun. He gathered up his tools and walked toward the massive packing crate.

A step or two from it, he stopped, and felt a chill shiver up his spine. “Somebody’s walking on my grave,” he said aloud, the words coming out flat and strange in this familiar place that all at once seemed too big and dark and echoingly empty. Gooseflesh had blossomed on his arms, and he ran his hands down over them to smooth it. There was a big Federal dresser in the crate, already surrounded by wood on three sides. The dresser’s bottom drawer was standing ajar, and

abruptly, without knowing why, he reached out with the toe of his work shoe and kicked it solidly shut.

Another chill shuddered along his spine, raising the tiny hairs on the back of his neck. It was funny that he'd never noticed how dark and cavernous it was here at night, or how black and spooky the surrounding shadows were.

Shivering, he manhandled the last end of the packing crate into position and began to nail, noticing that he was taking unusual, almost obsessive, care to make sure that the crate was closely and firmly sealed—again without knowing why—as though for some esoteric reason it needed to be airtight. A line from an old church song was running repeatedly through his head: *Amazing grace...something something...that saved a wretch like me....*

When the job was done—and he took twice as long about it as he should have taken—but before he turned out the lights and went gratefully home, the workman took out a Magic Marker and on the side of the crate in large, somewhat shaky letters wrote:

Mrs. Alma Kingsley

Maple Hill Farm

Eden Falls, Vermont

“Gamma, there’s a truck with men outside!”

Alma Kingsley put her Manhattan down on the kitchen counter—carefully, for her arthritis was acting up again—and said to her granddaughter, “Dear child, please *do* endeavor to refrain from calling me ‘Gamma’ in the future. It makes you sound most deplorably winsome.”

Jennifer beamed and laughed, as she did at all of her grandmother’s more gravely sententious pronouncements. She didn’t know what they meant, but they all sounded funny to her.

Meanwhile, however, the driver of the truck was leaning on his horn, and his assistant was at the tailgate, wrestling an enormous crate onto the lift. “Come, child,” Mrs. Kingsley said. “Get your coat. You may find this interesting.” She swept into the yard, little Jenny trailing after her like a hyperkinetic pull-toy.

Outside, the day was cold, with a promise of snow in the air—a promise seconded by a sky as uniformly gray and featureless as an old blanket. Beyond the rocky, frozen fields, a fringe of trees marked the ravine separating Maple Hill Farm from the Laferrier place—though their farmhouse was not visible from here. They were isolated, alone among the Green Mountains, and that was the way Alma Kingsley preferred it. She couldn’t abide people tromping through here with their problems and their petty jealousies and ambitions. She’d put the world behind her more than a decade ago, when she gave up the editorship of *New England*

magazine, and she liked it that way.

As they crossed the yard, a flight of three military jets screamed by, only a couple of hundred feet away, flying very low to the ground, black and sleek and predatory as mechanical sharks. The immense noise of their passing seemed to shake the bones of the world, and everybody looked up, Jennifer waving excitedly, the two workmen staring at them expressionlessly for a moment and then looking away. The jets roared away across the fields, still hugging the ground, afterburners blazing, hopped up over a distant ridge, and were gone. They left a shocked, ringing silence in their wake.

Alma Kingsley compressed her lips and kept walking. She didn't like military planes flying across her land, but there was little point in complaining at a time like this, when she'd only be ignored. They were practicing for war—practicing flying low to the ground to avoid radar, maybe, or perhaps doing mock strafing runs on her barn or the delivery truck. They'd get to try their hand at the real thing soon enough, the way things were going.

Jennifer was babbling happily to her about the planes, but she ignored her. The workmen nodded politely to her, not quite tugging the forelocks they didn't have anyway, and she nodded stiffly back. No one spoke. She gestured for them to unload the big crate, and tugged an inquisitive Jennifer safely out of the way while the lift lowered it ponderously to the ground, and the men grunted it onto a hand-truck.

Iago came bounding up from wherever it is that dogs go, barking furiously at the men, who ignored him. The huge black mongrel ran in frantic circles, from Mrs. Kingsley to the truck and back again, until she had to take him by the collar, swat him on the rump to get his attention, and—pointing firmly downward—order him to “Sit!” He obeyed unhappily, watching the unloading with a worried, disapproving expression.

She supervised the delivery, directing the workmen to take the crate—carefully!—into the old barn, which had once held a few cows and maybe a horse but now had been snuggled up and served for storage space. They set the crate down and produced hammers and pry bars, and, with a shriek and squeal of protesting nails, the front came off, revealing her newest acquisition, a perfectly lovely piece that she had spotted on her last trip down south and which (not coincidentally) was the spitting image of a dresser her Aunt Dorothy had owned when she was a child, and which she had always, through all the intervening decades, lusted after. It was a triumph of will, her owning this piece, and the fulfillment of a girlhood oath, and she savored it as such.

“Now I'm going to want you to come back Tuesday, after the guests are gone, to place it in the house,” she admonished the driver. Then, to her granddaughter, “No, dear, we do *not* root about on the dirty floor like small, ill-mannered swine.” And again to the driver, “*Tuesday*, you understand, because I will not have you underfoot with company here. I'll need to decide which furniture to

shift, as well.”

The driver nodded slowly and, after a pause, said “Yep.” There was a quiet censoriousness to his monosyllabic reply, as if it were an admonition to keep her words and reasons to herself. His assistant, chewing on something—either gum or “chaw,” probably the latter—jaws agape and about as attractive-looking as a cow at its cud, was wielding his pry bar with abandon, splintering the crate’s planks, threatening the absolutely priceless—and irreparable should it be damaged—patina of the wood. Until finally she could not bear to simply watch any longer.

“Hand me that pry,” she snapped, and took it away from the gawking youth. There was a correct way to uncrate furniture; you sought out the joints and deftly, even daintily, applied leverage *there*, so that the whole thing popped open like a walnut shell under properly applied nutcrackers. Brute force was totally unnecessary. And so she would have shown him, only her arthritis chose that instant to seize up, and her hands became about as useless as clubs, and wouldn’t close all the way around the pry. She made a feeble pass or two at the wood, but it was hopeless—the tool slid in her hand, refusing to obey her. She couldn’t even *hold* the damnable thing.

She looked up then, and in a timeless instant of glaring horror saw that the driver and his slack-jawed assistant were both staring her with pity in their eyes. Jennifer, thankfully, was too young to comprehend, and stood looking on with innocent curiosity.

For a moment, she trembled with humiliation, and then, furiously, she flung the pry bar to the floor. Tears flooding her eyes, she gasped, “Oh, *you* do it!” and fled.

Behind her, the men quietly, red-facedly, settled the dresser into a dry corner. When it was in place, the driver rubbed it down with his pocket bandana to remove any greasy fingerprints, and swiftly pulled each drawer out a half-inch and back in again, to make sure that none had seized up in transit. He was a conscientious man, and always gave his work this extra bit of care and attention. But he wasn’t anxious to linger, and it was entirely understandable that, in his haste, he didn’t fully re-close one drawer.

It was dying.

Hunger had driven it to the sharp edge of starvation. It was already seriously sick, or it would have abandoned the dresser immediately upon regaining the mental equilibrium that served it for consciousness. No matter how comfortably enclosed, how nurturing and psychologically sheltering a niche it was, the drawer had proven unsafe. But the long exposure to first one, then another truck’s electrical systems had weakened and disoriented it, and filled it with anguished glimpses of something that *was once*, or perhaps *ought to be*, but was now no more. It trembled shiveringly where it was, until the hunger rose up like a wall and forced it out.

Moving as swiftly—as noiselessly—as shifting shadows, it scavenged the barn, a whirlwind of silent wrath, in search of the fire-of-life all living creatures carried within. Up in the rafters it took a clutch of bats, engulfing them before they could stir from their upside-down perches, and felt better for it, unsatisfied, but no longer so ravenous. Again and again, it scoured the barn, knowing that there should be more prey, and bewildered by its absence.

Frequently it passed by yellow cardboard boxes with grain spilling out from them and of course could not recognize them as bait stations filled with rat poison. But it quickly came to realize that the nourishment it must have would of necessity have to be found outside.

Cautiously, it edged out into the farmyard, slipping easily under the barn door.

And—fire! fear! pain! horror!—found its spatial sense overwhelmed by land that stretched far and away, featureless and with no place to hide, no sheltering masses or deep crannies into which to duck, nothing but rolling, exposed emptiness for hundreds of times its own length. Off to one side was the farmhouse, surrounded by evergreen shrubbery and a few ancient oaks, but it hardly spared that a glimpse in its panicked retreat back into the barn.

Terrified, cold, and hungry, it returned to the half-open drawer to huddle shivering like a wounded animal, its mind looping furiously over and over again and still not easing out the jagged static terror. It waited, because it had to, waited for something to change, for food to come to it, or else for the hunger and need to grow so great that it would be forced out into the openness and emptiness where it currently dared not go.

Mrs. Kingsley was tucking Jennifer into bed when the child's father came up the drive. She carefully bundled the little girl in, first between a pair of flannel sheets, then under a thin electric blanket, and finally—to top it all off—pulling a double-wedding band quilt over all. The quilt was one her mother had made, in point of fact, and Alma Kingsley hoped to live long enough to pass it on to her granddaughter, when the child came of marrying age.

“It's snowing outside,” Jennifer said as her grandmother smoothed down the quilt. And then, in that flat, absolutely sincere way children have of presenting their fantasies, she said, “And I saw a Monster from my window.”

It was then, in a kind of ironic counterpoint, that the El Dorado purred up the long drive. Jennifer sat up immediately. “Is that Daddy, Gamma?”

Mrs. Kingsley smoothed the child down on the pillow, then turned to look out the window. A few small, bitter flakes of snow were falling from the black sky. They fell fast, a precursor of more to come. The El Dorado pulled off the drive, which was unnecessary, and onto the house's front yard, which was worse. It was winter

and the grass was dead, but, still, that kind of treatment *hurt* a lawn.

“Yes, it’s your father,” she said. The car’s front door opened and the man himself spilled drunkenly out. “No, don’t get up. I am certain that your father would rather find you tucked angelically into bed than running about cater-wauling like a wild heathen Indian. Parents are peculiar in that respect.”

Jenny giggled appreciatively, if somewhat sleepily. Outside, the El Dorado’s *other* front door swung open.

Alma Kingsley slipped out of the room, snapping off the light. “I’ll leave the door open a crack,” she said. “Now you just lie there with your eyes closed, so when your father comes in to kiss you goodnight, you can open them and surprise him. Won’t that be fun?”

The child nodded slowly, then twisted a bit to dig her cheek into the pillows.

“Sweet dreams,” Mrs. Kingsley murmured.

She went downstairs to confront the father.

Iago came padding out from the kitchen as she threw a jacket over her thin shoulders against the terrible cold outside. He stood by her side, anxious with doggish worries of his own, as she flung the front door open. Desmond stood on the stoop, one arm flung around his roadhouse floozy’s neck, grappling vaguely for her breasts, and the other digging through his pockets—with equal incompetence—in search of the door key. He gaped up stupidly at her.

“How *dare* you?” she whispered, so as not to wake the child. “Your own daughter is in this house!” The snow was falling more thickly now, slanting down fast and tightly together, filling the air. The air was so full of snowflakes you could choke on them. If you listened carefully, you could hear them hit, it was so quiet. A whispery, slithery sound.

Desmond released the woman. He looked directly into Alma Kingsley’s eyes, possibly the first time he had done so since arriving at Maple Hill Farm. “You sanctimonious old bag,” he said quietly, also unwilling to disturb the child. “Stephanie died over a year ago. And you know something? A year is a long time to go without. You’d know that yourself, if you could remember that far back....”

The floozy—her hair was that hideous aniline red that positively shrieked its artificiality—hung back, embarrassed. Or maybe not; she gaped up at them from the car, as vacant-faced as a cow. Mrs. Kingsley didn’t spare her a second glance.

“I will not tolerate having the morals of a child corrupted within my house!” She moved to slam the door shut in his face.

The father caught the door with one hand, and effortlessly held it open. He was a short, heavy man, with a dirty little fringe of beard. About as far from the

Kingsley type as you could get, but a strong creature nevertheless. For an instant, she thought he was going to actually strike her, could almost feel the pain, the old bones cracking under porcelain skin.... But he didn't. He just grinned, a mean, drunken grin. "I don't *like* bringing Jenny up here twice a year," he said. "I only did it for Stephanie's sake, when she was alive, and now for Jenny. She likes being on your farm. But I'll tell you this—either you let us in or this is the fucking *last* time you'll ever see the child again."

She stood motionless in the doorway, losing heat to the out-of-doors while Desmond leered up at her. The snow was gathering already, a light powder-sugar frosting on the bare and frozen ground. The wind was already sweeping it to and fro. The air was cold on her face and it seemed to her that so long as she didn't move, she could hold back the future, keep from ever *having* to move, keep from slipping into a situation where she had lost control, where she was defeated before she even began.

At her heel, the dog whined plaintively. "Hush, Iago," she said automatically. She moved aside.

In the morning, she set out four plates for breakfast—the good Spode china, too, as pointed a bit of formality as it was possible to give a guest. She considered turning on the big plug-in radio on the kitchen counter, all the company she had most mornings as she cooked a solitary breakfast for herself, but there was a delicious quiet and serenity out here this morning, the snow now falling heavily but without sound close outside the window, like a slow fall of feathers, muting the daylight and filling it with shifting highlights, so that it was like being all alone in a bubble on the bottom of the sea. She hated to shatter that peacefulness with noise before it needed to be shattered; Desmond would be down and rattling the china with his booming, cheaply genial voice soon enough.

Besides, there wouldn't be much worth listening to on the radio anyway. Sometimes she could pull in WGBH from Boston in the mornings and listen to chamber music or string quartets, but for months now there'd been too much static from all the sunspot activity to tune it in clearly, and all she'd been able to get for the last few days were somberly hysterical talk-radio stations yattering on about the current international crisis, lines being drawn in the sand, frantic diplomatic efforts, troops massing at borders, military alerts, security advisories, leaves being canceled, aircraft carriers on the move, and so on—and she was sick to the teeth of that. All the familiar stuff, saber-rattling, jingoism, the vitriolic outpourings of suddenly acceptable racism toward people we were supposed to *like* only a few months before. Primate Aggressive Displays, chimps hooting at each other and beating their breasts until they had worked themselves up into enough of a lather to attack. It seemed like she'd been hearing this stuff all her long life, one conflict after another, one enemy after another, and she was sick of it. Let them have their war and leave her alone, here in her own kitchen. She didn't have to listen to them *talk* about it!

“Hi, Gamma!” It was Jennifer, down first, chirpy-happy as usual, practically bouncing with enthusiasm. Remember when you had that much energy? Mrs. Kingsley thought wryly. Remember when you had a *fourth* of it? She let Jennifer help by setting out the silverware and napkins, while she fried up eggs and sausages and piles of French toast, all in an iron skillet with lots of Crisco.

The second one up was her son-in-law’s roadhouse pick-up. She slumped down on a chair, eyes bleary under smeared makeup. Her hair was done in that kind of razor-cut where you can never tell if it’s brushed or not. “Morning,” she mumbled. She picked up a fork and stared at it, turning it over and over in her hand, as if she’d never seen Grand Baroque silver before in her life, and were searching for a clue to its purpose.

Sliding breakfast in front of her, Mrs. Kingsley was struck by the horrible realization that this young chippie was somebody’s daughter, and probably came down to the breakfast table in exactly the same sullen way every morning, with grumbled greeting and averted eyes. Maybe she hadn’t even noticed yet that she hadn’t made it home the night before.

“It snowed *two feet* last night,” the child announced. “Gamma says maybe it’ll snow all day today, right Gamma?” Then, when Gamma didn’t reply, “My name’s Jennifer, what’s yours?”

The woman stared at Jennifer, as if the girl had been suddenly and without warning plopped down out of the sky before her. “Candy,” she said at last.

The child’s father chose that moment to make his appearance. He lifted Jennifer out of her chair, hugged her, and held her up in the air while she squealed. Then he peered out the window. “Still coming down, eh?” He whistled. “Look at that drift over by the barn! Jesus!”

Desmond was wearing jeans and a green football jersey with white sleeves and a double-zero numeral on the back. Bits of lint were stuck in his beard; it would never have occurred to him to brush it before breakfast. He took a sip from the coffee cup that had been awaiting him for the past ten minutes, ever since she’d heard himself clumping about overhead, and made a face. “Could you warm this thing up for me?”

Wordlessly, she took the cup from him, put it into the microwave, and switched the device on.

“Hey, wait a minute!” Candy looked up suddenly. “How deep did you say it was out there?” She went to the window and pushed the curtain aside. “Oh, no!” she groaned. “How am I going to get home through all that?”

“The plows will be by when the snow stops,” Mrs. Kingsley said. “But this isn’t a primary route, and while it’s falling they’re going to keep most of their machines out on the Interstate.”

“My mom is going to have a *cow*! Where’s the telephone?”

“In the hallway,” Desmond said, and she hurried off without even pausing to ask permission.

A motion in the corner of her eye caught Alma Kingsley’s attention then, and she suddenly remembered the coffee in the microwave. Brown liquid was bulging ominously over the cup’s lip. Hurriedly she cut off the device, and it subsided. The cup was nice and warm; half the flavor was boiled out, but no need to mention *that*. She set it down in front of Desmond.

The young woman returned, throwing herself down into the chair with a kind of heavy despair. “I can’t get through. There’s this static and a kind of whooping noise, and nothing goes through.”

“More than likely something wrong at the switching facilities,” Mrs. Kingsley said. “The phone service here’s never been much to brag about.”

Candy worried a pack of cigarettes and a disposable lighter out of her disco bag and accusingly said, “Well, my mother is going to have a cow.”

Mrs. Kingsley personally thought that the girl’s mother’s outrage was a day late and a dollar short, but she kept her opinion to herself. Aloud, she said, “No, my dear, I am afraid that I do not allow smoking at the breakfast table.”

“Hah?” Candy looked down stupidly, lit the cigarette, and then hastily removed it from her mouth. “Oh—yeah, sure.” She made as if to stub out the cigarette on her plate. Mrs. Kingsley hastily reached into the cupboards for an ashtray.

“Here.” She thrust it at the young woman. It was ironic, the tyranny that smokers exercised over their betters. She herself had never picked up the disgusting habit, and yet had of necessity, over the years, acquired any number of ashtrays to accommodate friends and guests. “You can smoke in the hallway,” she said. “Though it would be *nice* if you were to go outside when—”

But an angry glance from Desmond told her that she had gone too far. “Well, that would be unreasonable, of course.”

“Damn straight it would,” Desmond muttered. He was at the kitchen radio now, fiddling with it. It emitted an earsplitting, see-sawing howl of static, like a dying banshee. Wincing, he turned the knob from one end of the dial to the other, finding no stations, then grimaced and turned the radio off. He started to say “Shit!”, cast a quick look at his daughter, thought better of it, and settled for an exasperated “Damn!” He came back to the table. “I’d hoped to catch the news.”

“War, and portents of war,” Mrs. Kingsley said sourly.

Desmond grinned offensively at her. “Hey, sounds good to *me*!” he said.

“That means I don’t have to worry about being out of work, right?” He knew that she disapproved of his work for military contractors—“war work” she’d called it bitterly once, in a monumental argument a few months after Stephanie’s death, correcting his euphemistic “defense work”—and he loved to bait her about it.

“There’s a television in the living room,” she said stiffly. “We get CNN even out here in the boondocks. Just keep the volume down. I don’t care to hear it.”

He shook his head. “You’d think you’d want to know what’s going on. There’s a *crisis* underway! Don’t you care what happens?”

Mrs. Kingsley hesitated, and glanced toward Jennifer, but she and the roadhouse floozy were busy playing dolls together with the salt and pepper shakers; obviously Jennifer had found a companion on her own level of emotional development. “I don’t care what happens anymore,” she said, keeping her voice pitched low. “Let them have their war. Let them all kill each other. Unless they drop an H-bomb on Montpelier, I don’t intend to take any notice of it.”

Desmond made a disgusted face. “You’ve got your head in the sand! You think the real world is going to go away just because you don’t like it? You have to deal with things as they *are*. *Do* something about them! If there weren’t so many people who think like you, maybe Stephanie would still be alive.”

They glared at each other, locking gazes. He’d stepped over the line, though, and he knew it, for, after a moment, he had the grace to look faintly embarrassed. Her gaze, though, was unflinching and unforgiving.

At that moment, opportunely, there was a scratching at the door, and she had to go let the dog back in.

“O base Iago! O inhuman dog!” she declaimed as the mutt bounded in. Candy stared at her uncomprehendingly. The little chit had probably never even heard of Shakespeare.

Iago was jumping up on her, panting and enthusiastically trying to wag his entire body. She looked deliberately at Desmond. “Let slip the dogs of War, eh?” she said, and smiled sweetly. She knew *he’d* heard of Shakespeare.

It was weakening. Perhaps it held enough reserves for another day or so, if it husbanded its resources. But that way lay oblivion and slow death; to survive it needed to strike out, to forage away from the comforting shelter of the barn, out into the flat, horribly open countryside.

It was hesitating by the door when the sound of trudging footsteps approached, heading straight for it.

Jerking back as if struck, it rose up, mantle stiffening, ready to attack. Then

caution took over, and it retreated swiftly to the shadows, hunkering down into the darkest corner, every sense on edge, waiting, observing.

The door rattled, then flew open. Two sophonts stepped into the barn, accompanied by a wild skirl of snowflakes. They slammed the door shut noisily, and stamped their boots clear of snow.

It listened carefully to words it could not comprehend.

“I don’t think your mother-in-law likes me.”

“Don’t take it personally. The old bat doesn’t like anyone.”

Stealthily, slowly, it moved. Keeping to the shadows and edges, it made its way to a wide support beam beyond the direct perception of the sophonts. Swiftly, it flowed up the beam’s far side, up to the loft, and then to the rafters, just below the ridgepole. Given the choice, it was always best to strike from above.

It moved cautiously, always conscious of the gentle tickle of the fire-of-life below.

The shorter of the two produced fire. Smoke snarled through the cold air. It could not smell, of course, but it sensed the smoke as a flicker of ionized charges.

“Whew—I really needed that!” the shorter one said. She sucked in the ions again, letting them damp down within her lungs. “Here, have a toke.”

The taller one made a disgusted noise. “Is that what we came out here for? To get stoned?”

Silently it moved among the rafters, flowing from brace to joist, and across the collar beams, until it was in position, directly above its prey. It rested invisibly over them, and prepared to strike.

The shorter one laughed. “What did you expect? I hope you didn’t think I was going to screw you out in *this* weather!”

But they were both sophonts and sophonts were dangerous. It would have to take both of them to be safe, and it wasn’t at all certain it could do that. Its reserves of strength were perilously low.

“I thought you had something you wanted to tell me. Let’s go back inside, okay? It’s too cold to stand out here smoking that shit.”

“Damnit, I’m going to *need* this to get me through the afternoon. Did you see the way she was eyeing me at lunch?”

“Yeah, well, I’ve got a daughter back there in the house and I’d like to preserve a few of her illusions about her old man for a while longer, okay? So if you’ll excuse me, I don’t see any reason why I should hang around out here in the

cold.”

And then, incredibly, there was only one! The other sophont slammed out through the door, and his footsteps faded away rapidly in the falling snow.

It gathered itself together to strike. The distance was not great, and it was starting from an ideal position. With effort, it suppressed a tremble of excitement in its stiffening mantle.

The woman below huddled disconsolately in her parka. She sucked in a lungful of ions, and held them.

It struck.

“Gamma, where’s Candy?”

The parlor was very quiet without the television or radio on—Alma Kingsley had tried them both (with Desmond coming right behind her and trying them again, as if she didn’t know how to turn a television set on properly), and they wouldn’t work right; sunspots or something—they had been very bad all this year, with the Northern Lights stronger and more frequent than she’d ever known them to be in all the years since she’d retired from the magazine—had scrambled all incoming signals. The phone still wasn’t working either, and Desmond had gotten quite agitated—uselessly—about not being able to get in touch with the office. The rest of the morning had, to say the least, been tense. Desmond had finally retreated into his work, getting lost in that annoying way that he had, going so deep into it that nobody, not even Jennifer, not even Stephanie when she’d been alive, could reach him.

She put down her copy of *Paris Match*, and said, “I don’t know, child. Somewhere in the house, I should imagine. Why don’t you ask your father?”

“She’s *not* in the house,” the child insisted. “I wanted her to play Barbie-doll with me, and I looked everywhere.”

Desmond looked up from a briefcase full of flow charts and printouts and other tools of his arcane trade. “Hmmm?” he said. And when the problem was explained to him, “She ought to be back from the barn by *now*.” With a sigh, he switched off his calculator, set down his ballpoint pen, and stood. “Now where did I leave my coat?”

Iago bounded up eagerly when Desmond opened the door, and insisted on following him out into the snow. The door slammed, and Iago’s excited barking faded as they headed toward the old barn.

Five minutes later, Desmond returned, carrying Candy’s body.

Mrs. Kingsley saw him coming from the kitchen window and—with a smothered exclamation of horror—hurried to throw open the door for him. Together they hurried into the parlor and laid Candy down on a couch.

It was possible now to assess the damage that had been done the woman. Her features were unnaturally sunken, the cheeks collapsed in on themselves, drawing the lips back from the teeth, and her stomach was literally concave, looking as if someone had punched it in with his fist. An ugly purple flush was still spreading over her face as hundreds of ruptured capillaries lost blood.

“She was just lying there!” Desmond said helplessly. “Like she’d had a heart attack or something. Is the phone still out? We need a doctor. Maybe I can...I could hike out to the road and flag down a car.”

Alma Kingsley put a finger under the girl’s nostrils. She touched her wrists, forehead, chest. She pressed down a fingernail, looked at the color.

“Desmond,” she said, “it’s too late.”

She straightened, and her son-in-law did likewise, both involuntarily drawing away from the body, as if by so doing they could distance themselves from death. When she glanced away, Mrs. Kingsley saw that Jennifer was standing in the middle of the parlor rug, eyes wide and calm, staring at the corpse.

“Daddy,” she said, “is Candy dead?”

Her father got a sick expression on his face, as if he’d been called upon to explain sex and reproduction to the child *right now*, with no blushing and no preparation. But he answered, voice flat and superficially composed, “Yes.”

“Like on TV?”

Alma Kingsley regained control then, and gathered the two up. With a push here, a nudge there, she shooed father and daughter out of the parlor and into the kitchen. At her command, Iago followed. Then she closed the door.

To survive, it had to get into the farmhouse. It knew that now, with a kind of animal cunning that came before reason and intellect. There were sophonts within, and it was practically suicidal to attack a sophont within its own lair. But they were few in number, and they were isolated from their own kind. And while they were danger, they were *also* nourishment.

It hesitated at the doorway of the shed, baffled by the snow that had already drifted above the middle hinges. Then it flowed up the wall, climbing to the crack at the top of the doorway, and eased through. Halfway out it halted, stunned by how the world had been transformed. The falling snow formed complex, shifting patterns that disappeared the instant it got a fix on them. It was as if the world had been

shredded and divided into component atoms, then instantly rearranged, again and again, a thousand times a second. All anew, it was struck by the sheer alienness of this world, where nothing was certain, where everything shifted and moved and changed. It wavered, flowed outward, flinched back again. Individual flakes of snow touched its surface, did not melt, slid off without sticking.

Had anyone been watching from the house, they would have seen it then, carelessly, dangerously exposed. But occupied as they were with their own troubles, no one was looking.

It advanced out onto the snow then, all in a rush, sudden and brave. Midway between barn and house, it halted. Nothing happened. It found it could partially filter out the flakes falling, though they disoriented and bewildered it still. Purposefully it set out for the farmhouse, a solid mass of potential shelter, unchanging, shot through with electrical fires and harboring at its heart the precious rumor of fire-of-life.

But the task it had set for itself was not an easy one; the house had been winterized with typical Yankee thoroughness. Caulk had been applied around every window and door frame, and a long, even bead had been drawn at the juncture where clapboarding met foundation. Cracks in the masonry had been plastered over, and every window was double-paned and covered over with storm windows, every door had weatherstripping.

It circled the house without finding entrance. The building was tight, invulnerable to it. There might be entrances up above—experience said it was likely to find chimney pots and furnace exhausts, gable vents, even the occasional hatchway—but it dared not climb the house side, up into the swirling, shifting snow, where matter and sky intermingled. It could not have been sure of maintaining its orientation, of knowing where the house left off and the air began. It was madness to even consider it.

Time and again it lashed silently around the house, skimming the surface of the snow, leaving behind it the very thinnest layer of ice, a trail that disappeared almost instantaneously under the new falling snow. It was perilously exposed, and this added to its confusion and desperation, to its determination to try *anything*, no matter how rash or foolhardy, that might help it to survive.

Even after Desmond had finally bowed to the inevitable and taken Candy's corpse out to the El Dorado, where it could await the snowplows and the doctor and the coroner in the preserving cold, there was an eerie pall cast over the house. Jennifer had been put to bed early, and the adults had retired to the kitchen, to try to talk.

But there was nothing to say. There was no way Candy could have died, and speculation would not explain the inexplicable—only the autopsy could do that. And she was a stranger, so there could be no reminiscences about her, none that Alma

Kingsley would care to have Desmond share, anyway. So, in the end, they simply fell silent. Mrs. Kingsley began going through her cook-books, and Desmond fell to punching listlessly on the keys of his calculator.

“What is wrong with that dog?” Alma Kingsley grumbled in exasperation. Iago was pacing the kitchen floor, infinitely restless, his claws going click-click-click on the linoleum. Now he was at the door again, pushing at the crack between door and sill with his nose, digging at it hopelessly with his claws, scratching and whining.

“Sounds like he wants to be let out,” Desmond said without looking up.

“Well, maybe I should,” she said at last. Throwing a wrap over herself, she took hold of Iago’s collar, and led him to the door. Her intent was to shove his nose outside and give him a whiff of the cold, and then draw him back in again. That ought to have settled his restlessness. But when the door opened, he strained forward, barking furiously, even anxiously, and she saw something outlined on the snow in the rectangle of light cast by the open door. She squinted and said, “Desmond, come here. Take a look at this.”

The dog’s feet scrabbled wildly on the floor, but her grip was firm. “Look at what?” Desmond said. He ambled up, calculator in hand, and peered over her shoulder. “That’s just a patch of shadow.”

“There never was a patch of shadow shaped like that there *before*,” Mrs. Kingsley said dubiously. A momentary twinge of arthritis hit her then, and her hold on Iago’s collar loosened.

All hell broke loose.

It lay watching, not knowing that it did not blend in against the snow, assuming that the sophonts’ awareness would be as dazzled by the downfalling flakes as was its own.

It had flattened against the snow’s surface the instant that the door opened with a great outrushing of warmth. The shifts of ionization and static charges in the air made the doorway a shimmering beacon, bright and inviting, and only the faint, almost undetectable flickers of fire-of-life within that wash of liquid warmth kept it from leaping forward at that very instant. Wary, it crouched, waiting.

Then the dog came flying through the air to attack it.

The beast was large and fierce, plowing through and scattering snow, howling and barking as it came. Terrified, the creature fled, but—cunning, desperate—it fled straight for the door, risking everything on a frontal attack, a savage, killing assault on whatever might lie in its path.

In the doorway, the black beast ravening and almost upon it, its perception

cleared, and it found that only two enemies stood between it and shelter. The first fell aside, shrinking back against the wall as it charged forward, and it could ignore her, making for the second who was just beyond her, and who was bigger, with more fire-of-life in him.

Berserk, it sprang at the man, who stumbled back, involuntarily flinging up a hand to fend it off. There was an object in that hand, a glittering complex of resistance paths that held a shimmering, shifting structure of energies, a vastly simplified and purified version of what lay within living beings.

A concept came searing up from the shuttered and forbidden parts of its mind, breaking through the pain: WEAPON! WEAPON! WEAPON! and it turned in midair, reshaping its structure and seizing hold of a wall so that it slammed aside and away from the thing. The beast leaped up after it, and for an instant almost had it, and then it fled down the hall and away.

In terror and wild confusion it was driven through several rooms and up a stairway. It took the first opening off of the hall it could find, and discovered itself in a cul-de-sac, the air all abuzz with jittery white energy, and dominated by a large, painful glow in its center.

The beast halted, hackles rising. It was cornered, and the beast knew it.

“What was *that*?” Desmond gasped.

Alma Kingsley shook her head. Her breath was still short, her face felt pallid with shock, and she discovered that she was clutching at her heart. Disdainful of her own weakness, she forced the hand down. Then, looking up at where Iago’s frantic baying had come to an abrupt stop, she felt seized with terror and cried, “Jennifer!”

Desmond easily outdistanced her, but she arrived in the guest bedroom practically on his heels. To her unutterable relief, the child was unharmed, sitting up sleepily in her bed and looking at the frantic Iago with dull, unfocused interest. Her father swept her up in a hug, and backed away, into the hallway. Oddly enough, Alma Kingsley felt a pang of jealousy.

Iago had cornered the creature.

Whatever it was—and in the gloom it was all but invisible—it crouched in the shadows to the far side of the four-poster, alert and quivering, frightened and dangerous. It reared up and slowly dipped down as Iago darted forward, then back, then forward again, growling and making little feinting attacks. The combination of quick and mazy movements made the fight look like a confrontation between cobra and mongoose.

The creature was trapped in the aisle between bed and wall. To its rear was a closet, its door open on a thick-packed rank of summer dresses in their plastic

dry-cleaning bags. Jennifer's jumper hung by itself on a hook on the back of the door.

Mrs. Kingsley was just reaching—belatedly, she realized—for the light switch when Iago attacked. Snapping and foaming, he charged. The two went tumbling, one over the other. Shaking his head fiercely, Iago backed out of the narrow way, dragging the creature out between his jaws, struggling.

Iago snarled savagely as he tore at the creature, and then there was an ozone crackle in the air and he yelped, a high, heartbreaking cry. His stiffening body crashed over sideways, onto the floor, and did not move.

The creature disentangled itself instantly, fainted at Desmond, then turned again and—going carefully around rather than over the bed—rushed into the closet.

There was an access panel in the back of the closet. It had been installed early in the century, when the upstairs water closet was retrofitted, and opened into the wall and a few dusty pipes. The panel was ajar slightly, leaning loosely rather than snugly. Perhaps the child had been playing with it, looking for a secret passageway, or perhaps it had been left partly open for years or even decades without anyone ever bothering to get around to straightening it.

The creature squeezed through the crack, quick and impossibly fluid, and disappeared into the wall.

Slowly, awkwardly, Mrs. Kingsley squatted down, knees almost touching the floor. She laid a hand on her dog's head. He was dead. "Oh, Iago," she said. "My little *bête noire*."

She began to cry.

The house was a maze of electric circuits and appliances. They dizzied and blinded it, dazzling and baffling its senses. The sophonts were somewhere within this maze, and it did not even know how many they were. It only knew that they had not followed it, and thus presumably *could* not. But the sophonts' lair was a dangerous environment, naturally hostile to it, and it fled.

It fled deep, sinking downward by instinct, tracing a tortuous way between walls and floors, sometimes following water pipes, and always avoiding electrical wires. Carefully, fearfully, it threaded its way along a twisty path that led downward, ever downward.

Finally it emerged into warm, cavernous darkness, and knew that it had found refuge.

Iago was dead, but Jennifer was alive; there was comfort in that. The faithful old family retainer had given up his life in defense of home and child, and that was somehow fitting. It was the way things ought to be. His corpse was outside the kitchen door now, packed in snow because the frozen earth made burial impossible, but Alma Kingsley vowed that her great-grandchildren would know his name.

The snow had finally stopped, and the night was clear, and bitterly cold, the stars burning in it like chips of ice. The great glowing, shimmering, billowing curtains of the Northern Lights were out, shifting restlessly back and forth on the horizon, brighter than she had ever seen them, so bright that it almost seemed that she could burn her hand on them, if she held it out to the sky.

It had been quite a storm. It must have dumped at least four feet of snow on the region all told, snowing through the night and through the day and through most of the night again, and the driveway beyond the lee of the house was buried under huge drifts; you couldn't even see the highway at its end. So much for her first thought, which was to bundle them all into Desmond's car and make a run for it, abandoning the house to the creature until they could come back later with help. To get the hell *out* of here!

But with all that snow, nobody was going anywhere, life-or-death emergency or not, until the snowplow came by in the morning. It was physically impossible. And if they locked themselves in the car as a refuge—her second thought—they'd freeze to death before daybreak. And besides, who was to say that it couldn't get into the car after them, the way it seemed to be able to squeeze itself through the smallest of cracks?

"Did you notice that it was afraid of my pocket calculator?" Desmond asked. He was pacing the length of the kitchen, back and forth, from the pantry door to the wooden cot they had set up for Jennifer by the refrigerator. "And it wouldn't touch the electric blanket either."

"Why is that?" Mrs. Kingsley asked without interest. Her granddaughter was sleeping like an angel, and her heart pounded with fear for the child. She had to fight down the impulse to run a rough old hand over hair so fine it could break your heart.

"I don't know, but did you see the way it squeezed into the wall? Like it was boneless, or something more than boneless. I'll bet it doesn't mass much of anything at all!"

He was getting excited now. Alma Kingsley simply tuned out his voice and let him rant on. Stephanie had always said that problem-solving was his *forte*, what he was most at home with. Given a logic problem—a crossword puzzle or a program that had crashed—and some shred of clue, his intuition would worry it to death or solution. To Alma Kingsley's way of thinking, this was a good argument that problem-solving logic was not one of the civilized skills.

It was only when he moved her brand new toaster-oven to the kitchen table

and began disassembling it that she was finally moved to object. “Just what the hell do you think you’re doing?” she demanded.

“I’m going to wrap a resistance coil,” he said, absorbed in his chore and talking so fast his words ran together. “Look, this thing is obviously sensitive to electromagnetic radiation, right? Now, assuming its shape is maintained through bound charges, then it would move by shifting electrical potential within itself. That would explain how it moves so fluidly. So—”

“Desmond,” she said, her patience wearing thin, “just what are you trying to do?”

He looked up from his work, puzzled. “I’m building a signal-interrupter. Didn’t I make myself clear?” Without waiting for a response, he bent back down over the table, uncoiling wires from the heating elements.

She closed her eyes, calmed herself. “Just what will this signal-interrupter do when it’s built?”

“Well, basically—” He broke something out of the toaster-oven, glanced at it, threw it aside. “Basically, it ought to render this creature totally immobile anywhere within—oh, let’s say a fifteen-twenty foot radius. More, probably, but that much at least.”

For the first time in her life, Alma Kingsley wondered if God might not have had reasons for creating Desmond. “You can do this?” she asked anxiously. “Tonight?”

He favored her with a vulgar, lopsided grin. “Old hoss,” he said, “give me half an hour, and we have got it dicked!”

With no warning, all the lights went out at once, plunging them into complete darkness.

“Oh shit,” Desmond said.

Calmly, because she’d been through blackouts before, Mrs. Kingsley felt and twisted the knobs on the gas range. One by one the burners came on, filling the room with an eerie, flickering light.

By sheer bad luck, the furnace was off at the instant the power went. It was a gas furnace, but it operated off of a solid state programmable electric thermostat, and wouldn’t go back on again until the thermostat told it to. But it wasn’t really crucial; she lit the oven, leaving the door open for heat.

After some clumsy, fearful rummaging through the dark pantry, she unearthed a hurricane lamp. Its chimney had gulls painted on the side, and the transparent

reservoir was filled with blue scented soil. Still, when she set it on the kitchen table, the light it shed was warm and friendly, and she could turn off the range.

Desmond, meanwhile, had found the utility flashlight in its recharger bracket by the basement door. He stood in the middle of the pantry, flicked it on and off, and then said, “What does this house have—fuses or circuit breakers?”

Alma Kingsley stared at the man in disbelief. His face was dark with shadow, his eyes lost in blackness. He was a silhouette creature, almost all outline and no substance, one hand on the doorknob of the cellar door. “Desmond, this isn’t the city. A power line is down. Going into the cellar and flicking a switch is not going to restore the electricity.”

She didn’t have to be able to see the face to know the smug, superior smile that crossed it now; she could hear it in his voice. “Let’s not get all worked up, now. *Maybe* a line is down. But the more likely reason is that a power transient has kicked out the main circuit breaker. There’s no reason for us to spend a night in the cold and dark when just a moment’s effort can restore the power.” He opened the door.

She peered past him, down into the cellar—it was a perfect, lightless black. Vague colors swam before her, visual hallucinations brought up by the absolute lack of light. The blackness crawled with menace. The only sound anywhere was the hissing of the gas oven.

Involuntarily, she clutched his arm. “For God’s sake, Desmond, you don’t know what’s down there!”

Desmond turned the flashlight on her face. She stood blinking as he studied her. “Don’t be such a wuss,” he said. “Whatever that thing is, we know that it’s somewhere *above* us, not below.”

He shook free of her grip and moved to the top of the cellar steps, hesitated for a moment, looking down. “Desmond,” she said, so frightened that she found herself actually pleading, “this is *unwise*. You’re acting like a character in a monster movie! Everybody in the theater would be yelling ‘Don’t go down there!’ by this point. Stay up here with us. We need you here.” It galled her to speak the words, words she’d never imagined she’d hear herself say—but it was true.

Desmond turned his head to look back at her, and grimaced. “Look,” he said, a defensive note creeping into his voice, “this thing *kills* people, and it’s on the loose. The only defense we have against it uses electricity. Either I go down there and reset the breakers, or we sit up here in the dark and wait to die.” After a second of silence, he grinned at her, the arrogance, the boundless self-confidence and self-assurance she’d always found so odious in the man already returning to his face after a fleeting moment of uncertainty. “Beside, I’ll be quick...and I’ll be careful!”

He was wrong, horribly wrong, but she didn’t have the arguments to confute

him with, only a horrid assurance that he was making a stupid move. Desmond shone the flash down the stairs.

A thin line of worn wooden treads led downward into darkness, a trace of light glimmering on the walls to either side. When Desmond raised the flash slightly, a pale circle formed on the whitewashed rock wall just beyond the landing. “Damn,” he muttered. “I don’t suppose the circuit box is on the near wall?”

“No, it’s on the wall opposite, at the front of the house.”

Abruptly, Desmond turned and walked back into the kitchen. For a giddy moment, Mrs. Kingsley thought he had come to his senses. But he only paused by his daughter and gently placed something on the cot beside her sleeping head. The calculator. He switched it on, then turned back toward the cellar.

“For the love of Christ, Desmond!”

But, ignoring her completely, he stepped down onto the top stair. It groaned under his weight. Slowly he descended, clutching the loose railing with his free hand. The light danced and bobbed on the basement wall, growing brighter as he approached, then darting to the side and disappearing as he turned away. Briefly, there was the faintest shimmer of reflected light, and then nothing.

The air from below was warm, like an animal’s breath on her face. Staring down into the liquid blackness, Mrs. Kingsley felt her every nerve on end. She strained to hear, to track her son-in-law’s progress below by sound alone. But the dirt floor muffled his footsteps, and damped down the noise he made.

“Desmond?” she said softly. He did not answer. Her own breath sounded loud to her; she could make out nothing above it. It was uncanny how silent the cellar was. It was as if the darkness were a gigantic beast that moved on soft paws to swallow up the least sound.

Then Desmond stumbled into a pile of cardboard boxes filled with old paint and coffee cans that she had put away years ago against some possible future need. A jar fell to the floor. He kicked it angrily, and it skittered and skipped away to shatter against the wall. “Fuck.”

Mrs. Kingsley leaned down into the stairway. The darkness was so deep, so absolute, it seemed to want to suck her down into it. It welled up dizzyingly about her, and she had to put out a hand to steady herself against the jamb.

Silence again. Then—

“Found it!” Desmond shouted. He sounded relieved; one presumed the darkness had finally gotten to him. There were faint noises as he poked about. “Jeez, this is an old system. Look at the rust on it! I’ll bet you ten to one I—”

He gasped.

The flashlight clattered noisily to the ground. For an instant there was silence, complete and profound. Then a kind of throbbing electrical hum rose to fill the darkness. Over the throbbing came other sounds, choking and thrashing sounds, as if Desmond were having a seizure. The noise went on and on.

And then it stopped.

The silence seemed to echo, like the air just after a great bell has been stilled. Fearfully, Alma Kingsley called down, “Desmond? Desmond, are you all right?” She waited, and heard nothing. “Desmond?”

A faint slithering noise whispered up from below. It wasn’t quite like anything she had ever heard before, and yet it definitely came from a living creature. It was coming from the far side of the cellar, and it was headed right for the stairway.

Frantically, she slammed the door shut, and backed away, into the warmth and light of the kitchen. For an instant’s frozen horror, she was convinced it would follow her. But it did not.

“Gamma?”

Jennifer was sitting up in bed, sleepily rubbing one eye. It was clear that the door slamming had wakened her. “Gamma,” she said. “Where’s Daddy?”

It had fled as far as it could, as deep as it was possible to go in this labyrinthine structure, and had thought itself safe. It badly needed to think things through, as a dozen conflicting emotions chased themselves through its neural fabric, and at that point wanted only solitude, darkness, stillness, the security of enclosure. But then, terrifyingly, one of the sophonts had come *after* it, tracking it down, coming relentlessly closer and closer and closer, a buzzing electrical device that emitted a spray of photons—a weapon?—in one hand. It had backed away in terror, retreating as the man came on toward it step by step, finally stopping only when it backed up against a solid wall and there was no place left to go without turning and exposing its back to a potentially fatal attack.

Still the man came implacably on, ever closer, ponderous steps shaking the floor like thunder, looming huge and heavy and menacing, only a few bodylengths away now. At last, still moving forward, the sophont turned the stream of photons from its device/weapon directly *on* it....

Trapped, terrified, knowing that it might only have seconds of life left in which to act, it struck. The sophont jerked and thrashed and flailed, the electrical device flying from its hand to shatter against the floor and go out.

It had tried its best to avoid this confrontation, had not wanted to kill again so soon, had wanted to think about the whole situation, but it had been given no choice.

None of those considerations kept it from feeding as fully as it could, of course, now that it *had* killed. The sophont was big and vigorous, in the prime of its cycle of existence, and was full of the fire-of-life.

When it had finished with him, it felt refreshed and somewhat calmer...although, almost immediately, a new unease began to grow within it. This was a bad situation, trapped inside a structure like this with a band of sophonts, all alerted to its presence. It was a dangerous situation, one in which it could easily be trapped or attacked—and there was something *else* about the situation that dimly troubled it, something other than the danger, something that generated another kind of unease. It shouldn't be hunting sophonts, it knew that somehow, not unless it had no other choice. It should find other, easier, less dangerous prey, like the rats and squirrels and birds it'd found in the park. To find nonsophont prey instead would be far less dangerous, and it would *also* be, it would also be...something. Something it no longer had the concept for, but which it vaguely knew was desirable.

Yes, it should leave here, get out of this situation altogether.

So it hunted through the structure until it found access to a metal pipe that it followed up through the walls and out onto the roof, out into the chill outer air.... But there were the Northern Lights, blazing above it, filling the sky, curtains of dancing, shimmering radiation, seemingly only a few feet above its head, dazzling it, making it squirm and caper and thrash, coil and uncoil and coil, scribing odd cabalistic patterns in the snow...until, on the verge of total madness, it retreated back into the pipe, plunging deep into the reassuringly solid structure of the house, where at least the sheer mass of all the stone and wood and iron afforded it some protection against the shifting, chaotic, maddening lights in the sky.

It had to stay here. It had no choice.

The grandmother clock in the upstairs hallway chimed midnight, a soft, homey noise. The house was still, and the kitchen was warm. The thing in the basement—whatever it was—still had not come out. Mrs. Kingsley dared to hope that it would not, that it was holed up in the cellar for good, and would not willingly emerge. Her granddaughter was asleep again, and she was alone with her fear and her guilt.

“He’s gone to town to get a snowplow,” she had lied. It was moral cowardice, pure and simple, and she knew that she would never be able to completely forgive herself for it. But by the same token, there was no way she could possibly have told the child the truth. Not now. Not in the state she was in. “He’ll be back in the morning, after breakfast.”

“Oh.” Jennifer’s head had sunk back to the pillow then. She turned to the side, closed her eyes, and was asleep. A faint green glow from the calculator’s display tinged her face.

Alma Kingsley stood motionless. Now that she listened, she could hear the house talking to itself. It creaked and groaned, making wooden noises like doors opening and shutting in a distant, fairy-tale wood. Ghosts walked the halls with slow, ominous tread.

She was afraid. Her heart was beating rapidly, and her limbs felt weak and drained. Her house—her own house!—loomed dark and menacing on all sides, and she was afraid of it.

She needed a weapon. The gizmo Desmond had been working on was nowhere near done, a tangle of wires and trash. Even with the power on, she would have no idea how to finish it herself. Desmond had said the monster was afraid of electricity, but with the power out, all the electronic equipment she owned, the television, the radios, the microwave, the food processor, were dead, and so the idea of surrounding them with a barricade of such things, all turned on, wasn't going to work. The electric blanket was useless as a defense now too. There weren't any firearms in the house, and she doubted a kitchen knife would be much use against the creature. Struck by sudden quick inspiration, she stepped into the mudroom to the side of the kitchen door and opened the narrow door of the utility closet. There was a heavy woodchopper's ax there, set on brackets on the wall, behind a jumble of brooms, old vacuum cleaners, saws, rakes, and other junk, where it had rested untouched for years, since her hands had gotten too bad to let her chop her own wood for the winter.

She fumbled the ax down from its brackets, lugged it into the kitchen—marveling ruefully at how *heavy* it now seemed, how much arm-strength she'd lost in only five or six years—and set it down near Jennifer's cot, handle up, leaning against the wall.

It wasn't enough. The ax might make for a secondary, last-ditch line of defense if the thing got into the kitchen, but she was too weak and stiff and arthritic to wield it with any real vigor or competence anymore, and the idea of taking slow, clumsy strokes at a creature that moved as fast as this one did, in a half-darkened room that was dancing with shadows anyway, made her mouth dry with terror. That wasn't good enough. She had to figure out some way to keep it out of the kitchen in the first place.

How to do that? How to keep it out of here, keep it away from Jennifer? Think, damn it, *think!*

The only thing she *knew* it feared was Desmond's pocket calculator.

That was a start, then. She darted into the darkened parlor and snagged a long, white taper from the candelabra on the mantelpiece. With a shiver, she retreated back to the kitchen. She wrapped several paper napkins around its base to protect her hand against the drippings. Desmond would have more calculators among his effects—he was simply that kind of person. There might even be one among

Jennifer's things. And for that matter, there was her own, tucked away in the upstairs china cabinet, which she used periodically for taxes and bills.

The candle shed very little light; it seemed to blind her more than illumine the way. She hesitated in the doorway and the shadows flickered and waved about her like living things. She did not want to go into the dark.

Holding herself straight, she stepped forward, fighting against panic.

Desmond had brought along two more calculators, and Jennifer one, a child's calculator in the shape of an owl, the readout part of its big round eyes. Among the child's things, too, she had found a pocket computer game—Meteor Defense, or some such nonsense—and estimating it similar enough to be of use, that brought the total up to six. Five, if you *didn't* count it.

It had been a harrowing expedition. She had started at every creak of the joists or scream of stairway tread underfoot. She had felt the Dark Angel upon her twice, as the shadow in an empty doorway had shifted toward her, and when the darkness behind a cabinet gathered itself up to leap. As she returned downstairs and into the parlor, her pace quickened. The kitchen beckoned.

It so heartened her to reach safe haven that she began to hum a snatch of Mozart. She was alive! She blew out the candle and dumped the calculators onto the kitchen table. For the moment, she didn't even notice the thing crouching in the hallway.

A sudden sense of foreboding, a prickling, crawling sensation, made her spin about. Something moved just outside the kitchen door. Black crawled within black, shadow in shadow.

It yearned forward slightly, then retreated, bobbing up and down in indecision, torn between flight and attack. Mrs. Kingsley couldn't even see it clearly, but she *felt* it studying the sleeping child.

More from panic than courage, then, she ran at the thing wildly. She slashed her arm as if the calculator in it were an ax, and she could use it to chop the thing into bloody bits, its black ichor steaming onto the floor, eating through the carpet.

It hesitated fractionally, then flowed into darkness and was gone.

Mrs. Kingsley sobbed in the doorway, weak and despairing. It was a victory, but a minor one. The thing was still loose, and with every encounter it was losing fear.

She set calculators by the doors to the pantry, hallway, and parlor. The fourth

she put by the window, and the little computer game was laid at the foot of Jennifer's cot as a second line of defense. They all glowed gently.

The oil lamp was running low. Mrs. Kingsley blew it out, to conserve what little fuel remained, and twisted on two of the range burners. She felt oddly secure, surrounded by the arcane little devices, with their crisp little lights. She felt safe, protected. It was probably unwarranted, mere blind faith in technology, but...

The calculator by the parlor door began blinking. The numbers had disappeared and there was a single dot tracking its way across the readout. She remembered Desmond bragging about the thing, when he first showed it to her, explaining that if it weren't used for some number of minutes—five? twenty? ten?—the numbers disappeared from the readout, though the memory still held them, and it went into an energy-conserving mode. And then, if more time went by and nobody used it, it simply turned itself off.

Hastily, she punched some figures at random, and hit a function button. The numbers came back on, with that funny little symbol that meant that an error had been made. She ignored it.

It wasn't long before she realized that the calculators were not going to do. Three of them kept blinking off, and one of the others was failing, its batteries low. She couldn't keep punching the things through the night—sleep would take her long before the snowplow came.

Think! she told herself fiercely. She had to kill the thing, to electrocute it somehow...She remembered a story Stephanie used to tell, about the summer camp she'd stayed at as a child, a place with an old-fashioned crank phone system.

The girls used to hook up a phone with one wire connected to a metal bed frame, then the other to a wad of aluminum foil. When the victim sat down on the bed frame, one girl would toss her the ball of foil and yell "Catch!" while her accomplice gave the phone a vicious crank.

She didn't have a crank phone, of course, but she sensed she was on the right track. She'd found a trap that wouldn't require much mechanical skill to set up. All she needed was a power source. Something like...

Something like an automobile battery.

She dressed hurriedly, making plans all the while.

First, she got the jumper cables out of the El Dorado's trunk, leaving it up and open behind her as she hurried them through the snow to the kitchen. Jennifer was still asleep, and this time Mrs. Kingsley didn't try to keep from stroking her hair. The simple act seemed to fill her with resolve. The creature would not get the child. This she swore.

Again she stepped out into the storm. The car's front door balked at first, frozen with the cold. She yanked harder and it popped open.

Candy stared up at her accusingly. The dead girl's face was grotesquely shrunken in upon itself, and the tightening skin had pulled the eyes wide open. Mrs. Kingsley gasped involuntarily. She had forgotten the macabre thing was there, stretched out across the front seat.

But there was no time for squeamishness. She leaned over the corpse, and fumbled under the steering wheel for the hood release. With a *bing*, the hood unlatched and she went around to the front—slamming the door shut behind her—to raise it up and confront the battery.

She was fiddling with the cables—they were cold, of course, and frozen to the terminals, and corroded over as well—when her hands seized up with arthritis again. Vainly she tried to *force* her mittened hands to close about a cable. Pain shot up her arms, but still her hands did not respond. Frustrated, she slammed them against the cables again and again.

The lines wouldn't budge.

Tears built at the corners of her eyes, but sternly she suppressed them, blinking them down, thinking harsh thoughts at herself. There had to be a way—the trunk! She'd left it open, hadn't she? She hurried around back and it was true, the trunk still gaped wide. She rummaged about with her useless arms, pushing things to one side or another as if they were long sticks she was using to poke with, and at last she found what she was looking for. A tire iron.

It took longer to scoop up the iron than she'd have liked, an awkward, nightmarishly clumsy time, but finally she had it, and scuttled back to the battery. Holding the iron as a Punchinello might hold its bashing-stick, she tried again and again, leaning, putting her weight *just so*, until finally the one cable popped loose and went banging against the engine.

Time was all. Mrs. Kingsley tried hard not to think of Jennifer lying alone in the house, at the center of her protective pentagram of failing calculators, tried hard to put blind, unreasoning faith in the flimsy little Oriental-built machines.

It took a hellishly long time to get the iron in position for the second cable, and then it kept slipping out of the way. But at last she pried that one free of its terminal too, and with a feeling of triumph, she let the iron fall. She reached for the battery.

It would not budge.

She couldn't get her hands around the damnable thing, couldn't get a hold on it, probably didn't even have the strength to lift it.

She *did* cry then, the tears running down her cheeks and the thin trail of

moisture freezing on her skin with a faint crackling sensation. But even then she did not give up. Her mind kept working, as she started with a positive hatred at the battery. There was nothing in the workings of the car touching it, she noted, and nothing beneath it. There was a space of an inch or so around it on three sides, and it was set on a kind of little metal ledge.

If not for that ledge, the battery would fall to the ground.

She set out to break the little shelf, battering and prying at it with the tire iron. Time and again the iron slipped from her hands and fell. She had to get to her knees in the snow, and reach around under the car to make it fall flat, and then draw it out from under and seduce it into her arms again—she lost a lot of time that way.

By now her knees and her arms, up to her shoulders, were numbed and bruised. The cold seemed to soak through to her bones, and she knew she was running a bad risk of frostbite.

But at last she managed to poke and pry and stab enough that, with a sudden ripping noise, the battery was gone. It had fallen to the ground.

She still couldn't lift it up from the snow—not for more than a few seconds at a time, anyway. But she could get the thing back to the house by pushing it, if she was willing to crawl.

Slowly, with distaste, she got down to the ground. Sometimes a woman had to crawl.

It was more with disbelief than with joy that she finally shoved the battery onto the linoleum of the kitchen floor. Leaving it on its side, she slowly stood and sank gratefully into a chair. Her knees were afire. The creature could have come and taken her then, and she'd have felt only gratitude. It would be so very pleasant to simply lean back and fall asleep....

Something creaked. Panicked, she struggled upright, twisting around to see that Jennifer was still all right. Her father's calculator had slipped to the floor as the child shifted in her sleep. Of the guardian calculators at the doors, only one was still blinking.

Hurriedly she punched new life into the calculators, bringing the green alphanumerics swimming up to their surfaces. There could be no sleep for her. She still had work to do, a trap to set.

But desire would not unclench her hands. She thrust them into her armpits, desperately trying to warm the joints into movement. It didn't work. She was stopped before she could begin.

Finally she knelt by her granddaughter's cot and nudged her ever so gently.

“Rise and shine, sweetheart,” she murmured. “Grandmother needs you to be her hands.”

Jennifer was sleepy and balky. It took a great deal of coaxing just to get her to untangle the jumper cables. Then, when they were stretched out to their ten-foot lengths, side by side like orange vinyl snakes, it was time to assemble the trap.

Fortunately the cables were old, and the clips were not as taut as they might be. Even at that, Jennifer had to use both hands and all her strength to open the grippers enough to clamp them onto a battery terminal. The first two times she tried, they slipped right back off. Mrs. Kingsley merely tightened her lips and said, “Again.”

“Why?”

A noise came from the parlor, a faint, whispery slithering sound. Mrs. Kingsley threw back her head, listening, but it was gone. “Just *do* it. I’m your grandmother.” She put all the authority she had in her voice, and, for a wonder, the child obeyed.

As soon as the connection was firm, and wouldn’t come loose at a tug on the cable, she threw a tea towel over the terminal, to protect her grandchild against accidental shock. “That’s good,” she said. “Now the other one.”

“This is dumb!” Jennifer cried rebelliously. “I don’t have to if I don’t want to!”

“By God, I’ll give you don’t-have-to!” Mrs. Kingsley angrily lifted a hand shoulder-high to slap the child. Then, at the look in her eyes, she stopped, and bit back her anger. She crouched down, joints hurting horribly, and hugged Jennifer to her. “I know it seems hard, child. But sometimes we have to do things we would rather not. It’s simply the way the world wags.”

Jennifer obstinately shook her head.

“It won’t take long, I promise. Suppose that as soon as we get through with this, we make hot chocolate? Would you like that?” She held the child at arm’s length, studied her solemnly. “Yes, I’d supposed you would.”

The second cable went on smoothly, and Jennifer enjoyed making the ball of aluminum foil. Alma Kingsley had to stop her from using up all that was on the roll.

“Now pretend that the cable is an alligator, and make it bite the shiny ball.” It took Jennifer three tries, and then she got it right. The final step was to hook the other cable to something large and metallic, something that the creature would have to touch or pass over to get at her. This was less satisfactory than the rest. The nearest bed frame was on the second floor. She could no more have dragged it

down into the kitchen than she could have hauled the battery up the stairs to it. In the end, the best she could find was a screen window that had been stored in the pantry against spring.

The screen was wire mesh, not the modern plastic stuff, but after Jennifer had clipped the cable to it, it looked woefully small and inadequate. There was no way of placing it that guaranteed the creature would pass over it, or of being sure it would be touching when she threw the second cable. But it would have to do. Because it was the best she could come up with.

“Gamma, we can make hot chocolate now, right?”

She allowed herself a smile. “No, my young apprentice. *You* will make the cocoa. Your grandmother will supervise. Have you ever made cocoa all by yourself before?”

Jennifer shook her head, eyes wide and solemn.

“Well! This will be a special occasion, then. The first thing to do is to—”

The cocoa was a smashing success. By the time it was made, Jennifer was nodding and yawning again. She only managed to drink half her mug’s contents before her head slumped over onto her shoulder. Mrs. Kingsley led her back to the cot, and pulled the blankets up over her.

The trap was not good enough. It needed...something more. Mrs. Kingsley thought the problem through as she put the cocoa-stained saucepan in the sink and ran a little water in it for it to soak. The drain was closed and water built up in the sink.

Inspiration struck her then.

She turned the tap all the way over, and stood back to watch the sink fill up and brim over. Water crept out onto the formica countertop, and slopped over onto the floor in a thin, ragged sheet. It splattered and spread, a widening puddle on the linoleum. Soon everything on the floor—including the screen window—was damp.

Success! She stepped through the spreading water and gathered up the calculators. Climbing up on a chair, she sat down on the kitchen table itself, resting her feet on the chair’s cane seat. She didn’t know much about electricity, but she knew that this would insulate her from the shock. In the same way, the cot’s wooden legs would protect Jennifer.

The water was spreading into the pantry and the hallway, seeping through the floorboards, being sopped up by the Oriental carpets in the parlor. The damage it was doing to her house was incalculable. But she kept the water flowing. As long as the one cable was solidly grounded in the water, the entire kitchen was a death-trap

for the creature.

One by one, she turned off the calculators, stacking them beside her. She rested the ball of foil in her lap, ready to throw. Let the monster come! She was prepared for it.

She only wished she had thought to brew some tea for the wait.

Time passed with excruciating slowness. She kept squinting at her watch, thinking that an hour had gone by, to find that it had only been a minute or two instead.

Where *was* it? she thought, straining to hear, although she knew that it could move almost without sound. What was it up to? What was it doing?

What was it doing *here*, for that matter? Here in this house, here on this *planet*? For it was obvious to her by now that the creature was not of this Earth. What did it *want*? Why had it come? Was it just a blindly ravaging, mindless creature, a simple predator, or did it have some kind of plan, some sort of purpose?

Conquest, probably. Invasion. That was the most likely guess. Perhaps it was a scout for some sort of interstellar invasion force. A spy, a saboteur, a guerrilla fighter, a stealthy terrorist. A soldier.

The thought made her feel very tired. Even out among the stars, it seemed, they had soldiers, and wars, and armies, and waged campaigns of conquest. The fighting never stopped, the killing never stopped, no matter where in the universe you went. There was no escaping it.

She blinked back sudden tears, and steeled herself to increased alertness. This time she was drawing her own line in the sand. It was *not* going to get Jennifer. This time she was going to fight the blank black grinding forces of the universe to a standstill. She was going to kill the loathsome thing, right here and now.

Come on, you abomination. Come for me!

Come *on*....

The weapons were gone! The sophonts had disarmed themselves, rendered themselves unprotected, unguarded...helpless. And yet, such an action was contrary to everything it somehow knew—without quite knowing *how* it knew—about the nature of sophonts. It felt the contradiction as an almost physical assault.

It was baffled and terrified. The imperatives of survival demanded that it attack and kill the two remaining sophonts. Yet they were alerted and prepared, waiting for it in a space that had but one approach, and *whatever* they had done with their weapons, it was not fooled into thinking they were not dangerous. They were

waiting for it.

It quivered in darkness, mantle involuntarily expanding and contacting with conflicting urges, making little retreating and advancing movements, paralyzed with indecision and fear. It was in an impossible position. It felt the wrongness, though it had no way of understanding it. It should not be here, it knew, should not be playing this dangerous game in such alien surroundings. This was not how it was meant to be....

Finally, though, it came to the only decision it could: it must attack.

If it was to act, it would have to act fast. The sophonts would not remain passive forever. In what pitiable remnants of its mapping functions remained accessible, it created a model of the house, a one-to-one visualization of its every wall and surface, from the patterned tin ceiling of the master bedroom to the uneven dirt floor of the basement. There were lacunae within its knowledge of the house, but they did not matter; it knew those portions that it would employ. Within this small maze, it set a marker to represent itself.

It plotted its attack by moving the signifier. Silently, craftily, it would flow up one wall to the juncture of wall and ceiling. Attacking from above was instinctive behavior to its own kind, and it knew from experience that the sophonts here rarely looked up; taken together, these facts just might give it an edge.

Quickly, then, it would traverse wall and ceiling to the kitchen doorway. The room was charged with tensions. The air sparkled with dying by-products of the gas oven, dazzling its senses, so that it perceived the two surviving sophonts with their complex nervous systems as areas of greater brightness within a general glare. It would be entering the room half blind.

The mental marker looped over the archway, sped midway across the ceiling to a spot directly over the smaller brightness. It came to a dead stop, and then dropped.

Time and again, it ran the marker through its mazy path of attack, never varying, until the instructions were scored into its consciousness. It was huddled in upon itself, fringe crackling and humming faintly with the effort. Had its enemy known, she could have walked up to it now and destroyed it without its being able to put up the least resistance. All its energies directed inward, it was temporarily helpless. But that was necessary if it was to imprint its attack, making it a single complex involuntary motion, a spasm of reflex violence that would either succeed all in an instant, or fail before it could regain full consciousness.

One last time, it held the cursor-self over the lesser sophont. Without pausing, it dropped. Fluidly, it stunned, possibly even killed, its first opponent, then leaped straight at the second, to wrap its hood about it, and discharge the powers that freed the fire-of-life. It was a desperate move, and if any least thing went wrong, it would be a fatal one.

When the cursor had run through the final repetition, it was as taut with energy as an overwound spring. It positioned itself carefully. It would take only the slightest triggering thought to free that resolve into a blurred burst of killing fury, an explosion of purpose.

Now!

She must have been dozing. Or perhaps a general stunned weariness had dulled her perceptions, so that she stared blankly unseeing as it entered. Because the first that Alma Kingsley saw of the creature was when it flickered down before her, and on top of Jennifer.

It came too fast. It was upon Jennifer before she could react. There was a sudden moving darkness, like black cloth flapping in the breeze, and then a scorching smell, and the child *screamed!* Then the thing was flying through the air at her, the sides of its mantle spread like manta ray wings, as if it needed that little extra bit of lift to reach her.

She would have died then, had her reflexes not betrayed her. For in the panicked instant when the creature fell through the air before her, all thought stopped, all plans of action and attack abruptly fled and she'd scrambled to her feet, chair falling away, as she twisted to flee from the thing.

Then the creature was soaring through the air at the space where she had been, and it slammed into her upraised hand, the one that held the jumper cable with its foolish ball of aluminum foil, as though it were a scepter. The thing's surface had the oddest feel, coarsely textured as if it were made of woven metal and at the same time oddly slick, as if it held some faint charge repulsing her hand. The mantle spread wide, then folded in, seeking to wrap her head in its folds. In blind fear, because she had a dread of suffocation that dated back to her childhood, she flung the creature away.

The thing flew across the kitchen, hit the wall, and fell to the floor. For an instant, it crumpled to practically nothing. Then unseen forces stiffened it and it rose up, swaying slowly and woozily back and forth, looking for all the world like a punch-drunk fighter. For a long moment, they stared at each other.

The thing was resting on the high end of the kitchen, and though the floor was damp there, it was not so deeply puddled as further in, and Mrs. Kingsley didn't know enough about electrical conductivity to know if it was damp enough. "Come on," she grated, holding up the ball of foil as if it were a crucifix she were employing to ward off a vampire. "Just a little bit closer, and I have you!"

She thought of righting the chair and climbing up on it, to protect herself. But she was still wearing her rubber boots, having foreseen the danger and put them on for this very purpose, and surely they ought to be enough. "That's right," she

crooned. "Slide forward, into the water."

The creature swayed slightly, back and forth, forth and back, clearly focusing on her. It seemed dazed, unsure. It moved a bit to one side, then to the other, avoiding the edge of the puddle proper.

It *knew*! The vile thing knew to avoid the water! She felt a wave of dread. It was not going to be tricked.

To one side, Jennifer made a soft noise, a gentle, final sigh, and Mrs. Kingsley turned to see the child's head fall to one side. The face was burned and blistered, and the eyes closed. She could see no sign of breathing.

The creature chose that instant to attack. It was upon her before she could throw the cable. Alma Kingsley screamed, and it seemed to some far, remote part of her that there was less terror than rage in her scream, and then she was grappling with the thing. It had leaped through the air, and though she held the cable against its skin, no part of it made contact with the water. The circuit wasn't complete.

Those soft, tough surfaces wrapped about her arms, tried to envelope her head. It covered one eye, and she could not pry it off. Her skin tingled, and she heard the faintest imaginable mechanical-sounding hum, as of a generator starting up just over the horizon.

Very deliberately then, Alma Kingsley decided that if she was not going to survive this encounter, then neither would her enemy. It was the only chance Jennifer had. And at the very worst, at the very least, if her granddaughter was already dead, she could take this hellspawned demon with her, and if vengeance was a sour drink, it was at least a potent one.

Grappling the creature with both hands, she threw herself forward, tumbling them both into the wet, charged floor.

Fire! fear! pain! horror! And then a blinding, ripping, sundering bolt of light, beyond pain and horror, more powerful than anything it had ever known, that ripped the very fabric of the universe apart. That wiped its mind clean like a sponge across a blackboard. And then put it back together again, in an instant.

It screamed. Alma Kingsley, lying stunned and spasmed on the linoleum floor, heard it, not with her ears, but-deep in her brain, a wash of noise that filled the universe. The creature screamed not as an animal would, not as a being of flesh and blood, backbone and viscera would, but like a machine in agony. Like the scream of stripping gears of some immense but deadlocked engine tearing itself apart with its own energy of motion because it was unable to go forward as it was designed to do, because the load it was pushing against or trying to lift was too great for it to move. Like the high-pitched squeal of distortion, chasing itself up the frequencies, of an

electric amplifier just before it burns itself out with a bang and a flash and the stink of burning insulation. Like the boiler of some old-fashioned steam locomotive shrieking out news of its impending death, seconds before the boiler explodes and fills the icy night with twisted scraps of flying black iron. Like that same locomotive plunging off a high trestle into a deep ravine. Like the dopplering scream of an artillery shell or a missile as it falls out of the sky to kill some mother's child. Like the apotheosis of every ugly mechanical sound that had ever been heard since people came down from the trees and learned how to make tools.

It screamed and there was more to that scream than mere pain: there was anguish there too, maybe even—but she was surely making this up—regret. It was a cry from Hell, like that a damned soul might make as it fell down into the Pit, a cry from a soul that knew that it deserved to be damned, and to fall endlessly forever through darkness.

The car battery shorted out. A scorched smell rose from its remains, and a short black puff of smoke curled like a question mark in the air, slowly dissipating. Freed from her grip, the creature flopped, twisted, and streaked for the kitchen window. There was a flare of energy, and the ugly stench of burning wood, paint, and glass. A pane flowed and melted, and, with a dwindling wail, the creature was gone, out into the night.

Cold air blew in through the hole.

Alma Kingsley was still alive, although at first she didn't realize it. She lay there for a long time, listening to someone crying, making baffled little sobbing sounds, *hunnn, hunnn, hunnn*, like a beaten and exhausted animal, and then the cold wind in her face revived her enough that she realized that it was she herself who was making the noise, and that that meant that somehow, impossibly, she was still alive. Sense began to seep back into her head, and the world swam blurrily into focus. She moved, instinctively trying to sit up, and a fierce lance of pain cleared her head a little bit more. She had no conscious memory of the electric shock but it must have been bad, because when she tried to remember, her mind shrank away from the very thought in fear and revulsion.

Snow was blowing in through the window from the wind-drifted dune beyond, fine particles that danced a stately gavotte in the middle of the air. She sat there for a moment longer, sitting in a puddle of water on the floor, cold wet linoleum underneath her, cold air in her face, blinking in bewilderment, staring at the fine particles of snow dancing in the air, staring at the ragged hole melted through the window, wondering what on Earth could have happened...and then memory began to return, and with it, fear and horror, rebooting suddenly, kicking in with a sudden shock that flooded her system with adrenaline, as painful and nauseating as a punch in the stomach.

Jennifer. Oh God, Jennifer!

Somehow, she managed to pull herself to her feet, although the world tilted slowly around her when she did so, first one way and then the other, with ponderous slow-motion grace, as if she were riding a ship in a heavy sea. She staggered toward her granddaughter, falling next to her rather than kneeling, pawing at her with hands that felt like frozen slabs of meat rather than living flesh.

Jennifer was lying still, very still. There was a deep burn across one side of her face, curling up a corner of her mouth, touching the edge of one eye, blistered and cauterized, and all around it the child's flesh was a horrible dead-grey color, as if all the energy and life had been sucked out of her.

She fumbled at Jennifer's throat, trying to find a pulse, unable to tell whether she couldn't find one for the obvious reason or because of her numbed, tingling hands; she could hardly tell whether she was even touching the child without looking to see where her hands were. She leaned close to smell her lips, feeling for even the gentlest whisper of breath from those tiny nostrils, thinking she felt it, unable to be sure.

Without even knowing she'd gotten up or crossed the room, she was at the telephone, fumbling at it, finally getting her hands to pick up the receiver, forgetting entirely that the device was dead—and then, just as she was remembering with a sick surge of dismay that it was dead, she realized it *wasn't*. The dial tone was clear, perfectly normal, as though nothing had ever happened, as though it were a perfectly ordinary day and this a perfectly ordinary call. Somehow she forced her blundering fingers to dial 911. She reached the police with her first attempt and, a flicker of common sense telling her not to babble of monsters, not now, not yet, managed to at least convey that an ambulance was needed out here, that it was a life-or-death emergency, with every second counting...although she knew, without them needing to mention it—although they did—that with all the best will in the world it would take some time for an emergency vehicle to force its way through the snow-choked roads to her place.

She stumbled back to the cot, knelt down by her silent, unmoving grandchild. Bits and pieces of first-aid wisdom, learned decades ago at summer camp or half-remembered from television programs she hadn't really been paying much attention to, babbled desperately in her head, and so she tugged the blanket out from under Jennifer's frail, broken little body, wrapping her up in it to keep her warm and keep her from slipping into shock, balled the pillows up and stuffed them under her feet to elevate her legs...all the while trying to ignore a cold dry voice in the back of her head, remorselessly logical, that knew perfectly well that all this was useless, and kept whispering, *Too late, too late*. When she could no longer feel any hint of breath, and could no longer feel even the ghost of a pulse—sensation was returning to her hands with a feeling like a thousand hot needles being plunged into them, although she hardly noticed the pain—she began clumsily performing CPR on the child, performing it as well as she could remember how to perform it, anyway,

whispering between breaths, “Don’t die, don’t die, don’t die, don’t die,” like a mantra, trying not to also think *Too late, too late, too late*, like a counter-beat.

At last, she could fool herself no longer, and slowed to a stop. The child looked like a waxwork dummy of herself, all heat and life—the soul, if you believed in those—gone. Her flesh was already growing cold. *Too late*.

Alma Kingsley went away from her body for awhile then. When she came back to it again, returning as though from across a great gulf of space, she heard her voice speaking aloud again, mumbling broken fragments of sentences in a sodden monotone, randomly assembled words that jarred and ground against each other like stones in a sack.

A vast surge of bitterness shot through her. Useless old woman. Never good for anything in your whole damn life. Couldn’t keep your husband alive, couldn’t save your daughter. Couldn’t even protect your own grandchild. You’d think if you’d be able to do *anything*, one miserable thing that made a difference in this foul and pestilent existence, that made it worthwhile that you were ever alive in the first place, at least you could save your own grand-daughter. A six-year-old child! Why was it that she was dead and *you* were still alive, living on and on into a bleak morning that had no reason left in it for you to be alive anymore, and your traitor lungs continuing to pump, your heart to beat, after Jennifer was dead? After everyone you ever cared about was gone? What was the point? Why couldn’t she have been allowed to trade her life for the child’s? You old fool, couldn’t you have done *one thing* right in your life? In your whole useless and pointless life?

It was bitter and hard for her, almost harder and more cruelly bitter than she could bear, to realize that if Desmond had lived and *she* had been the one to die instead, that Desmond—much as she’d always disliked him, thought him not worthy of her daughter, looked down on him, much as she *still* disliked him now, in spite of the fact that he was dead—probably would have been able to save Jennifer from the monster. To save her as *she* had not been able to. Why hadn’t it worked out that way? Why had the fates instead left the child’s life in her hands? Her useless, good-for-nothing, crippled hands, that had let that life slip through arthritic fingers?

A draft of cold air. She looked up in time to see the back door swing soundlessly open, letting in a puff and swirl of snow.

A sinister, black, serpentine shape reared up in the doorway, raising the bulk of its length off the ground, like a cobra coiling to strike.

It was back.

The creature was back.

Fear was her first, instinctive reaction, an icy stab of atavistic terror that made her back away a step or two, and which dimly surprised her, since she would have sworn a moment before that she no longer cared at all if she lived or died. Well, in

fact, why struggle anymore? Let it kill her. What did it matter *now*? She felt resignation begin to glaze over her like a scum of ice forming over a pond, dulling her fear.

The creature swayed in the doorway. Dawn was beginning to break, the sun not yet over the horizon, but staining the sky a sullen purple-red. The creature was a black silhouette against that sullen red sky, weaving slightly from side to side, rippling sinuously. As yet, it had made no attempt to move forward into the house, to attack her, although she knew how fast it could move. Maybe it was scenting the wind, searching out her presence with whatever strange senses it possessed....

Still it didn't move, as one long moment crawled into the next. Maybe it was *taunting* her, teasing her, playing with her the way a cat plays with a mouse. Enjoying her fear. Making her wait. Relishing her helplessness.

Suddenly, she was furious. The murderous creature was toying with her! Mocking her! Rage instantly melted the ice of resignation and futility. If she was too late to save Jennifer, she could still do one worthwhile thing before she died. She could take this obscenity *with* her. She could make sure that it slaughtered no one else's children.

She could make it *pay*. Or at least die trying.

The ax was still resting against the wall, where she had put it what seemed like years ago now, handle up, a few feet away from the cot; she could just see it at the edge of her peripheral vision. Without turning, she took a slow, slow sideways step toward it, not looking away from the creature, not turning her head, not daring to do anything that might break the spell of immobility. She took another slow sideways step, and another, inching along like a crab. Slowly, still without turning her head, she stretched her hand back behind her, trying to move her body as little as possible, groping for the ax-handle.

As she touched it, her hand wrapping itself solidly around the wooden handle, the creature spoke to her.

Kill me, it said.

It struggled against the fire! fear! pain! horror! that welled up through its being. But the torrent of voltage, wild and undirected and irresistible, drove its consciousness helplessly before the flood, driving it *through* that protective hedge of forces, through the whitening, searing agony of the unbearable, into memories far worse.

It was falling. Tightly wrapped within a neatly calculated bundle of shielding, its consciousness a pure nub at the center of calming forces, it descended from space, down to the Earth below, at last at the end of a journey that had taken many

decades, almost half a century, with the real beginning of its Mission yet ahead. But then—impossible!—it felt a blast of radiation, raking through the core of its being, scrambling circuits. The shielding was not good enough! It wasn't holding! It knew about the Van Allen radiation belt, of course, and that had been taken into account when the voyage was planned; beings with greater science than even its own race could command had confidently predicted that even if the Van Allen belt were to be energized by a spate of sunspots, the radiation could not possibly be strong enough to get through.

Mistakes happen, though. They were not gods, and neither were any of the other races they knew, however advanced they might be. Sometimes, even with the highest and most subtle of technologies, things go wrong.

The radiation could not get through, and yet it *was* getting through. High-level energies sleeted through the tightly interwoven fabric of its substance, leaving maddening pain in their wake, a hundred, a thousand times more agonizing than anything it had ever known, pain not only physical but mental as well—logical chimeras that its rational functions could not deal with, self-contradicting structures that one by one overloaded its higher functions, driving it down the asymptotal curve toward total extinction.

It was the best qualified of its race for the job ahead, a creature of vast patience, tact, wit, gentleness, diplomatic skill, culture, and erudition—all the commingled powers had agreed on that, just as they agreed that it was the turn of its race to reach out and bring a benighted alien race out of the darkness of provincial ignorance and into Civilization, just as their own race had been so contacted and assimilated into the galactic community thousands of years before. It had been so *proud* of that, of the responsibility it had been given. But now, it was unraveling in madness and pain, and could *feel* its rational mind dissolving, and could do nothing to stop the process. It felt its higher functions failing, and automatic systems taking over.

The ambassador's race was an ancient and intensely civilized one. Long eons ago, even before contact with the communities of the stars, they had put aside their predatory origins, overridden them with a thousand culturally programmed safeguards. They no more felt the age-old archaic urges than a human felt the need to brachiate.

The urges were still there though, ancestral voices whispering in the blood, at the very bottom of the brain, as they must be in every corporeal creature who has evolved from a lower—or at least a more basic—form of life.

One by one, it lost reason, memory, personality; it knew the horror of losing everything that made it itself, and *knowing* it was losing it, and being unable to stop the process. At last, it would lose even the knowledge that something had been *lost*, except for a vague trickle of unease at the back of its consciousness. It would be reduced to survival programming, the underlying atavistic ancestral memory whose

human equivalent would be the reptilian hindstem.

From the depths of pain, it had a last fleeting moment of clarity in which to mourn its own passing, and then most of its brain went down.

Glowing like Lucifer falling, it tumbled from the sky, down to the Earth below.

The car battery shorted out. There was a puff of acrid black smoke, and then it was free. Instantly, it reacted. Instinct hurled it *away* from there, away from the trap that had almost killed it, though the window, out into the night.

Outside, alone in the darkness and the swirling snow, with the Northern Lights still a vaguely troubling presence on the horizon, an uneasy prickling sensation that it could now control, it came to the full realization of what it had done.

When she got over the initial shock of hearing the creature speak, Alma Kingsley quickly picked up the ax, bringing it awkwardly around in front of her body so that she could get a better, two-handed grip on it, resting it on her shoulder, ready to swing. She backed away two steps, felt her rear foot bump into the wall, and started to edge sideways again, moving away from the wall a bit (even if it did mean moving a step or two *toward* the monster) so that she'd have room to swing the ax overhand at the creature if it rushed her, a woodchopper's stroke. Couldn't let it pin her against the wall...

Kill me, it said again.

She hesitated. She had been figuring out how to do just that, or the best way to try to do it, anyway, deciding that she'd better rush it and try to get a good swing in at it before the big ax grew too heavy for her tired old arms to hold up effectively, do it right *now*, before she lost her nerve.... But it kept putting her off her stride by *speaking* to her; she hadn't known that it could talk.

It wasn't "talking" at all, actually—the words seemed to print themselves in her brain somehow, faintly superimposed on reality, like the afterimage of an object you can sometimes see after you close your eyes. But she had no doubt that it was really happening, or that it was the creature who was "speaking" to her.

Go ahead, it said. *Do it now. I won't try to stop you.*

She came forward a couple of steps, and then stopped, hesitating, wary. This was some kind of trick. It was trying to lure her closer so that it could strike at her, maybe counting on being fast enough to be able to dodge any blow of the ax she might get off at it. When she got close enough, it would attack....

It will not be difficult, it said persuasively. *My physical component is really quite fragile. If you strike at the center of my being hard enough, with something sharp or heavy, that will kill me. That tool you have in your hand will do nicely. I*

perceive that the handle is made of wood; that will insulate you from any shock. You'll be perfectly safe.

“You weren’t so concerned with my safety a few minutes ago,” Alma Kingsley said harshly. “When you were trying to kill me!”

I was insane then, it said. I have been insane for a long time. But I am insane no longer. The shock that you administered to me has re-integrated my functions. I am sane now.

“How nice for you!” Rage pulsed through her, and she tightened her grip on the ax. “You unspeakable bastard!”

It shivered convulsively, and she jumped back a step, thinking it was about to attack. But it didn’t move forward. *I know what I did, it said. I am ready to atone.*

“Atone?” She found herself laughing, harsh, cawing, jagged, ugly laughter that tore her throat. “You killed Jennifer! And Desmond! And...and that poor girl!” To her shame, she found she couldn’t summon up the young woman’s name, although she got a flash of her vapid, cheaply pretty face. “Damn you, you even killed my dog!” Tears sprang into her eyes and she blinked them fiercely away. She couldn’t allow it to distract her, let it put her off her guard. As soon as she did, it would strike.

I know what I did, it repeated. That’s why you have to kill me. It was swaying slightly from side to side now, as if in agitation. Kill me! Strike now! Get it over with. I won’t fight you. I know I deserve to die.

She tried to say something but the words tangled themselves in her throat and wouldn’t come out. Her head felt as if it was going to explode, and she was shaking all over. “You’re right about that!” she managed to rasp, panting with rage. “You deserve to die a hundred times over!”

It was shaking too, as though stirred by the same inner wind. *I know that, it said. I can’t live with the guilt and the shame. I was sent here on a mission of peace, to bring you the gifts that would allow you to live as civilized creatures, without war, without want and poverty and hatred. Instead, I killed everyone I met ! It swayed violently. There could be no worse failure! No worse betrayal of everything that I believe in! Kill me!*

She raised the ax. Images flashed through her mind: Jennifer, her face gray and blistered and burned...Iago collapsing in a pathetic jumble of furry limbs...the girl, the roadhouse pickup, smiling vapidly although amiably as she dug a fork into her eggs...Desmond waving his hands and talking expansively, self-importantly.... She was crying openly now, tears running down her face, breathing in harsh gasps through her mouth, but she didn’t lose sight of the monster, in spite of the tears. She squeezed the wood of the ax-handle until her hands ached. Abruptly, fiercely, she rushed forward, swinging the ax as far back as she could, ready to bring it crashing

down.

A step or two away, she stopped, hesitating, the ax swung high in the air.

It hadn't moved, although she was in easy attack distance by now.

DO IT! it shrieked.

There was a long frozen moment, as though time itself had stopped. For some reason, she found herself thinking about something she hadn't allowed herself to consciously think about for decades: her husband's coffin, shipped by air back from Vietnam, being lowered into a hole dug into the raw red earth on a blustery wet spring morning, a flag draped over it, while people in uniform stood stiffly next to the grave and saluted and little Stephanie fidgeted impatiently by her side, too young to understand...the incongruously cheerful sound of birds singing somewhere off in the trees (and she realizing how incongruous it was even at the time, and hating herself for noticing something like that at a time like this, no matter how ironic it was)...her thinking how much Steve would have hated having his coffin wrapped in a flag, how he would have disliked the solemnity of this whole ceremony, the priest droning pious platitudes about somebody he'd never met and how Steve was now going to walk with Jesus in A Better World...looking at her own mother beside her, leaning heavily on Uncle Henry's arm, noticing with a shock how old and frail and tired she looked.... The photo that had stood on the mantelpiece in the living room as long as she could remember, her father in a World War II Army uniform, the father she'd never met, a black star on the glass frame, the photo gathering dust for years, never touched, never moved.... Her own daughter Stephanie, laughing and hugging her at the airport gate, kissing her husband and her baby goodbye, telling them that she'd send them all postcards and maybe some souvenirs if she could find a moment to steal from the sales conference, only minutes before her air-plane was blown to pieces in midair by a terrorist's bomb.... The military jets screaming by outside, mean and black and predatory, on the way to the buildup for the *next* war, that would kill somebody *else's* children....

As though it were reading her mind—and who knew, perhaps it was—it said, *The Mission will succeed, even though I failed. Eventually. They will send someone else. It may take another hundred years for them to get here, but eventually they will, and we'll help you heal this world of yours. I have to believe that. Eventually, my failure won't matter. The Mission will succeed.*

Another hundred years. How many children dead in that time, in how many wars?

She heard the sound of a siren, a thin wail still far away, on the edge of hearing. The ambulance coming.

Kill me, it said *You have the right. I owe you that. I have nothing to pay with but my life.*

Suddenly, she was very, very tired, unutterably weary, as though the marrow in her bones had turned to lead.

Hurry. They're coming. Soon it will be too late. Kill me now. Don't hesitate. I want you to do it. I don't want to live. I can't live with what I've done. It hurts too much.

A kind of weary revulsion seized her then, a nauseated rejection of everything and everyone. She stared at the alien for another long moment. "Then *live*, God damn you," she cried bitterly. "Live and be damned!"

She flung the ax aside.

Her legs gave out, and she sat down abruptly on the cold floor. If this was a trick, then it had won. She no longer even cared. Let it kill her if it wanted to.

The wailing siren came closer and closer, the sound cutting sharply through the cold winter air.

One year later, on the anniversary of First Contact at Maple Hill Farm (as the scroll on the screen would say whenever they came back from the commercials), Alma Kingsley sat alone before the television set, listening to herself being praised on CNN. The commentators prattled on and on about the terrible tragedy of the Ambassador's arrival, and of the even greater tragedy that would have occurred had it not been allowed to complete its Mission; one commentator, face radiating sincerity the way a pot-bellied stove radiates heat, spoke of Alma Kingsley as a secular saint for forgoing personal revenge for the Sake Of All Mankind.

The Ambassador had tried to attend Jennifer and Desmond's funerals (Candy was buried elsewhere), but she had refused to allow it to attend, to the disappointment of the newsmen, although they were there filming everything in sight anyway, keeping tight close-ups on her face as the last remnants of her family were lowered into the ground, not wanting to miss the slightest nuance of expression. Later, at the UN, the Ambassador had insisted on giving an emotional eulogy for the people he had inadvertently killed, going on to say that Alma Kingsley's greatness of spirit, in being willing to forgive even the very creature who had killed her own granddaughter, all by itself was enough to prove that humanity was worthy of inclusion among the great interstellar Community of Races, and would insure their admission.

Sometimes she wondered if the creature, who was certainly many times smarter than she or any other human being, had *manipulated* her psychologically into deciding not to kill it, using a sly variant of Br'er Rabbit's "Don't Throw Me In the Briar Patch!" routine to get her to act the way it wanted her to act. Certainly it had been easier for it to explain itself to the ambulance crew and the police with her there alive on the scene to vouch for it than it would have been if she were dead, and

it was there alone to greet them with a houseful of murdered people at its back. And the forgiveness angle made for great press, just the spin to neutralize the unfortunate fact that the Ambassador had started its career on Earth by killing as many humans as possible. Or maybe it *had* been sincere. Certainly its people *did* seem to be highly ethical, concerned with Justice and Right Actions in a fussy, legalistic, rabbinical way that seemed almost prim. She would never know, one way or the other.

CNN was now running through a quick inventory of all that humanity's new friends had given the Earth so far. Once the Ambassador had used the living fabric of its body to form and trigger an interstellar Gate, new technologies had poured through in a seemingly endless stream: Defensive weapons that really *were* defensive, for they couldn't be used offensively...an end to disease...medicines to expand the human lifespan a hundred years or more...safe and plentiful energy...the transmutation of elements...gold from lead...lilacs from mud...silk purses from sows' ears...a partridge in a pear tree...blah, blah, blah.

They were like children on Christmas morning, with bright wrappings strewn about and nothing but presents as far as the eye could see. To listen to them go on, it seemed that the entire human race was going straight to Heaven. Everybody was going to be healthy and beautiful and tall. They were all going to be transformed into gods.

Except Jennifer. She didn't get to be immortal and go to the stars. She got to lie at the bottom of a grave in Brattleboro, rotting in the cold unforgiving ground, while worms ate her.

Alma Kingsley sat staring at the screen and listening as voices far older than any god spoke within her. Their words were dark and poisonous. They ate at her heart like acid.

She got up and fixed herself another Manhattan. Bitterly, she drank it down, wishing—as she would wish every day for the remaining two hundred years of her life—that she'd killed the damn thing when she had the chance.