

COOL DADDY

Vruuk reclined on his cushion and regarded the screen with intense concentration. His small, cat-like body was without extremities since, long ago in the course of their evolution, his people had learned to use their minds to control physical objects, including their own bodies. Around him the silvery blue of the compartment glowed with an inner warmth from the fusion-powered equipment behind the smooth metal walls that were broken only by the crack of a sealed entrance and the glistening screen in front of him.

On the screen, a gleaming rectangle of translucent material, a blue and white globe appeared and gradually increased in size. As he watched it grow, he sent mental impulses, to activate the beaming apparatus and began to transmit.

“I am approaching the third planet of the Vrondek system,” he sent. “As yet, I have not tried to establish any form of communication, and I am keeping them under observation. I await further instructions.”

By this time the planet had enlarged so that only a portion of the surface was visible at one time, and as the image moved slowly, it first showed a vast expanse of water laced with filmy clouds and, then, a continent with patches of green and brown.

“Well done, Vruuk.” The reply from his home planet came through a beam that was partly mechanical and partly telepathic. “Proceed to within one thousand lyr of the surface,” it went on, “and then follow an observational orbit.”

He beamed instructions mentally to the control cells in the motive compartment and continued to watch the screen, his furry neck arched with intense interest.

“As far as we can gather, Vruuk,” the beam continued, “there must be a form of intelligent life on Vrondek III. From time to time we have detected waves of the etheric type and, although there seemed to be some type of pattern, they were too indistinct from this distance for us to study them effectively. Your close proximity, however, should enable you to interpret and, hopefully, understand them. We want you to know, Vruuk, that every soul here is with you and gives you his blessing. For the good of all Aedis may you succeed.”

Vruuk pictured to himself the violent pestilence which had ravaged his home planet for the last decade, and he saw again the image of his children dying in an agony that their young minds were not yet able to comprehend. The death rate of those who had not yet reached maturity had become so great that unless a new, uncontaminated environment was found, his race would soon become extinct.

The beam from his home planet stopped transmitting, so Vruuk shifted slightly, turning toward the wall at his left. As he did so, a section of the smooth metal slid back revealing a cluster of smaller screens with several lights that blinked on and off. He beamed commands at the intrareceiving cells that activated the panel and, as he did so, the screens were filled with geometric patterns, some sharp and regular, and others vague and confused. Gradually, some of the screens began to clear as he mentally changed the controls and the unit hummed with bio-electric activity. Some lights began blinking faster while others slowly dimmed. Finally, all the screens but two became dark and,

moments later, only one screen on the panel remained lighted. On it, there appeared a series of waving lines which crossed and crisscrossed, seeming to move from left to right.

Vruuk studied the screen for several seconds and then began to beam:

“My equipment has picked up the waves they are sending. There seem to be a great many of them, and since the only section of my equipment which responds is the etheric circuit, we may be fairly certain that they are of that type. In fact, they seem to be the same type of waves we have detected previously. I have selected one of the many patterns, and I am focusing it more clearly in order to try to determine its origin and its possible meaning, if any.”

By this time all the lines on the screen but one had disappeared, and he adjusted his controls so that it moved horizontally. Once this was done, it coalesced into a series of pulses that moved across the screen with a regular vibration.

Again he beamed:

“Judging from the type of pattern on the screen and from the response of my equipment, these waves are the type that originate in an atmosphere composed of some subtle, gaseous substance. They seem to have been converted into electric impulses and then into the etheric wave to allow transmission over greater distances.”

The beam from his planet responded with a question:

“Will your equipment allow you to convert it into a beam which we can receive?”

“Yes, I believe it will,” Vruuk answered. “I am selecting the matching coordinates now and... yes, they will work. This will give me the original etheric transmission, but it will probably mean nothing without further study.”

“Try it, then,” the beam advised, “so that we can have the original wave pattern to work with.”

Vruuk sent more adjustments to the control panel and then set his senses to receive the etheric wave. His first impulse was to lessen the intensity of the signal, and then he answered:

“Yes, I have it.”

“Does it mean anything to you?” the beam asked.

“No, I can make nothing of it so far, however, it does seem to be some form of communication of the auditory type as I suspected. There seem to be different clusters of syllables which, when they are combined in different ways, may have meaning. There are more than just groups of syllables, however. There are a series of accompanying impulses—some are of the percussive type and others seem to be a sustained vibration of some sort which changes in frequency and intensity.

“Does the pattern coordinator register anything which might suggest intelligence?”

“Yes,” Vruuk beamed in reply: “there seems to be a definite symmetrical pattern. The sequence of syllables and the accompanying impulses are coming in groups of two, with the second pulse the stronger of the two. The coordinator also recognizes a harmonic sequence which has a regular pattern. I believe there is no doubt that it comes from some type of intelligent being.”

“Can you now beam us part of the transmission so that we can analyze it?”

“Yes, I believe I can do that, and, of course, I am copying the entire transmission for further study and analysis. I believe that groups of syllables must be used to express thought patterns. The rest, then, must be something to accompany the thought. Perhaps it is similar to beaming as we do with an accompanying emotional vibration or with visual images.”

“Yes, that may indeed be true. Can you separate some of the syllables from the accompanying impulses?”

“As close as I can determine, there is one group of syllables that is repeated several times: ‘o ies bebi, iu ar mai kul daedi.’ As I said, this is repeated several times and then is followed by another group of syllables: ‘aend ai uant iu tu bi mai luv.’ Each group is expressed with a different arrangement of frequencies, so even though the syllables are the same, they must gain some further significance from the different frequency vibration. Also, the whole has been increasing and decreasing in intensity which would probably indicate a further difference in meaning.”

“Yes, you must be correct,” the beam answered. “This is undoubtedly some rather high form of intelligence, judging from the fact that they use this dual form of communication, plus the fact that they can . . .”

“Excuse me for beaming in,” Vruuk interrupted, “but the transmission has now changed. The accompanying impulses have ceased and the syllables alone remain. The coordinator registers no obvious pattern in this so far, so I believe that, since the other was more complicated, this must be some form of sub-communication.”

“Yes, indeed, that must be the case. Probably it is a form of the first, but lacking its consistency and intensity. Certainly this will require further study, but now it seems more important that we try to analyze the first, dual mode of expression. Some effort must be made to communicate with an intelligence that expresses itself in this complex form. They may very well represent, at long last, the solution to our dilemma. You have made copies of the converted waves?”

“Yes, I have them.”

“Good. Then, beam them to us, and we will make an effort to interpret them. You may keep copying any further transmissions of the same type and send those to us later. We will contact you again as soon as we have enough information to attempt a communication with them.”

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Gene braked and turned into the driveway. It was good to be home and relax for a while, even though his leave only lasted for a few days. He looked forward eagerly to the time he would be able to spend with his fiancé, Gloria. Hopefully, he could relieve some of the tension which had hung over him at the base these past few weeks. He often wondered how people would respond if they knew that one of the most important military bases in the country was located just twenty miles outside of the city. It was fortunate for him that it was so close to home. Not many soldiers were lucky enough to spend time at home when they were off duty, or on leave.

They had to keep it secret, though, since most of the top brass in the Defense Department had moved there in a mass movement of decentralization that began about a year ago. The only thing left in Washington now was a few figureheads, but most people

didn't know that and neither, he hoped, did the Kremlin. With the tension caused by the real prospect of an international conflict hanging over the base, it would be a relief to be in the company of people like Gloria and his parents who had no idea that a crisis was possible, and would probably care even less if they did.

He pulled off the driveway and parked in the yard next to the house and, dragging his suitcase from the back of the car, he headed for the back door. He grimaced as the sound of loud music reached him through the window, something about a "Cool Daddy." Glen was at it again; he was glad this was just a stage his little brother was going through.

The music was so loud that no one heard him come in through the back door. Mom was in the kitchen fixing supper and she started with surprise when she saw him standing there. He just grinned and nodded toward the front of the house, but his mother, fed up with the noise, stormed into the living room and turned off the radio with a gesture of finality.

"For goodness sake, Glen," she said, exasperated, "Gene is home and you and your music are making such a racket I didn't even hear him come in."

Unconcerned, Glen was sprawled on the couch; he twisted toward the kitchen in order to wave at Gene.

"Where's dad?" Gene asked.

"Working late again," his mother replied. "I swear, I'm beginning to feel like a widow, he spends so much time at the office these days."

Gene grinned sympathetically, and sat down next to Glen. Just as he was thinking that he ought to call Gloria before supper, the phone rang, and Glen jumped up to answer it. His first thought was that Gloria had heard he was home and was already calling him, but when Glen came back he said:

"Some big-shot colonel wants to talk with Lieutenant Martin. You wanna talk with him?"

"Sure," Gene said with a smile, but then he thought seriously, what the hell could they want now? He had a feeling he wasn't going to like finding out. He picked up the receiver and said:

"Lieutenant Martin speaking."

The voice at the other end said, "this is Colonel Evans, Martin. I'm sorry to interrupt your leave, but we need you back here as soon as possible. Things are happening around here that don't look good. All I can say now is that there is an unidentified craft of some kind hovering—high up—just over the city. People are worried, and it looks like we are going into conference in less than an hour. Try to get here as soon as you can."

"Yes, Sir," Gene responded reluctantly. "I'll leave right away."

"And, Gene," the colonel added in a more friendly tone, "I'm sorry to cancel your leave and call you back so abruptly. I wouldn't do it if it weren't important. Oh, and I guess I can count on you not to say anything."

"Yes, Sir, mum's the word."

"Fine. Then, I'll be expecting you."

Gene hung up with a frown and turned to face his mother who was standing in the kitchen doorway.

“Something up, Gene?”

“Yeah, mom, I’m afraid so. I’m going to have to go back to the base.”

“Well, go on. Get your things out of your room. Goodness knows, when something important comes up, they certainly couldn’t get along without my son.”

“I hate to run like this, mom,” he said. “It seems like I never get to spend time with you these days.”

“Oh, it’s not me I feel sorry for. You need some time off a lot more than those military people need one of their silly meetings. But it can’t be helped, so go on now. I’ll have a couple sandwiches ready by the time you get your things.”

While he was driving back to the base, his headlights probing the gathering darkness, he thought to himself, this could blow the lid off the whole thing. If the Kremlin has already spotted the base... well, it’s a cinch the defense department isn’t just going to twiddle their thumbs and wait for them to do something.

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Paul turned down the volume on turntable one and flicked on his mike switch.

“There it is,” he announced, “‘Cool Daddy,’ the latest hit from Wild Bill Jameson. We’ll hear from Spyder Williams in just a moment, after this word...”

He was beginning to get tired and wished he had a cup of coffee. This Top Forty show really gets you down, he thought. Both phones were ringing off the hook—people wanting to make requests—but he let them ring until he finished the commercial and got Spyder started on the other turntable. Finally he picked up one of the phones.

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As a voice on the other end of the line said, “Good evening, this is KLEF,” Jarvis said, “Hey, I wonder if you could play ‘I’m In Love With You,’ by the Shirrells?”

The voice on the phone said they would try to, so Jarvis said thanks and hung up. As he went back into the living room, he said, “Come on, baby. Let’s dance.”

Martha jumped up from the chair and said, “Sure, Cool Daddy, let’s rock!”

Man, what a chick she was. And could she ever move that body! He put one arm around her and swung her into the dance as they both responded to the rhythm of the music. She was slender and graceful, and her tight sleeveless top accented the surge of her breasts as she moved. They turned together, rocking back and forth, her breasts brushing his chest as their bodies came together. He swung her apart and then pulled her back, as they flowed with the energy of the music. When she moved toward him again, he put his hands on her hips. Then, as they turned he pulled her toward him until his lips brushed the top of her blonde hair. Finally, breathing hard as the music reached its climax, he crushed her against his chest. He felt her twist underneath him, the feel of her body filling his awareness. With the sensation of physical contact still stimulating his senses, he murmured huskily:

“Come on, baby. Let’s go get the car before I lose it! I can’t wait much longer.”

“All right,” she agreed, her face flushed with the lingering energy of the dance.

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Vruuk was observing the screen while he copied more transmissions, when he sensed the beam from his planet again.

“We are now ready to try to contact Vrondek III,” they sent. “We have analyzed the content of the transmission you beamed us, and although we do not comprehend it fully, we have prepared a basic message which they should be able to receive. Our meaning may not be fully comprehensible to them, but will at least they know that we are trying to communicate with them. In this way we can establish first contact and then improve our communications as we proceed. Under different circumstances it might have been better to solve the communication problem more completely before attempting contact, but time grows short. We must contact them soon, or what we learn from them will be of no use to us. This, then, seems to be the most direct way.”

“In what way do you want me to send the transmission,” Vruuk queried. “Do you wish me to try an etheric wave like they are using?”

“No, that would only cover a limited frequency and might be missed altogether. It will be more effective to use a permeating beam that will activate their molecular structure so that any reasonably sensitive mind will be aware of it. It may cause some confusion at first, but we must take that chance. You may beam for a short time, and then we will wait to see if they answer and, if so, how they respond.”

“All right, I will activate the beam and you may send me the transmission.” Vruuk shifted his awareness and started to send the controlling impulses to his equipment. The walls of his isolated cubicle began to brighten with the bio-electric energy of his instruments behind the smoothly polished surface.

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Paul had just finished his shift and was leaving the station when he heard the sound. It seemed to come from everything around him, out of the wall, out of the cars parked at the curb, and even out of the ground at his feet. It filled his mind so that it was difficult to think. It seemed like music, and the sound contained something like words, but none of it had meaning. He groped to the side of his car, staggered by the impact of the noise in his mind, which was impossible to resist. It permeated his entire being until his body and mind ached with it. He could sense confusion around him in the street. Traffic was slowed and people were milling around in bewilderment, some with their mouths open trying to talk, and others with terrified expressions on their face.

Out of the corner of his eye, Paul saw a snarl of traffic. A bus full of people had crashed into an official-looking black limousine. He sensed all this without being able to focus on it clearly. He fought it, until he realized that he was screaming without being able to hear the sound of his voice because of the noise in his head.

His mind seemed to blank out for a moment under the onslaught of sound. How long he stood there leaning on the side of his car, he couldn't remember. He tried to plug his ears with his fingers, but it did no good; the noise only seemed to come from inside his head. Finally, though, it seemed a little better, and he was able to form some coherent thoughts. He groped his way into the car with the sound still hammering inside his head.

By then, the street was becoming a little more orderly. People were scurrying around and there were a couple of ambulances by the stricken bus and car. Another ambulance came by him, its red light flashing, but if the siren was going he couldn't hear it. He turned on the radio, but that was also useless. The only thing he could hear was the pseudo-music with senseless words that filled him with terror. He was finally able to start the car, and he began to drive toward his apartment, threading his way cautiously out of the remaining confusion.

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Colonel Evans met him at the door of his office and said, "Come on, Gene, we're going into conference right now. I'll brief you on what's going on once we're inside."

Inside the room there were fifteen or twenty people and it was rumored that the President was due to arrive at any moment. Gene had only seen the President on one other occasion, so this was likely to be even more serious than he had thought.

The atmosphere of the room was one of grim determination. The men, most with military uniforms, were sitting around in tense groups talking earnestly and quietly. General Reeves, the officer in command, was walking up to the speaker's platform when sound erupted out of the air around them.

For almost sixty seconds no one moved, all too stunned to do anything as they fought the intensity of the sound. Once the preliminary shock wore off, a few officials began to grope around, as though they were blinded by the noise. It seemed to Gene as if the room was being crushed by a sound which was impossible to escape. He made his way to a telephone, thinking that things might be different in another part of the city, but it was impossible; he could only hear the noise which sounded like music but with words that made no sense. Glen would have probably loved it. It had echoes of many different songs, but it was still like nothing he had ever heard. The sound had an unearthly quality that tugged at his emotions. It made him feel as though someone was calling his name in the midst of a terrible nightmare.

Someone pulled some heavy curtains over the windows, but the sound still seemed to come out of the very air around them. A grim-faced General Reeves finally got back on the podium and raised his hands trying to get their attention. Someone had raised a map at the back of the stage, revealing a dark-green blackboard. The General gestured toward it with a piece of chalk. Then he began to write instructions about what they should do, and the way they would conduct the meeting.

After he was finished, the first person to step up to the board when was General Naylor, the Army Chief of Staff. He wrote: "Russians," and pointed up toward the sky, and then continued writing. "They have blocked our communications. I say we strike back while we are able."

At this some head shook in vigorous agreement, while others looked around, uselessly trying to talk in the confusion. For a moment everyone tried to write at once, but finally General Reeves gestured that he would recognize one person at a time.

In the difficult discussion that followed, most of the military personnel agreed that it must be the Russians, but they couldn't agree on whether to strike back. One two star general pointed out that it might not be the Russians, and that they might be having the same problem. Besides, he continued, if it really were the Russians up there, they would have done more by now than just sending this sound. It seemed to Gene that they were stalling because they really didn't know what to do; some officers seemed to hope that the President would come and assume the terrible responsibility of making a decision.

Suddenly, the door burst open and a staff sergeant rushed in with a piece of paper that he handed to General Reeves. It was telegram. Yes, Gene thought, that would still work. It was evidently the only form of communication they had left.

The General frowned as he began to read, while the others waited expectantly. He seemed read the message a second time until, finally, he turned to the blackboard and began to write:

"In the confusion following the arrival of the sound, the President's car was involved in an accident. The President has suffered a heart attack and is dead."

The men in the room were obviously stunned by the news.

"As far as we know," the General continued writing, "communications are cut off all over the world except that, naturally, we can get no information at all from behind the Iron Curtain."

For a long moment, no one moved as those present contemplated the tragic news of the President's death which seemed to have paralyzed everyone. Now the responsibility rested with them, and it was as though they were postponing the decision they all knew they would have to make. Finally, General Reeves went to the board and suggested that they take a vote. Most seemed to agree that this was the best course of action, so the General wrote a large "Yes" and then a "No" on the blackboard. He pointed to the "Yes" and raised his arm, signifying that the others should do the same if they wished to vote that way. Sixteen arms went up. He pointed to "No," and just three arms were raised. There was some further written discussion and, finally, they voted a second time. This time all nineteen arms voted "Yes."

Gene, being just a lieutenant, wasn't allowed to vote, not that it would have made any difference. He didn't know how he would have voted, if that were possible, but he was glad he didn't have that responsibility. He never thought that it would come to this. No sane person could really believe that a group of men sitting in a room before a blackboard would vote for the death of millions of people, and perhaps most of the people in the world. He still couldn't believe that it would happen, even now that they had voted. But the missiles were out there in their silos and the death they would spread over the world would be very real. Over a hundred missiles, bright death-needles, sat waiting to be sent toward all the strategic points in enemy territory. Now it seemed that they would finally fulfill their purpose.

The sergeant left the room with another slip of paper. That was it: the order for the Strategic Command Center to launch. Just a slip of white paper.

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Jarvis breathed deeply, letting the cool, night air relax and sooth his body. Martha lay on the back seat of the car next to him, not moving. A moment ago they had felt the hot energy of passion as their bodies moved in tandem toward the climax of sensual release. Now the moon shone through the car windows, its white light shimmering over their partially clothed bodies. Someday, Jarvis was thinking, it won't be like this. "We will have our own home, and we won't have to do it in the back seat of a car. I'll get a job and make some money, and we can always be together. The guys will say, "man, you mean that hot chick is your wife?"

Yeah, and when he came home after work, Martha would be there waiting for him; they would have a larger car, and a TV, and a nice house. And someday they would have kids. Class, man, that's what he would get. Something would turn up, he could feel it coming, and when he had made a bundle...

Slowly relaxation deepened into peaceful slumber, and they both were quiet. When the sound forced its way into the moonlight drowning out the night sounds, they didn't hear it.

In his dream, first Jarvis was dancing wildly with Martha, her face flushed with passionate love for him. Then, suddenly, he has riding with her in a long, yellow convertible, listening to music on the radio. Finally, they were in their own home, playing records and dancing. And neither of them felt anything when the mushroom cloud rose over the city and then reached out to hurl them into a screaming red oblivion.

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Vruuk was checking his instruments when the communicating beam from Aedis reached him.

"Yes," he beamed back, "I am still transmitting."

"Have they given us an answer, or responded in any way?" the beam asked.

"No," Vruuk beamed, "nothing of significance has occurred. I have been observing them closely ever since the transmission began, and the only thing I have been able to detect is the movement of some surface craft over the globe. Two groups of vessels are moving toward each other from opposite sides of the planet. They must be some form of intercontinental transportation. My instruments show a slight increase in atomic radiation, but nothing else. The fact that they are able to travel in this way is another indication that they must be an advanced civilization."

"Indeed, this is an indication that they may very well be able to help us with..."

"One moment," Vruuk cut in, "I am sorry, but something terrible has happened. Suddenly my instruments detect a burst of extremely high radiation, and on the viewer... No!... I don't understand!... That can't be!..."

On the screen in front of him the planet was being slowly being consumed by billowing clouds of red flame that seemed to flow around the sphere like streams of molten metal.

"Quickly, cease the transmission, and see if that has any effect."

Vruuk deactivated the transmitting beam and then responded:

“No, it makes no difference. I am afraid that we have made a terrible miscalculation. For some unknown reason the planet seems to be destroying itself. I cannot imagine what could have caused this. The radiation is so strong that I will not be able to remain here much longer.”

“But what can possibly have caused this change, Vruuk? Surely your instruments...”

“No, they reveal nothing of significance other than a vast increase in the level of planetary radiation. All I can tell you is that I must now leave this planet immediately, and I fear for our own planet... and for our people...”

Vruuk broke off the communication and sent his craft soaring into orbit until he was able to set the controls for travel through the galaxy. Below him Vrondek III continued to shimmer with an incandescent brightness that eclipsed the light of the surrounding stars, and his small craft grew smaller and smaller, until it became another star, and then disappeared.

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