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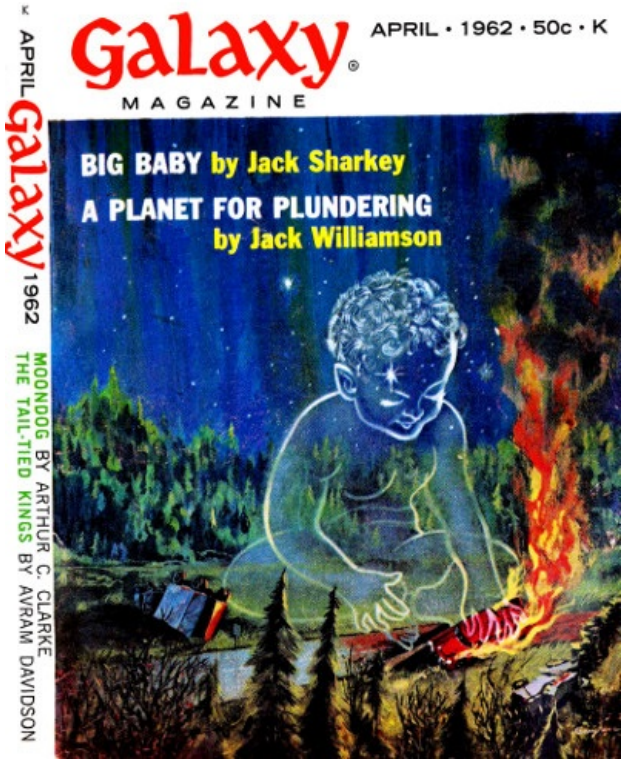

BIG BABY

By JACK SHARKEY

Illustrated by GAUGHAN

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BIG BABY

The baby was lonesome, helpless and afraid. It wasn't his fault he was seven hundred feet tall!

The dancing green blip traced an erratic course upon the glossy gray screen, the jagged-line pattern repeated over and over, its outline going from dim to sharply emerald brightness to dim again before fading. The technician cut the switch. There was a sustained whir of reorganization within the machine as the data-cards were refiled.

"Care to see it again, sir?" asked the technician. His fingers hovered over the dials, his body in an attitude of impending motion.

Jerry Norcriss tilted his head in a brief, authoritative nod. The technician started the machine again. With a soft humming, the gray circular screen began to pulse once more with that dancing line of brightness.

"Now, here, sir," said the tech, "is where the scanner beam first caught the pulse of the creature."

Jerry nodded, his eyes riveted to that zigzag phosphor pattern upon the screen. He noted the soaring peaks and plunging valleys with something like dismay. "It's a powerful one," he marveled. It was one of his rare comments. Space Zoologists rarely spoke at all, to any but their own kind, and even then were typically terse of speech.

The tech, almost as impressed by this—for Jerry—long speech as he had been by the first warning from Naval Space Corps Headquarters on Earth, could only nod grimly. His own eyes were as intent upon the screen as Jerry's.

"Here—" the line was glowing its brightest now—"here's where the creature passed directly beneath the scanner-beam. That's the full strength of its life-pulse." The line lost clarity and strength, faded. "And here's where it was lost again, sir."

"Time of focus?" snapped Jerry, trying to keep his voice calm.

"Nearly a full minute," said the tech, still blinking at the screen. It was now devoid of impulse, barren once more. "That means that whatever the thing is, it's big, sir. Damned big, to stay at maximum pulse that long."

"I know very well what it means!" Jerry grated. "The thing's so—"

The tech smiled bleakly. "—incredible, sir?"

Jerry's nod was thoughtful. "The only word for it, Ensign." His inner eye kept repeating for him that impossible green pattern he'd seen. The strong, flat muscles of his shoulders and neck knotted into what could easily become a villainous tension-headache. Jerry realized suddenly that he was badly scared....

"Sir," the tech said suddenly, "I was under the impression that the roborocket scanners couldn't miss a life-pulse on a planet. I mean, making a complete circuit of the planet every ninety minutes, for a period of six months.... It's impossible for them to miss an uncatalogued life-form."

"I know it is," said Jerry Norcriss, pushing blunt fingers through his shock of prematurely white hair. "Save for two precedents, I cannot conceive of any way in which this pulse could have been overlooked."

"Two precedents, sir?" said the tech, intrigued both by the unsuspected fallibility of the scanner and by this unusual loquacity from the zoologist.

Jerry removed his gaze from the screen and regarded the young man standing beside it. He made as if to reply, then thought better of it. Any out-going on his part was an effort. A big effort. And a danger. Only another Space Zoologist would understand the danger of speech, of letting loose, of relaxing for a moment that terrible vigil over one's personal psychic barricades.

"Skip it," he said abruptly. The young ensign's smile tightened to obedience at the words.

"Yes, sir," said the tech, with strained cordiality. "Will that be all, sir?"

"Yes," said Jerry. Then, as the tech started out of the compartment, "No, wait. Tell Ollie Gibbs in the Ward Room to bring up a pot of coffee. Black."

The man nodded, and went out the door, dogging it after him.

Jerry listened to the booted feet clanking on their magnetic soles up the passageway of the spaceship, and sighed.

The situation, in Jerry's experience, was fantastic. Only twice, in the history of Space Zoology, had there been oversights on the part of the scanners. One, almost comically, had been on Earth, when the scanners were first being tested. The chunky roborocket—its angles and bulges and tapering pickup-heads unsuitable for flight in any medium but airless space—had swept giddily about the planet, the sensitive pickup-heads recording and filing on microtape the patterns of the life-pulses of all sentient life below. And when the tape had been translated onto the IBM cards, and the cards run through the translation chambers, to get their incomprehensible sine-patterns changed into readable English, it was found that there was an animal missing.

Six months of circling the planet had still left the index blank on that animal's expected check-pattern. The animal was the brown bear, of north central America. And only after agonizing hours of theorizing and worrying did someone come up with the answer to the dilemma:

It had been a long, hard winter. The bears were in extended hibernation. Somehow, the fleeting flicker of their subdued life-pulses had never managed to correspond with the inquisitive sweep of the scanner-beams from the blackness of space overhead. And so, they'd been left off, as though they did not even exist.

A lot of sweat was dabbed from relieved foreheads in the Corps when a secondary roborocket, sent into a short one-week orbit, had picked up the animals' pulses with ease as soon as springtime was upon the land. The odds against their being thus missed were fantastic, astronomically unlikely. But it *had* happened, despite the odds against it, and the Corps was forcibly reminded that in a universe of planets, there is infinite room for even the unlikely to occur.

The only other oversight had been years later, when a just-settling colony had been half-destroyed by a herd of immense beasts similar to the buffalo of Earth, but viciously carnivorous. There had been no indication, in the six-month scanning period, that such a species even existed on the planet, the third planet of Syrinx Gamma, the sun of a newly discovered system beyond the Coalsack.

The reason was maddeningly simple. The herds were migratory. Their migrations had corresponded in scope around the oceanless planet with the sweep of the scanner-beam in such a way that the roborocket was scanning either where the herd had just been or where it had not yet arrived. Again, the odds were fantastic against the occurrence. Yet, again, it *had* happened. Other than these two events, though, there had been no further error on the part of scanners for nearly a decade.

Precautions had been taken against recurrence.

Roborockets were now sent to scan a planet only at a time when there would be an overlap of seasonal climes, so that the beam would inspect the surface throughout both the mild and the rigorous weathers, thus obviating a repeat of the brown bear incident. And the sweep of the beam had been extended, so that no animal with migratory movement at speeds less than that of a supersonic plane could have avoided being duly detected and catalogued. That, they thought, should prevent any more such incidents.

All that Jerry knew.

And yet, here he was, descending through the black vacuum of space toward an already-colonized planet, the second planet of Sirius, a planet supposedly already scanned, catalogued, and long-since ready for inhabitation. And now, after the colonials had been there for nearly five years, something was starting to wipe them out. Some unsuspected alien thing was present on the planet, a thing that a hastily lofted roborocket had located in a matter of hours, and yet had missed in its original six-month orbital check, before the settlers came.

It was impossible. Incredible. And yet, again, it *had* happened—*was* happening—and had to be stopped.

A frantic appeal had been beamed to Earth through sub-space, an appeal for a Space Zoologist to find the alien, learn its weaknesses, and recommend its mode of destruction.

"Some day," Jerry mused, waiting impatiently for Ollie Gibbs with the coffee, "I'll come upon an invincible alien. What recommendation then!" He could just imagine himself telling a second-generation village of hardshell settlers that they'd best just pack up and get out....

Jerry's ruminations were interrupted by the soft tap on the door that meant Ollie had arrived. He grunted an answer, and the ship's mess boy came in, his face rigid in an expression of polite decorum as he set the steaming pot and drab plastic cup down on the swing-out table at Jerry's elbow.

Jerry sensed the man's eyes flickering onto him each time the mess boy felt the zoologist wasn't

looking his way. He finally turned and caught the youth in mid-stare.

"What is it, Ollie?" said Jerry, not unkindly. "You'll burst if you don't talk. Go ahead, spit it out."

Ollie flashed a brief grin, a dazzle of white teeth that was all the brighter in his bronze face. "If I'm bursting with anything, sir, it's just plain nosiness."

Jerry glanced from Ollie to the wall clock—spaceship clocks were always set at Eastern Standard Earth Time—and sighed. He was cutting it terribly close this time. Suddenly, he wanted very much to have someone to talk to. It didn't matter, all at once, that he'd be exposing himself to danger by relaxing his mental grip on himself. If the ship were not landed and his job begun within two hours he'd be no worse off speaking than if he'd kept still.

"Sit down, Ollie," he said abruptly.

The mess boy's eyebrows rose at this unheard-of request, but he perched obediently in a chair, almost poised for flight on the edge of the seat. To have a chat with a Space Zoologist was without precedent in Ollie's experience.

Jerry carefully poured himself a cup of coffee, took a sip and settled back comfortably in his chair. "What's on your mind, Ollie?"

"Like I said, sir, just plain nosiness. I—I can't get over you Learners, sir, that's all. I always wonder what gets you into the business. Why you stay in it so long, why you die so quick if you quit the Corps, or—Well, like that, sir."

"Just general curiosity about my *raison d'être*, huh?" said Jerry. He wasn't trying to floor the mess boy with a four-dollar word; even the lowliest crewman on a spaceship had been chosen for brainpower, long before brawn came into consideration at all.

"That's about it, sir." Ollie nodded. "I mean, I watch you, sir, when you come out on these trips. You get all keyed up and worried and sick-looking, and I keep wondering, 'Why does he do it? Why doesn't he get out of it if it affects him like that?'"

Jerry stared ruefully at the wall before him, and didn't meet the mess boy's eyes as he replied.

"Every man gets keyed up and scared when he has an important undertaking at hand. It's just worry, plain and simple. The thought of failure keeps me all tightened up."

Jerry paused, awaiting a response. When none was forthcoming, he turned his gaze slowly to meet that of the mess boy, hoping he was doing it casually enough to allay anything like suspicion in the other man. But the smile he met was, affectionately, the smile of a man who hasn't been fooled.

"That's not it, sir," said Ollie. "I know it's not. Because you're keyed up the wrong way. You're keyed up with worry that you *won't* have a job to do. Your big upset's a lot like a—Well, like a junky waiting for his next fix.... If you'll pardon the expression, sir."

"I will *not* pardon it!" Jerry bawled, then gripped the arms of his chair and shook his head in instant apology as the other man's face went slack with surprise. "No, Ollie, no. I take that back. I *asked* you to sit there, *told* you to let me know what was on your mind. I can't very well blow up just because you followed my lead."

"Everyone blows up, now and then, sir," Ollie said.

Jerry nodded glumly.

Ollie got up. "I'll be in the ward room, sir, if you need anything else," he said. "Unless you'd like me to stick around awhile?"

Jerry considered the offer, then shook his head. "No.... I'd better not, Ollie." The barest ghost of humor glowed a moment on the zoologist's face. "You're too damned easy to talk to."

"Yes, sir," Ollie grinned, then went out and closed the door after him.

Jerry sat in the chair a second longer, then jumped up and pulled the door open again. Ollie, a few steps down the passageway, turned about in curious surprise.

"Sir?"

"Tell Captain—" Jerry began, then realized his voice was nearly a ragged shout, and lowered it. "Would you please tell the captain to speed things up if he can, Ollie?"

Ollie hesitated. "The vector—" he started, then stiffened militarily and replied, "Yes, sir. At once, sir."

"No," Jerry groaned, closing his eyes and hanging onto the metal edge of the doorframe. "Forget it. He's got a course to follow in. He can't get there any faster."

Ollie, knowing this already, just stood there.

"Just go have a cup of coffee," Jerry added, lamely. "And about what I said—"

"*You* know I wouldn't say anything about it, sir," Ollie said.

"I know," Jerry admitted. "Sorry. Space nerves or something of the sort, I guess."

"Sure, sir."

The mess boy turned and continued down the passageway. Jerry shut the door slowly, then sat down in his chair once more, and stared at the clock, and sipped the hot coffee, and fought the cold needle-pricks of fear in every muscle and joint of his body....

II

The colony on the second planet of Sirius existed solely due to one of those vicious circles of progress. Just as iron is needed to make the steel to build the tools and equipment necessary to mine the raw iron ore, so this colony was needed to mine the precious mineral that made such colonies possible in the first place.

The mineral was called Praesodynimium, a polysyllabic mouthful which meant simply that it was an unstable crystalline isotope of sodium that broke down eventually into ordinary sodium (hence "prae-":before; "sod-":sodium), which was possessed of extreme kinetic potentials ("dyn-":power), and was first extracted from sodium compounds by a Canadian scientist ("-imium" instead of the more American "-inum" or even "-um").

This crystal had the happy habit of electrical allergy. When subjected to even a mild electric current, it avoided the consequent shakeup of its electronic juxtaposition by simply vanishing from normal space until the power was turned off. The nice part about its disappearance—from an astronaut's point of view—was that the crystal took not only itself, but objects within a certain radius along with it. It turned out that a crystal of Praesodynimium the moderate size of a sixteen-inch softball would warp a ninety-foot spaceship into hyperspace without even breathing hard. Of course, it would warp anything *else* within a fifty-foot radius, too; so it was only turned on after the ship had ascended beyond planetary atmosphere, lest a large scoop of landing-field, not to mention a few members of the ground crew, be carried away with the ship.

In her eagerness to investigate the now-attainable stars, Earth had soon exhausted her sources of the mineral. Worse, the crystal, being unstable, had a half-life of only twenty-five years. That meant that a ship using it had a full-range radial margin of about five years before the crystal ceased warping the ship-inclusive area.

Until some way was discovered to get into hyperspace without using Praesodynimium—and its actual function was as much a mystery to scientists as an automobile's cause-and-effect is to a lot of drivers; very few people can describe the esoteric relationships between the turning of the ignition key and the turning of the rear wheels—the mineral was worth ten times its weight in uranium 235.

Sirius II had been found to be as rife with the mineral as a candy store is with calories. Hence the colony.

For so long as the ore held out the planet would be regarded with fond respect and esteem by any and all persons who had investments, relatives or even just interest in the Space Age and its contingent programs.

So it was with considerable trepidation that Earth received the news that the mines on Sirius were no longer being worked. Oh, yes, there was still ore—enough to keep the planet profitable for another century. The trouble was the miners. They weren't coming out of the mines anymore. And no one who went inside to look for them was ever seen again, either.

Naturally, mining slacked off. The men refused to set foot in the mines until somebody found out what had happened to their predecessors.

So the officials of the colony resurrected a scanner-beam and roborocket from the cellar of the spacefield warehouse and storage depot. They sent the rocket into an orbit matching planetary rotation. In effect it simply hovered over the mines while it scanned the area for uncatalogued alien life.

And when they brought the rocket down and checked the microtape against the file of known species on the planet, they found that no such beast had ever been catalogued. Its life-pulse gave a reading of point-nine-nine-nine.

Since life-pulses are catalogued on a decimal scale based on the numeral one (with Man rated at point-oh-five-oh), the colonial administration staff immediately ordered the mines officially closed and off-limits. This brought no results on Sirius II which had not been already achieved, but the declaration made the miners feel a little less guilty over their dereliction of duty.

An SOS was swiftly sent to Earth, explaining the situation in detail and requesting instructions.

Earth sent word to hang on, keep calm and leave the mines closed until an investigation could be made—all of which the colony was trying to do anyway.

A duplicate of the microtape had been transmitted along with the SOS. Earth had checked the pattern against every known species filed in U.S. Naval Space Corps Alien-Contact Library, a

collection of the vast alien multitude gathered by Space Zoologists in the methodical colonization and exploration of the universe. It was found to be not only *unknown* anywhere in the thus-far-explored cosmos, but totally *unlike* any life-pulse previously encountered.

Earth decided the only way to get any satisfaction would be by the unorthodox method of sending in a Space Zoologist to Contact the alien, though this would be the first time in the history of Contact that this had ever been done on an already-settled planet.

And so the badly frightened colony lingered behind bolted doors, and peered through locked windows at the sky—awaiting the arrival of Jerry Norcriss, and praying he'd locate the alien and tell them how it might be dealt with....

"Begging your pardon, sir," grinned the tech, doing some last-minute fiddling with the machine, "but you never had it so good." Jerry dabbed at the cold sweat-film on his forehead and upper lip, and nodded silently.

In all his previous Contacts, done before any colonization was even attempted, things were a bit more rustic. His present environs were luxury compared to those setups. If the six-month orbit of the roborocket found the planet safe for humans, well and good; Jerry did not have to go. But if a new life-form were spotted—one that did not correspond in life-pulse to any known species—then it was Jerry's job to land on the planet and Learn the beast, to determine its probable menace, if any, to man.

The tech was referring to the fact that Jerry's usual base of operations was out on the sward beside the tailfin of the rocket, the only power-source on a non-colonized planet. There, in his Contact helmet, relaxed upon his padded couch, he would let his mind be sent right into that of the alien, to Learn it from the inside out. Here, though, on a settled world, his accommodations were pleasantly out of the ordinary. He was in the solarium of the town's research laboratory-hospital. He gazed up through quartz panes at soothing blue skies, in air-conditioned comfort spoiled only by a fugitive scent of disinfectant lingering in the building.

Some half-dozen curious members of the building's staff were gathered in the room. None of them had ever seen a man go into Contact before. In vain the tech had assured them, before Jerry's arrival, that there was nothing to be seen. Jerry would lie on the couch and adjust the helmet upon his head, and then the tech would throw a switch. And for forty minutes there would be nothing to see except Jerry's silent supine body.

Later, of course, the information transmitted by Jerry's mind through the helmet pickups to the machine would be translated into English. Then they could all read about the new animal. That would be the interesting part, for them; not this senseless staring at the young man, white-haired at thirty-plus, who would, so far as they'd be able to tell, merely doze off for an uneventful forty-minute nap.

For Jerry, however, things would be anything but dull for those forty minutes.

Once the process was begun, there was no way known even to the discoverer of the Contact principle to extend or reduce the time-period. When Jerry's mind had traveled to that of the alien, he would remain there for the full time. Anything that happened to the alien in that period would also happen to Jerry. Including death.

If the alien somehow perished with Jerry "aboard," as it were, the group in the solarium would wait in vain for him ever to bestir himself and rise from the couch again.

Jerry, fighting the waves of nausea that burned in the pit of his stomach, lay there in his helmet and waited for the tech to finish adjusting the machine.

A scanner-beam, sent toward the suspected locale from the solarium, had instantly retriggered that same green blip in response, as jagged and powerful as before. Jerry would soon be sent right into the center of the response-area, and his mind imbedded in the brain of the alien.

"Hurry it up, will you?" Jerry called over to the tech, trying not to shout.

"Ready, sir," the other man said abruptly. "Are you all set?"

"All set, Ensign," Jerry replied, then shut his eyes to the clear blue sky and the stares of the curious and let his mind relax for the brief shock of transport....

A flare of lightning, silent, white and cold in his mind—and Jerry Norcriss was in Contact....

One of the nurses, crisp and efficient in white starched cotton, took a hesitant step toward the figure on the couch, then spoke to the tech without looking at him, intensely. "What are his chances? It's so important that he succeed!"

About to brush her off with a noncommittal reply, the tech turned his gaze from the control panel to meet, turning to face him, a pair of the deepest blue eyes he'd ever seen, and a smooth-skinned serious face beneath a short-cropped tangle of bright yellow hair. The eyes were troubled. His manner softened instantly.

Trying not to show the sudden warmth he felt, he pointed with offhand authority at the tall metal

machine, its face alive with leaping lights and quivering indicator needles.

"This'll tell the story, one way or the other," he said. "A Space Zoologist's chances are always fifty-fifty. He either succeeds and returns in perfect health, or he fails and doesn't return at all. But whatever data he picks up in Contact will be punched onto the microtape. It may help us deal with the menace. Or it may not."

She looked surprised. "Then this is simply a recorder? I'd thought it was the thing that sent his mind out to the mine area...." She faltered on the last few words, and looked more concerned than ever.

The tech was tempted to ask her about it, but decided to stay on the neutral ground of simple mechanics for a while. "No, his mind sends itself. That is, the helmet triggers a certain brain-center; his mind follows a scanner-beam directed toward the alien and he Contacts. After that, this machine could be turned off, so far as maintaining Contact goes. After a forty-minute interim, his mind would return to his body by itself. The brain-center gets triggered sort of like a muscle reacts to a blow. It gets paralyzed for a certain time. Forty minutes. Beyond that limit, or short of it, no Contact or breaking of Contact is possible...."

His voice trailed off as he realized her responsive nods were abstracted and vague, her thoughts elsewhere. "Look," he said awkwardly, "I'm no psyche-man, but—maybe it'd help if you talked about it."

A faint smile touched her mouth. "I didn't realize it showed."

He grinned and shrugged.

"My name's Jana," she said. "Jana Corby." She was trying to ease some of the natural tension between strangers.

"Bob Ryder," said the tech. He stood and waited for her to make the next move.

"My father—" she said, and for the first time, some of the tension behind her eyes flowed over into her voice. "My father was one of the miners. He was on the morning shift. The day the men didn't come home was the day before my wedding."

Bob frowned. "I don't understand."

She blinked at the moisture that had come to her eyes, and flashed him a sad little smile. "I'm sorry. I was telescoping events. You see, with Dad missing, I postponed the ceremony, naturally, till I could learn what had happened. Jim—that's Jim Herrick, my fiance—was wonderfully understanding about it. He's a miner, too. On the night-shift, thank God. But if Lieutenant Norcriss doesn't succeed—if he can't find a way to destroy this beast, whatever it is—we can't get married, ever."

Bob shook his head slowly. "You can't? I don't follow."

"You're in the Space Corps," she said. "Maybe you don't know about interstellar colonies. It costs plenty to send people to the stars. The investors want some kind of guarantees for their money. So we're all signed to a ten-year contract. If we fail to fulfill the terms we're sent back to Earth on the next ship going that way."

"Well—I know you're still within the limit," said Bob, "but how does this upset your marriage plans?"

"We go where we're sent," she said simply. "If this colony fails, we'll be sent to a new planet. It may not be the same one. I'll be sent where they need nurses, Jim where they need miners."

Bob felt funny, talking against the colonial program, but the weary despair in the girl's eyes outweighed economic considerations. "You could both renege on your contracts."

"And go back to Earth together?" Jana shook her head. "I couldn't do that, for Jim's sake. He's spent his life at mining, and this is the kind of mining he knows best: Praesodynimium. And there just *is* no more on Earth."

"He could get something else," said Bob.

"I know. But he might not be happy. After a while, he might blame me for it. Or I'd blame myself. Either way, things just wouldn't be the same. I—I suppose you think I'm foolish, feeling so strongly about him?"

Bob said softly, "Honey, any guy would cut his arm off to get a girl like you. Myself included."

Embarrassed, she looked once more toward the silent figure upon the couch. "You're very kind."

"Not kind," said the tech. "Wistful."

Behind them, a myriad banks of lights and switches flickered, shifted with electric monotony, slowly recording the details, down to the most minute sensory awareness, of the Contact between Jerry Norcriss and the alien....

III

There was at first the feeling of warm sunlight on his flesh, then a pungent scent of crushed foliage, green and heady, very strong and familiar.

As his mind took hold, a whisper of wind hummed into his consciousness and a shimmering golden brightness began to grow upon his closed eyelids. Abruptly, unity of sensation was achieved. Jerry Norcriss "was" in a sunlit part of the woods near the mines, feeling the alien's perceptions as though they were his own.

He crinkled his eyes against the glare, then slowly opened them.

As he blinked his eyes to focus the golden glare, he spotted a strange little cluster of tiny sticks, with miniature leaves sprouting greenly on thread-like branches. Halfway between his face and this fragile copse slithered a brilliant blue line, ribbon-thin, through a serpentine gouge along the earth. On the far side of this trickle lay a rich tumble of soft green velvet, ending at a group of more of those twig-copses. Puzzled, Jerry turned his gaze skyward. Within the warm blue canopy overhead he saw clouds ... but clouds unlike any he'd ever seen for size. None of them could have been more than a foot in diameter. They hung against the sky like cotton-covered basketballs.

He returned his gaze groundward, and for the first time saw the scuffed grayish area of earth between himself and the trickle. A wiry network of metal glittered there, the wires in pairs, and the pairs disappearing into small square punctures against a wall of banked soil.

Then Jerry gasped. His mind had apprehended the implications of his vista so suddenly that he was staggered.

All the facts sprang into proper perspective. The twigs were actually tall trees, the tumble of velvet a wide stretch of grassy sward, the trickle was a rushing blue river, and the tiny wire-network in the grayish area was the tracks for the mine-cars, leading down into the planet through those tiny square adits.

Jerry had unconsciously been receiving sensations in terms of his host's size. A quick calculation showed him that his head must be easily five hundred feet in the air.

Cautiously, he glanced for the first time toward the body of his host, to see what sort of creature he was in Contact with.

There was nothing whatever to be seen.

Yet when he closed his eyelids once again, golden opacity returned. He reopened them thoughtfully. The alien, apparently, could cut off its vision. Yet the eyes of a creature so high must be many feet in diameter. And, at this height, twin opacities would be spotted even from the nearby town.

But no such sight had been reported. Therefore, the lids were opaque only from the inside. Which was ridiculous. Yet it was happening.

Jerry's thoughts were interrupted by a giddy realization. He, in this alien body, was not standing. He was seated cross-legged on the ground. That meant a height of not five hundred feet, but

nearer seven hundred.

Cautiously, he extended a hand toward one of the tiny mine-cars. He had a little difficulty directing a hand and arm he could not see; but, by feeling along the earth, he got hold of the dull gray object and tried to lift it. It came up with featherweight ease.

Then, halfway to his eyes, it began to glow, to smoke, to grow terribly hot. And as Jerry released it with a reflex of pain, it burst into white flame and hit the ground as a shapeless gobbet of molten slag. Jerry's hand came to his mouth automatically. He sucked and licked at the sore surfaces of his finger and thumb, trying to drain some of the hurt out of them.

Then he froze.

After a heartbeat, he felt carefully about the interior of his mouth with a forefinger. Gums. Warm, wet, soft-boned toothless gums. Whatever the alien looked like—it was still only a baby.

Which meant—

Quickly Jerry looked at the sky again. Not a cloud had moved. Their rotund fleeciness might have been carven there. He gave himself a mental kick. Hadn't one of his first alien awarenesses been the sound of wind? And yet the grass lay still. The trees stood silent. And the clouds, so nearly over his head that he could have touched one, hung quietly against a perfectly calm sky.

It was not the wind he had heard. It was air. Just molecules of air, as they shifted and flew about at incredible speeds.

The alien-baby's time-sense was occluded, as that of any Earth-baby, by shortness of life. It was the paradox of relative lifetime.

A lifetime, Old Peters had said, training the eager young men who were to become graduate Space Zoologists, is a lifetime. He'd written it on the blackboard so they might understand he was not speaking in circles.

"A lifetime," he'd said, "is the time one spends from birth until any present moment. A lifetime is the actual count of moments of existence from birth. When a baby has been born for an hour, its lifetime is sixty minutes. And to the baby, that sixty minutes is a lifetime."

He'd written the two words on the board, and would point from one to the other as he spoke, so the class could understand the distinction visually, and not have to rely on his inflection to tell which term he'd used.

"A lifetime," he'd continued, "is subjective; a lifetime is objective. The first deals in one's personal sense of time passed. The second is simply readings from a clock. When a man turns ninety, he is usually surprised to find how short a life he's seemed to have had. His ninety years seem hardly longer to him than a single day seemed when he was a baby.

"It is a lucky thing that we cannot penetrate the mind of an intelligent creature. If any of us got into the mind of a baby, we'd soon start going out of our minds with the maddening length of a day's time, seen from a baby's viewpoint. Remember, when you are in Contact with an alien mind, for that immutable forty minutes your *sensation* of elapsed time will be subject to that of your host. To a baby, forty minutes is forever."

And here Jerry Norcriss was, in a baby's mind.

No wonder no tree had rippled, no cloud had blown. The baby-senses were geared to a near-eternal forty minutes. For all practical purposes, Jerry was stuck in one frame of a movie film, trapped for who-knows-how-long till the next frame came by.

"*That's* why the car melted!" he realized. "The movement of the car toward me, in my hand, must have been infinitely shorter than the few seconds it seemed to take. I tried to make the mine car move more than five hundred feet, in an actual time less than a thousandth of a *second*!"

Jerry wasn't overly concerned about the duration itself. He'd been in subjectively-slow creatures before. If things got too boring, he could always doze off; that usually served to pass the time. Even a baby's time-sense jumps long gaps when it sleeps.

The thing that puzzled him was this: If the mine car had burnt up from moving too far too fast, why hadn't the baby's hand and arm been scorched by the motion? The heat of the car had affected it, so that let out inborn heat-resistance....

His hands once again went to his face. He felt not only the features—familiar features, eerily like a human baby's—but the skull-size. When he'd finished, he no longer had reason to doubt that the baby was of an intelligent species. Too much cranial allotment to think any differently.

The whole situation, Jerry mused with grim humor, was screwy. The six-month roborocket could not have missed a creature with such an intense life-pulse, but it had. Contact could not be achieved with an intelligent mind, but it had been. Invisibility—except for certain species of underwater, creatures—was supposed to be impossible for a living organism. Yet here it was.

Three separate impossibles ... all accomplished.

"Still," said Jerry to himself, "that's not the main puzzle. The vanishing of those two shifts of miners is still beyond me. They could, of course, have simply walked head-on into this invisible leviathan. But how fast can a man walk? And would they *all* have done it? Now, if this kid happened to pick one of them *up*—" Jerry gave a shudder at the thought of what had happened to that metal mine car. "Still," he sighed, baffled, "a man who bursts into flame is no more fun to hold than a hot mine car. After maybe two or three deaths at the *outside*, the kid would've learned not to touch them."

Then he had an even eerier thought. If this creature were a baby—where did its mother and father lurk?

The thought of two more invisible giants at large on the planet was unbearable.

Jerry decided to chance losing control over the alien mind, to let its own instincts come to the fore.

There was the possibility that it knew where its folks were, and would try moving in that direction. Or it might cry for its mother, and she'd hurry back. If there *were* invisible giants, the sooner the colony was informed the better.

As Jerry's control of his host grew tenuous, he could feel the baby's mind taking over once again. Feeble pulsations reached him—nothing like solid thought, but mere urgencies about comfort, food and affection.

Jerry waited, in the background of the unformed mind, for something to happen. Then, suddenly, there was a shifting, something like a metal earthquake. A cold hard light of awareness focused on him, where he'd thought he was safely hidden in the background.

"Who are you?" asked the awareness.

It is not in so many words, of course. A mind speaks to another mind in incredibly swift shorthand. The actual thought-impulse that came to Jerry was a thick wave of curiosity, its stress laid upon identity.

"I am a Learner," Jerry's thought replied. It was a self-sufficient response, since Jerry's concept of all that a Learner was was incorporated in the thought.

"I see," said the alien. "You have memories of antagonism which are now gone from your intent. Explain."

"I came to find a menace. I found a helpless child."

"I see," came the cold, thoughtful reply. "Yes, that is how I sensed it."

"Is your mother around?" asked Jerry. "Or father?"

"Dead," said the awareness. "I am alone."

At the thought, the intense thought of loneliness, a kindred spark flared in Jerry's own mind. The alien caught at the spark, recognized it.

"Strange," it said. "You, too, are alone. But it is a different aloneness."

Jerry's thoughts were whirling in confusion. To be read so easily by a baby was incredible to him. Yet the situation was without precedent. Perhaps a baby's mind was brighter than science gave credit. Since a mind needed no words or manual skills, the mind of a baby might be open to learn the thousand things necessary for adult survival. Maybe as a man learned to use his body, he forgot in proportion how to use his mind.

"How can you know my aloneness?" asked Jerry.

"I see it, there in your mind. It is plain to me. You have been misled. You are a helpless pawn of a singularly wicked scheme. The victim of a lie."

Jerry's recollection flashed to his conversation with Ollie Gibbs, to the things he had wanted to tell the other man but was unable to put into words. All the heaviness he had borne alone these many years was apparent to this mind he enhosted. The alien mind knew. *Knew!*

"I see," it said again, though Jerry was unaware of expressing any conscious thought. "It is clear to me now. You have suffered much—will suffer much. No hope for you, is there?"

There was warmth in the words—warmth, friendship and compassionate understanding. Suddenly, to this mind of an alien in its incongruous, invisible baby's body, Jerry found himself blurting the things he had never told to any man. Things which no Space Zoologist had ever discussed even with another member of that hapless clan.

"They never told us," he said to the alien. "I don't hold any rancor because of it; they dared not tell us, lest we refuse to become one with them. They were fair, though. Long before we were indoctrinated, long before we'd been allowed to attempt our first Contact, we were told that there were dangers. Not the dangers we had heard about, such as the imminent peril of dying if the host died while we were in Contact. Another danger was implied, one which we could only learn of by actually becoming Learners, and one which—once we had learned of it—would be

impossible to escape.

"With a little thought along the proper lines, we might almost have guessed it. For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. One of Newton's laws, applied in an area he did not even suspect existed.

"Oh, we were a brave, adventurous lot, all of us. We would be Learners; no alien mind but we could enter it, and actually become the alien for the period of Contact. Thrills, danger and hairsbreadth escapes would be ours. Ultimate adventurers, they called us. And all along, we were fools."

The alien refrained from comment, although Jerry could feel its mind waiting, listening, assimilating.

"Contact had a drawback. A basic one which we might have guessed, if we hadn't been going around with stars in our eyes and a delightful feeling of superiority over the men who would never know the interior on any minds but their own. In Contact, just as in sunbathing, there is a delayed reaction, a kickback."

"Sunbathing?" thought the alien.

Jerry's mind swiftly opened for the alien's inspection his full storehouse of information on the subject. In an instant, the alien apprehended the fate that lay in wait for the careless Space Zoologist—

"Sure is warm in here," said Bob, running a finger around inside his sweat-dampened uniform collar.

"You have to be careful," said Jana, indicating the quartz panes that formed the ceiling and three walls of the solarium. "The quartz passes ultraviolet, unlike glass. You can pick up a severe burn if you sit out here too long without some sort of protection for your skin."

The tech nodded. "The insidious thing about sunburn is that you only turn a little pink as long as you're out in the sunlight. It's when you've gone indoors, or the sun has set, or you put your clothes back on that the red-hot burn begins to show up on your flesh."

"It's the light-pressure," said Jana. "As long as there's an influx of ultraviolet, the flesh continues to absorb it without showing much reaction. But as soon as you get away from the rays—the burns show up.... I wonder how Norcriss is making out."

IV

"You mean, then," said the alien to Jerry, "that all the experiences you undergo in Contact are held back under the surface of your mind, waiting there until you let up on the incoming Contact experiences?"

"That's it," said Jerry, miserably. "In some of my Contacts, I've undergone pretty painful experiences. I've had an eye twisted out, an arm eaten and digested, been poisoned, nearly strangled—you name a near-death; I've been through it."

"And your reaction?" thought the mind.

"Nil," said Jerry, ruefully. "When I awakened from a Contact, my memory of my experiences was strictly a mental one. Like something I'd read in a book. There was no emotional reaction whatsoever. My heart beat its normal amount, my glands excreted normal perspiration, my muscles were relaxed. Not a trace of shock or any other after effect."

"And later?" the mind asked gently.

"Back on Earth," said Jerry, "the Space Zoologists have a thing we call the Comprehension Chamber. It's a room filled with couches and helmets, in which we can listen—through replayed microtapes—to all the Contacts our confreres have ever made. Perhaps 'listen' is a weak word. For all practical purposes, we are in Contact, so long as the tape runs. I thought this room was a wonderful adjunct to my education, but nothing more. I went there a lot at first. It was even more fun than the real thing because there was no danger of perishing. Tapes of zoologists who died while in Contact are never used in the Chamber."

The mind waited, listening patiently.

"So one week—" Jerry's mind gave a mental twinge akin to a physical shudder—"one week I got bored. I decided not to go to the Comprehensive Chamber. I went out on a few dates, instead. Tennis, the movies, like that. And on the third day, I woke in the morning with a heart trying to pound its way through my ribs, with my bedsheets dripping with cold perspiration, and lancing agony in my eye, my hand knotted into a fist of pain, lungs burning for air...."

"Delayed reaction," said the mind.

"Yes," said Jerry. "That was it. I recognized the pains right away, having been through them personally in Contact only a month before them. I had a horrible inkling of what was occurring. I called the medics at Space Corps Headquarters before I passed out. They came, shot me full of

morphine and stuck me into a helmet for twenty-four hours straight, to cram my reactive agonies back beneath an overload of vicarious Contacts. It worked pretty well. The pain was gone when I awakened. But my nerves weren't the same afterward. I used to look forward to Contacts because I enjoyed them. Now I look forward to them because I dread what will happen if I don't have another one in time."

"In time?"

"I find that I *must* get to a Contact—real or vicarious—at least once in forty-eight hours. I've been trapped by my job. I'm doomed to do this job or die horribly. Some men, desperate for escape from this treadmill, have quit the Corps, tried to battle this kickback-effect. None of them have made it. They were found, all of them, in various states of agony. Dead, broken, burnt, torn...."

"Psychosomatic pressures?" asked the mind.

"Yes. Their minds, overborne by their emotions, self-hypnotized them into re-undergoing their experiences. And their bodies, duped by their minds, reacted. On a normal man, a hypnotically suggested burn can raise an actual blister. On a man who's opened his mind to the Contact-power—his body can break, burn, dissolve or even evaporate."

"Poor Jerry," said the alien mind, soothingly. A tingle formed slowly in Jerry's mind, a growing warmth, a vibration of utter affection. He was being consoled, being loved by the alien. It knew his troubles. It understood the sorrow of his life. It wanted only to keep him close, to tell him not to be afraid, to make him happy, comfortable, safe.... Safe, and secure, and—

The glare of silent lightning leaped through Jerry's consciousness, jerking him back from the unnervingly delightful torpor he'd been letting overcome his thoughts.

Something hard bumped against his forehead. He realized that he'd just sat up on the couch, knocking the helmet from his head with the shock of the breaking Contact.

"Sir!" said the tech, pausing only to snap off the circuit switch before dashing to his side. "What the hell happened? I never saw you break Contact like that! Did you see the alien? Can it be destroyed?"

Jerry groaned, tried to speak, then fell back onto the thick padding, unconscious.

"What's the matter with him?" cried Jana, sensing the fright in the tech's attitude.

"I don't know," he whispered. "I've never seen him act this way before. Whatever's out there, it's unlike anything we've ever encountered before! Here, you get some of your medics up here to see to him. I'm going to process this damned tape and see what's what!"

Her face pale, Jana hurried off to do his bidding. The tech began to reset the machine so that the coded information on the tape might be translated into legible words.

And Jerry Norcriss lay on the couch, sobbing and groaning like a man on the rack, although his mind was blanked by merciful unconsciousness.

"A baby?" choked the tech. "That thing out there is a *baby*?"

"Does the tape ever lie?" sighed Jerry, relaxing against the plump white pillows Jana had arranged under his back and shoulders.

"Well, no," faltered the tech. "But a baby! Five hundred feet high—and invisible—and able to carry on an intelligent conversation?"

"Which reminds me," said Jerry, sternly. "I am going to ask you to edit both the tape and that typewritten translation of that conversation. It's just as well too many people don't get the inside story on my job, and its rather rugged drawback. And as for yourself.... Well, I can't order you to forget what you've read there."

"I won't talk about it, sir, if that's what you mean," said the tech. "It's not such a hard secret to keep. All the crewmen on the ship know there's *something* pretty awful about your job. I just happen to know *what*. All I'd get for spilling the inside dope would be, 'Oh, is *that* what it is!' Hardly worth it."

"That's hardly a noble reason to keep a secret," Jerry murmured, looking narrow-eyed at the tech.

The man grinned, then shrugged. "Makes my life easy, too. Now when you flare up at me, I'll know why, and skip it."

"Thanks a hell of a lot," Jerry muttered.

The tech laughed aloud.

"But," the zoologist added soberly, "we did learn one surprising lesson today. The forty-minute Contact period can be broken, under certain stresses."

The smile left the tech's face, and he looked earnestly puzzled. "I don't follow you, sir. There was nothing on the tape about—"

"Tape?" said Jerry. "You *saw* how quickly I came out, didn't you? What's that got to do with the

tape?"

"Sir," the tech said hesitantly, "you were under the helmet for the full forty."

Jerry flopped back upon the pillows, staring at the other man as if he'd suddenly gone berserk. "That can't *be*," he said slowly. "I was in a long-life host. The clouds weren't even moving. That baby was living many subjective days in the forty-minute period."

"Begging your pardon, sir," said the tech, "but you must be mistaken. You were gone the full forty."

"That's impossible," said Jerry.

Jana, who'd been standing back from the two men, stepped forward cautiously, apprehensive at butting into something that was not really her affair.

"Excuse me, Lieutenant Norcriss," she said softly, "but Bob's right. You were gone as long as he says."

"You don't understand, either of you!" Jerry snapped. "My time-awareness in a host is subject to the host's time-awareness. So far as this host was concerned, a day was a confoundedly long period. But I could tell the elapsed time by watching the clouds, the height of the sun. They didn't move, either of them, visibly...."

"How's that again, sir?" asked the tech. "How long did you *seem* to spend?"

"Possibly an hour."

"Well, then." The tech shrugged.

"But this had nothing to do with the host's subjective sense of *time*, Ensign. It was my own knowledge of *objective* time through watching the sun, the trees, the clouds. None of them moved during my subjective hour in the host-alien. So no time—or very little time; barely a few minutes—could have passed while I was enhosted, do you see?"

"Lieutenant Norcriss," said Jana, abruptly. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but did you say clouds?"

"Yes," said Jerry, puzzled by her intensity. "Why?"

"There hasn't been a cloud in the sky today," she said awkwardly. "I mean—Well, look for yourself!"

Jerry turned his gaze upward through the quartz ceiling of the solarium. The sky, a rich turquoise, was smooth and unbroken save for the glaring gold orb of the sun, Sirius. He sat up then, looking out through the likewise transparent walls. As far as he could see, over storetops, cottage roofs, and distant green glades, the sky was that same unbroken blue.

"But that's crazy!" he said, sinking back against the pillows. "It couldn't have been like that all the time I was in Contact. Could it?"

Jana and Bob exchanged an uncomfortable look.

"Well, sir," the tech said, "we weren't exactly *watching* the sky, if you know what I mean. But it was clear when you went into Contact. And it's clear *now*."

His voice trailed off, uncertainly, but Jerry gave a slow thoughtful nod. "You're right, Ensign. It is, and it was. The likelihood of its clouding up for forty minutes, and then clearing again is so ridiculous I can't even consider it.... And yet, I *saw*—"

Jerry stopped speaking, and shook his head. Then he waved a hand at the tech, abstractedly. "Get me some coffee, Ensign. I have to think, hard."

When nightfall had cloaked the planet in dark purple folds, Jerry was still gazing intently at nothingness, racking his brain for an answer. Bob, meantime, had checked the card against the ship's files on dealing with alien menaces, and had found—much as both he and Jerry had suspected—that there was no recommendation available. The menace was new. It would have to be approached strictly *ad libidum*. Whatever method served to rid the planet of the menace would then, not before, be incorporated into the electronic memory of the brain on the ship, to serve future colonies who might meet a similar alien species.

"Any ideas, sir?" asked the tech, after a long silence from his superior.

"None," Jerry admitted, not turning his head. "It's pretty damned difficult to find a solution to a problem until you're sure what the problem *is*."

"Well," said the tech, "we played the radar all over the area where the tape said the thing was located. We got nothing. Maybe the kid's mother came back."

"Just a second—" said Jerry. "Ensign, could you rig the machine to give us, not a written transcript of that alien's description, but a drawing of it?"

"Jeepers, sir!" choked the tech, taken aback. "I don't know. I'd have to talk with the engineers."

"It should be possible. Hell, it's got to be. When I was enhosted, my mind transmitted back every bit of info on that body. A man who only knew mechanical drawing could sketch that shape, simply by following the measurement specifications as my mind recorded them. Go on, Ensign, get with it. One way or the other, I want a look at what we're dealing with."

It was nearly midnight when Bob shook Jerry gently awake and handed him a small glossy rectangle of paper.

Jerry, blinking his eyes against the sudden onslaught of light in the room as the tech threw the wall switch, stared blearily at the paper for a moment, blank and disoriented.

"It's the picture, sir," Bob said, recognizing the bafflement on his superior's face for what it was. "I finally had the bright idea of turning the problem over to the brain, aboard the ship. It followed the specifications from the tape by drawing the picture in periods."

"In what periods?" Jerry mumbled, still trying to come awake.

"Not time-periods, sir. Punctuation. Then, when it had the thing done, on a ten-by-fourteen-inch sheet of feed-paper from its roller, I had the ship's photographer take a snapshot and reduce it in size, so it looks at least as good as the average newspaper half-tone job."

Jerry nodded, absorbing the information even as his eyes crept over the image in his hands. "Looks strangely familiar," he said, studying it closely.

"If you'll pardon what sounds like a gag, sir," began the tech, "I think that the picture—in fact, we all think—"

"Yes?" said Jerry, looking at the man.

"Well, the consensus among the crew was that this baby here looks a hell of a lot like *you*, sir."

Jerry sat where he was, his eyes on Bob's face, for a long moment, as fingers of ice took hold of his spine. Then, with unreasoning apprehension, he turned his gaze back upon the near-photographic likeness he held. "Ensign," he said, after a minute. "This *is* a picture of me."

"But sir, it can't be," said the tech.

"You're wrong," said Jerry, letting the paper drop to the floor. "It can be, because it is. And all at once I think I know why."

Without warning, Jerry swung his legs over the side of the couch and jumped to his feet.

"Listen," he said urgently, "there's no time to lose. Get the hospital staff together, fast, and bring me back their best psyche-man. I need a hypnotist."

"A h-hyp—?" the tech blurted, confused, then gave an obedient nod and hurried out, shaking his head all the way to the switch-board.

"Never mind *why*, Doctor. Can you *do* it? That's all I care to know," Jerry's voice crackled, his eyes flashing with authority.

"Y-Yes, I think so," quavered the other man. "If you *can* be hypnotized, I mean."

"All Space Zoologists have the brainpower necessary to be perfect subjects," Jerry snapped. "Quickly, now, Doctor. I've wasted one Contact already."

"Very well, sir," said the man. "If you'll lie back, now, and make your mind blank—"

"I know, I know! Get *on* with it, will you!"

Bob and Jana stood back in the shadows beside the towering metal control board, listening in silence as the hypnotist put Jerry under, deeper and deeper, until his mind was readily suggestible. Then he made the statements Jerry had told him to make, and with a snap of his fingers brought the zoologist out of hypnosis.

"You heard, Ensign?" asked Jerry. "Did he do exactly as I told him to?"

"Sir!" protested the doctor.

"I mean no offense," said Jerry. "But if your words left my mind too free, too human somehow, the alien would sense it. And a ruse like this one might not work on a second attempt, once the alien had been apprised of our intent."

"He did, sir," said Bob. "Word for word, as you told it to him."

"Good," Jerry said. "Thank you, Doctor. And good night."

"Uh—yes," said the man, finally realizing he was being peremptorily dismissed after coming all the way across the town from his warm bed in the black morning hours. "Good night to you, sir."

He fumbled his way out the door, and Jana, after a glance at Bob, shut it after him. Bob stood beside the control board, waiting as Jerry once more adjusted the helmet upon his head and lay back on the couch.

"All right?" he called to the tech, as Jana, now walking nervously on tiptoe, though there'd been no injunction against noise, hurried to Bob's side and took his arm.

"Ready, sir," Bob said, keeping his voice steady.

"You've set the stopwatch?" warned Jerry.

"I depress the starter the same instant I turn on the machine," said Bob.

"All right, then," said Jerry.

Bob's right hand threw a switch.

Even as it snapped home, his left thumb had jabbed down upon the stopwatch button. The long red sweephand began clicking with relentless eagerness about the dial.

On the couch Jerry stiffened, then relaxed.

"You'd better stay with him," Bob cautioned Jana. "The machine's on automatic. If I'm not back on time, it'll take care of itself."

"Back on time?" she gasped. "But you can't be, Bob. If what he said about the timing—"

Bob shut his eyes and gripped his forehead between thumb and fingers. "Yes, of course. I'm being an idiot. This maneuver is something new. But—" he withdrew his hand from his face and smiled at the girl—"you stay with him anyhow. I'd feel better—safer—if you weren't with me and the others."

"Yes, Bob," she said, in a faint shadow of her normal voice. "Be careful."

Bob grinned with more confidence than he felt, turned and hurried from the room.

Jana moved slowly across the floor to the couch where Jerry Norcriss lay in unnatural slumber, and stood staring down at his strange, young-old face, and her eyes were bright with quiet wonder....

V

"What's this, what's this?" rasped Jerry's mind. "Where have I gotten to, now?"

"It's all right," said a soothing voice. "You're with *me*, now."

"Oh? Oh?" Jerry's mind said, snickering. "And who might *you* be?"

It was dark as he looked out through the alien eyes, but a quick patting of his paw across his face reassured him that his sharp white incisors, muzzle and stiff gray whiskers were intact and healthy.

"How can I be you?" asked Jerry. "If I'm a gray rat and you're a gray rat, what am I doing here?"

"You've come to spy on me, I know," said the soothing voice. "But see? You have nothing to fear, nothing at all. I'm not going to hurt you. You find no menace in me. Do you?"

"No. No menace. No danger. I'm safe, I'm secure, I'm warm and loved...."

"Relax," said the alien. "Relax, and let me have full control again. You can sleep if you do. You can rest. *I'll* take care of you, trust in that."

"Yes. Sleep. Rest. No more running, hiding, fearing...." said Jerry Norcriss, the gray rat-mind in the invisible body of another rat much like himself....

"Come on with that flashlight, damn it!" Bob raged, leading the other three crewmen through the woods. Two of them carried rifles, one had a flamethrower, and Bob himself carried one of the new bazookas with a potent short-range atomic warhead. Ollie, the man with the light, hurried up to him with a quick apology.

"Okay, okay," Bob said. "But I've got to see this dial—Ah, yes. This is the way, all right. Come on. Ollie, keep that beam so it spills on the tracking-cone dial as well as on the earth. We don't dare risk losing our way. There are only seven minutes left until Contact is broken."

"Yes, sir. I'll keep it right on there," Ollie said. "But about the lieutenant—are you *sure* he won't —"

"That's what the stopwatch is for. We *must* strike just as Contact is being broken. Any sooner, and we kill Lieutenant Norcriss with the alien. Any later, and the alien kills us. The same way it did the others who came upon it."

"But what does it do? What does it look like?" Ollie persisted.

"Damn it, there's no time to talk now! Just keep that light steady, and hurry!"

The men plunged onward through the woods, the white circle of light from the arc-torch splashing the cold leaves and damp, colorless grass with sickly, stark illumination.

"If you would only release your hold," the alien was saying. Then its mind-voice stopped.

Jerry, too, had seen the dancing white freckles that spattered the boles and branches of the nearby trees. The darkness of the woods was rent by streamers of ruler-straight light beams.

They began to radiate like luminous wheel-spokes through the tangled leaves of the woods.

"Men!" cried the alien mind. "Men are coming here. Men, our enemies!"

Jerry, still in partial control of the invisible rat-body, fought the flight-impulse that began to stir beneath the unseen skin.

"Run!" shrieked the alien mind. "You fool, can't you see that we must flee this place? Quickly, or we are done for!"

"Run—Flee—" Jerry said dully, within the alien mind. "Yes. Run from men ... the eternal enemy, men. Run, hide, a dark corner, under a bush, behind a tree...."

He felt his own mind joining that of the alien in the preliminary tension that comes before flight.... Then the glaring beam of the arc-torch was full in his eyes, and the hypnotic illusion, at this, the trigger of his psyche, was shattered. And Jerry once again knew himself to be a man.

A man in the body of a rat—the animal which Jerry Norcriss loathed most of all creatures!

"Run!" screamed the alien. "Why don't you—!" Its commands ceased as it realized the difference within the mind that had invaded its body. "You again!" it cried, trying wildly to reassume the placid plump image of that unseen baby once more.

"You're too late," said Jerry, fighting its will with his own as the crewmen broke from the underbrush into the clearing, and the tech, pointing straight at him, yelled a caution to the man with the flame thrower. The man bringing up the terrible gaping mouth of that weapon halted, waiting, as the tech stared at the stopwatch in his hand.

"Five seconds!" cried the tech. "Four ... three ... two ... one.... *Get* it, quick!"

Jerry, still within the mind and watching with the same horrified fascination as his host, saw the puff of flame within the flame-tube of the weapon, then saw the insane red flower blossoming with its smoking yellow tendrils toward his face—

And the silent white lightning flared—

And he sat up on the couch, back in the solarium.

Jana hurried over to him.

"Did it work? Did it work, sir?" she cried. "Is Bob—"

Jerry patted her hand. "Bob's all right. He was on time. *Just* on time."

"I still don't understand, sir," said the nurse, sinking onto the couch beside him without waiting for an invitation. "I don't understand *any* of this!"

For an instant, Jerry resented this familiarity, then felt slightly overstuffed, and slipped an arm paternally across her slim shoulders.

"I'll explain," he said. "It'll pass the time till he gets back."

Jana nodded.

"The alien," Jerry said softly, "was a mimic. A perfect mimic. It was, while non-intelligent, of an abnormally well developed mind in one function: telepathy. That's how it could carry on apparently intelligent mental conversation with me, during my first contact. It could sense my questions, then probe my mind for the answers I wanted most to hear—and play them back to me. For my forty minutes of contact, it told me only what I wanted to know, like a selective echo. It needed no understanding of my questions, nor of the answers it plucked from my mind. It had one instinct: self-preservation. It could sense my question, select an uncontroversial answer from my mind and feed it back to me, without really understanding how it warded me off as a menace to it, any more than a dog understands why lowering its ears and hanging its head as it whines can fend off the wrath of its master. It works; that's all the creature cares about."

"But how did you *know*—?" Jana asked.

"I didn't," Jerry replied. "It fooled me completely. Until the Ensign—Bob told me that my full forty minutes in Contact had elapsed, despite my knowledge that the sun and clouds had remained motionless during my Contact. That threw me, I'll admit, for quite a while. It just didn't make sense."

Jana's eyes widened as she suddenly understood. "And then you realized that you had seen the sun and clouds motionless because that was what you *expected* to experience when enhosted in a baby!"

"That's it," Jerry nodded. "It made an error with the baby, though. It was able to duplicate it in almost every respect except two: Size and appearance."

"Why?" asked Jana. "And why appear as a baby at all?"

"I'm coming to that," said Jerry. "The size was off because the first thing I saw when I blinked open my eyes was a distant copse of trees, which I took to be an upright pile of leafy twigs. Since

my mind possessed information regarding the relative size of babies and twigs, the alien immediately made sure my mind saw other things in the same perspective. By the time it realized it had made an error, it was too late to normalize the baby's dimensions; that would have given its fakery away."

"But why did the thing choose a baby?"

"Because that was the thing's protection! It had a powerful hypnotic power, one that worked on its victims' minds directly through its telepathic interference with sensory perception. It always appeared as the thing the victim would be least likely to harm. In my case, a baby. But it made a slight error there, too. I'm a bachelor, Jana. There's only one baby with whom I ever had any great amount of experience: myself."

"And the invisibility?"

"I have no recollection, even now, of my body when I was a baby. I may have stared at my toes, played with my fingers, but they just never registered on my consciousness as being part of *myself*. So the thing was stuck when it came to reproducing me visually, since it depended upon my own memory for details. But it was able to supply the way I'd *felt* as a baby. Every baby has an acute awareness of its own skin; it will cry if any particle of its flesh is bothered in the slightest. So the alien fed the 'feel' of my baby-body back to me, if not the view. Which is why the electronic brain on the ship was able to duplicate the detail into an almost perfect replica of my babyhood likeness."

Jana nodded, as she finally understood the meaning of that strange illusion. "And this time? That post-hypnotic suggestion you had the doctor give you, I mean: that you'd think you were a gray rat until such time as the light of the arc-torch caught you directly in the eyes...."

"Duplicity, Jana. It had to be that way. The alien was very sure of its powers. If I returned, and it were a baby again, I couldn't attack it or thwart its ends. And such an attack was necessary. I had to be able to fight it, to hold it in place for that last moment before it was destroyed. Which is why I chose a gray rat, an animal I cannot bear the sight of. When the light struck my eyes and I became myself again, I caught the alien unawares. Then, before it could change to a baby, and start lulling me back into camaraderie, it was too late. Bob had given the order to fire. And here I am."

Hurrying footsteps sounded in the corridor. The door burst open and Bob rushed in, his face anxious and creased with worry until he saw Jerry sitting on the couch, alive and well.

"Whoosh!" The tech expelled a mingled chuckle and sigh as he sank into a chair opposite the zoologist. "Well, sir, I can't tell you how glad I am to see you. I couldn't be sure you'd gotten out of that thing alive until I got back here. Glad you made it, sir. Damn glad!"

"That 'thing' you mentioned," said Jerry. "What did it *actually* look like?"

Bob jerked his head toward the corridor. "The other guys are bringing it along. I kind of thought you'd want a peep at it."

As more footfalls were heard from the corridor, Bob bounced to his feet again, and stepped to the door. "Hold it a minute, guys," he said, then turned back into the room. "Jana, I don't think you'd better stick around for this. It's not very pretty."

The girl hesitated, then flashed him a smile and shook her head. "I'll stay. It can't look as ugly as a bad case of peritonitis on the surgeon's table. If I can take that without upchucking, I can take anything."

Bob shrugged. "Suit yourself, honey. Just remember you got fair warning." He leaned back out the door. "Okay. Bring it in."

The crewmen, looking a little ill, came slowly into the room, bearing a bloated, scorched object on a stretcher they'd contrived from two long poles and their jackets. They set it onto the tiled floor before the zoologist, then stepped away, all of them wiping their hands hard against their trousers in ludicrous unison, though their grip on the poles had not brought them into actual contact with the alien's corpse.

"There it is, sir," said Ollie Gibbs. "And you are very welcome to it."

Jana, to her credit, had not upchucked, but she went a shade paler, and her mouth grew tight.

Jerry studied the burnt husk, from its sharp-fanged mouth—easily eighteen inches from side to side—to its stubby centipedal cilia under the grossly swollen body.

"Damn thing's all bloat, slime and mouth," said the tech, suddenly shuddering. "I wonder if its victims felt those jaws rending them open, or if it kept their minds fooled through to the end?"

"I don't think we'll ever know that, Ensign," said Jerry. "Unless you feel like going out there and playing victim to one of this thing's confreres?"

"No thanks, sir," said Bob, so swiftly that Jana laughed. "I'd rather fall out an airlock in hyperspace."

"Well, here's what we do to get rid of this thing, then," said Jerry. "Since it assumes a form that's the least likely to be harmed by whatever presence stimulates its mimetic senses, we'll have to trick it. Before this thing decomposes too far, rig it up with an electrical charge, and stimulate its nerve-centers artificially. That ought to give you an accurate microtape of its life-pulse. Then hook the tape to a scanner-beam, and *send* the life-pulse into the mine-area. When the fellows of this creature react to it, they'll assume the safest possible form: their own."

"I get you, sir!" said Bob. "Then all the miners have to do is see it for what it is, and shoot it."

Jerry nodded. "It'll mean all miners will have to go armed for awhile. But that's better than getting eaten alive by one of these."

"You sure their presence won't trigger the thing's mimetic power?" asked Bob, uneasily.

"Not if you give full power to the scanner-beam," Jerry replied. "It'll muffle their life-pulse radiations under the brunt of the artificial one."

"Good enough, sir," said Bob. "I'll rig it right away."

Jerry shook his head. "No need. You could use some rest, I'm sure. The morning'll be soon enough. Meantime, you can see this young lady home. The rest of you," he said to the hovering crewmen, "are dismissed, too."

The men, eager to be away from the thing, saluted smartly and hurried out of the solarium, buzzing with wordy relief.

Jana paused a moment, staring at the creature whose strange powers had destroyed her father. Then she turned to Bob.

"I think I'll go to Jim's place," she said. "I want him to know." She moved her gaze to Jerry. "I owe you a lot," she said. "We all owe you a lot."

Embarrassed by the warmth of her praise, Jerry could only mumble something diffident and look the other way. He was taken quite by surprise by the pressure of cool moist lips against the side of his face.

When he looked back at the pair, Bob and Jana were on their way out the door.

Only when he heard the elevator doors at the end of the corridor close behind them did he move to the still-warm corpse of his onetime adversary, with a look of deepest compassion on his face.

"Well," he said gently, "you've lost. The planet goes back to the invaders. Once again, Earth has successfully obliterated the opposition."

He reached out a hand and touched the hulking thing on the floor. "Good-by," he said. "And I'm sorry."

Jerry Norcriss wasn't thinking about the deadliness of the thing, nor of the deaths of the hapless miners, nor of the billions of dollars he'd saved the investors holding Praesodynimium stock. He was thinking of a voice that—even unintelligently, even in the course of deception—had said, "Poor Jerry. Rest.... Relax. You're safe.... Secure...."

"You really had me going for a while, baby," he said, then blinked at the sudden sharp sting in his eyes, and hurried from the room.

Outside, the sun was glowing pink against the black eastern sky, and the air was cool and fresh in his nostrils. As he crossed the street from the hospital, heading toward the landing field and his shipboard bunk, a hurrying figure from the end of the block caught up with him and began to pace his stride, panting slightly.

"Talk about happy," said Bob, glumly. "When Jana told her boy friend the news, they went into such a clinch I didn't even stick around to be introduced. Seemed a nice enough guy, I guess. Hope she'll be happy with him."

Jerry recognized the gloominess of the tech's mood, and its cause, so didn't say anything. After a moment, Bob seemed to recover himself a little.

"Sir," he said, "there's one thing still bugs me about this alien."

"Oh?" said Jerry, halting. "What's that, Ensign?"

"How'd the initial roborocket miss the thing and its kind when it circled the planet before colonization began?"

"That's a moot question," said Jerry. "But my conjecture is that the scanner always caught it when it was assuming some other form. Since its victims were always indigenous to this planet, the things familiar to them were also of this planet, and the scanner-beam couldn't detect any life-pulses which were dissimilar to already-known species."

"I'll be damned," said Bob. "It's almost childishly simple when you explain it." Then, as Jerry went to start off again, Bob stopped him with an exclamation.

"What about that melting mine car I read about on the translation sheets? Was that for real, or wasn't it?"

Jerry shook his head. "Part of the general mimetic illusion, like the motionless clouds and unmoving trees. It let me see what I expected to see. In reality, I was just in the woods near the mine area, where you came upon the creature to destroy it." Jerry started slowly moving away once more.

A few steps further, and Bob halted again. "One final point, sir. That life-pulsing reading of point-nine-nine-nine. If the thing's pulsation was that powerful, I should think it would've been a lot harder to knock off than it was."

"You're right," said Jerry. "It would have been. But its life-pulse wasn't nearly that high."

"But the scanner-beam—" Bob protested. "When the colony sent up that roborocket, after those miners vanished, it reported an unknown life-pulse of point-nine-nine-nine. If that wasn't the alien's life-pulse, what the devil was it?"

Jerry patted Bob on the shoulder. "You're forgetting the mimicry. The roborocket they sent up caught the alien off-guard, in its own shape, not imitating some other life-form's pulsations. It detected the beam, since a scanner picks up mental pulses, and it instantly assumed the life-pulse of a creature it assumed no roborocket would worry about."

"What? What life-pulse, sir? What kind of life?"

"Atomic life, Ensign," said Jerry. "That bright green blip you and I studied so assiduously was the life-pulse of an atom-powered creature. It was another roborocket."

And as Bob stared after him, stupefied, Jerry Norcriss made his way across the landing field toward a well-earned bed—and oblivion.

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