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Title: The Instant of Now

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Release Date: March 15, 2010 [EBook #31651]

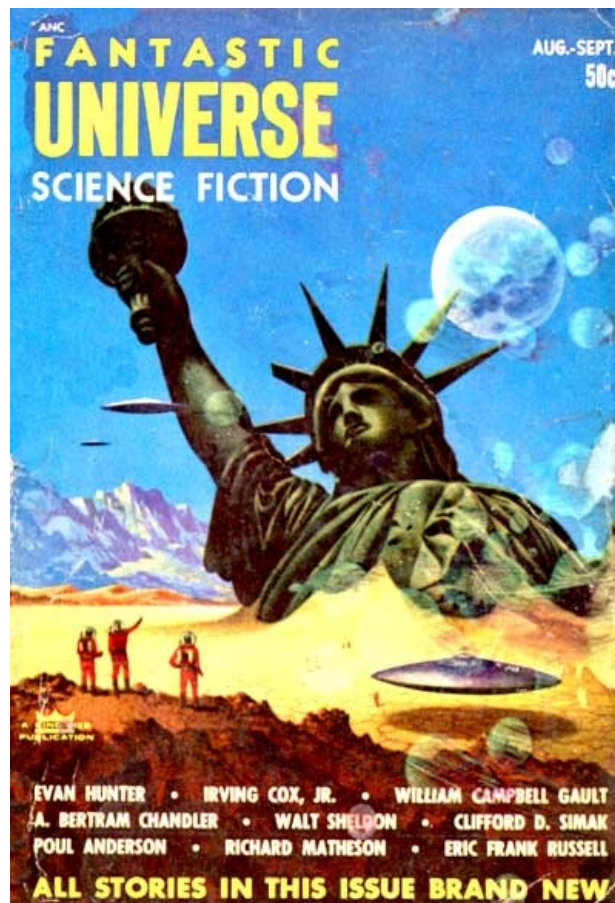
Language: English

Credits: Produced by Sankar Viswanathan, Greg Weeks, and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE INSTANT OF NOW ***

Transcriber's Note:

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One of the most intriguing of all science fiction patterns is that of the galactic sweep—the story which takes for granted human travel between stars at speeds far faster than the speed of light. In its most successful form, such a story combines cosmic action with a wholly human plot. In this case Mr. Cox—but read it yourself.

the instant of now

by ... Irving E. Cox, Jr.

Revolution is not necessarily a noble thing. Unless shrewdly directed, its best elements may fall victim to its basest impulses.

Eddie Dirrul had destroyed the message seconds after reading it. Yet, as he left the pneumotube from the University, he felt as if it were burning a hole in his pocket. It had come to him from Paul Sorgel, the new top-agent from the Planet Vinin. It had been written in High Vininese.

For a moment the alien language had slowed Eddie's reaction to its contents, as had the shocking nature of its words. It had read—

Need your help. Glenna and Hurd in brush with Secret Police—both hurt. Come at once.

Luckily old Dr. Kramer had asked no awkward questions when Eddie excused himself from the balance of the lecture. If the kindly bumbling professor had been inquisitive, Eddie had no idea how he would have answered. Glenna was his fiancée, Hurd his best friend—and their disaster meant disaster for the underground movement that had become the guiding purpose of his entire life.

The night was still young when he emerged from the pneumotube and the slanting ramp-lines of windows in the massive unit-blocks of the Workers' Suburb rose about him within the darkness of the structural frames that encased them.

Parks, recreation centers and gaudy amusement halls were aswirl with the usual evening crowds. With a sort of angry heedlessness Eddie forced his way among tall perpetually-youthful men in bright leisure clothing—and consciously alluring women clad in filmy garments as teasingly transparent as mist.

Glenna hurt—and Hurd! Seriously, of course, or Paul Sorgel would never have risked a hand-message. With quiet desperation he pushed through the crowds—in his trim grey Air-command uniform he was one with them, a nonentity like themselves.

He knew where to find the three he sought. Beyond the outdoor courts, where his fellow-Agronians amused themselves with a variety of racquet-games, lay a tiny park, wherein a state of wild disorder was carefully maintained in imitation of nature.

Few were attracted by its rugged growth, save in very warm weather, when hardy souls ventured within its borders to relax in artificial breezes created by silent concealed fans. In its center stood a small stone building that housed the maintenance machinery. It was deserted, except for once each year when the city engineering crews came to check the machines and to make minor repairs. There the Libero-Freedom Movement held its meetings, in the shadow of the whirring wheels.

Sorgel came out of the shadows as Dirrul pushed through the thicket of brush that surrounded the stone building. In a hushed whisper he asked, "That you, Eddie?"

"Yes—where are they?"

"Inside. I gave them a hypo—they're both under now. It makes it easier."

"How did it happen, Paul?"

"I was to meet Glenna and Hurd at her apartment, to talk over the details of the Plan. The police were there ahead of me but I broke up the party before they could finish the job. Since they've got to do this sort of thing unofficially, to be able to deny it later if any questions are asked, I scared them off easily enough. I brought Glenna and Hurd here in my Unicyl but I'll need your help to get them out."

"This is the second time it's happened, Paul!" said Eddie. "And the Plan—we'll have to organize all over again. As soon as our people hear about this most of them will run like scared rabbits."

"Not if they don't know, Eddie. That's where you come in. We've got to get Glenna and Hurd away from Agron. If there's no evidence of a crime there's no reason for an investigation."

"But what can I do?"

"Borrow one of the Air-command's surface jets for a while."

Paul Sorgel's plan was simple and efficient. The Air-Command field was fenced with electronic paralysis barriers and the entrance was heavily guarded. But no watch was kept inside the encampment except for a daily inspection of the machines when the guard was changed at dawn. Since Durrul was a Captain of the Space-maintenance Division, 73rd Air-Command Wing, he was able to enter the area at any time without question. Among the scheduled night training flights for new cadets, the departure of one more surface jet would pass unobserved.

"Come back here for Glenna and Hurd," Sorgel said, "and take them out to the South Desert. If there's no hitch you should be back before dawn, with time to spare. If not...." Sorgel shrugged. "Eddie, we can't build a better universe without taking occasional risks."

Slowly Durrul's body tensed with fear. In a cold dead voice he asked, "Am I to leave them there, without help or medicine, to die of thirst and hunger?"

"Many sacrifices are necessary for the good of the Movement."

"But Glenna and Hurd are our leaders!"

"The freedom of the universe means a little more, I think, than the temporary safety of two individuals." Sorgel lit a cigarette. In the faint pink reflection of the Glo-Wave lighter his face was emptily placid, a faint smile twisting the corners of his lips. "Suppose I say it's a command, Durrul—a Vininese command, calling for Vininese discipline."

After a moment Durrul replied in a choked whisper, "I'll take them, sir."

Sorgel smiled and the crisp tone of authority edged out of his voice. "As a matter of fact, Eddie, I was curious to see what you would do. The Vininese Confederacy practises neither cruelty nor deception. You'll find one of our Space-dragons hidden in a gorge of the Katskain Range. It's the ship I came in a week ago.

"The pilot was instructed to wait fifteen planetary revolutions in the event that I might have a report to send back to Headquarters. You must learn to trust me, Eddie. From the first, you see, I intended to send Glenna and Hurd to Vinin. If they get there in time there's a chance our Medical Corps can pull them through. They may even be back here with us for the day when we carry out the Plan."

Durrul was in no real danger. Much as it benefited the Movement the laxity of Agronian security was one of the chief reasons why Durrul scorned the Planetary Union. The space-wide patrols of the Air-Command, the city guards and the electronic paralysis barricades created a feeling of internal control—but it was all a glittering sham. If it were not for the Nuclear Beams the whole system would long since have crumbled under the first pressure from outside.

With no difficulty he picked up Glenna and Hurd and took them to the South Desert, where he put them aboard the sleek Vininese space-ship. It was one of the new Dragon design—compact, efficient, faster than anything built by the Planetary Union, protected by sixteen circular batteries and yet small enough to be handled by one man.

Durrul had seen only one other Vininese Space-dragon and that from a distance at the Agronian commercial airport, when the last Vininese ambassador arrived. Technically there was no reason why Paul Sorgel could not have landed there as well, except that the Customs questionnaire might have proved embarrassing.

Twenty years earlier, when Durrul was still a schoolboy, the Galactic War had ended. Since that time relations between the Planetary Union and the Vininese Confederacy had steadily improved—at least in appearance. Undoubtedly there were commercial interests on both sides anxious to maintain peace and in recent years the quantity of goods in trade had grown enormously. But it was a truce, not a peace—a compromise, rather than a victory—forced on the galaxy when the scientists of the Planetary Union discovered the Nuclear Beams.

Pain shot through Durrul's mind as he carried Glenna into the pressurized chamber under the control room. She and Hurd were still unconscious but Glenna turned in his arms and her eyes fluttered open. She looked at him and screamed in terrible agony before the pilot of the Space-dragon plunged a hypodermic sedative into her arm.

"It is better," he said to Durrul in throaty Vininese. "So beautiful a one should not feel the pain." Carefully he fastened the needlepoint of a wall tube into Glenna's vein and another into Hurd's.

"Synthetic blood feeding," he said with a smile. "It will keep them alive, perhaps even permitting minor wounds to heal, until I deliver them to the authorities on Vinin. You see, sir, my little ship is well-equipped." He slammed the round door of the hospital room shut and led Durrul to the control blister.

"How long will it be, this trip to Vinin?" Durrul asked, speaking very slowly in classical Vininese. Like everyone in the Movement he had studied the language of Vinin as a sort of courtesy and duty but he had no illusion about his small ability to handle it.

"In terms of your time," the pilot said, "about thirty days."

"Only thirty? The Planetary Union hasn't a ship that could make it under sixty!"

"But this is a Space-dragon." The words were self-explanatory.

Proudly the pilot showed Dirrul the controls, as functional and as uncomplex as the cool clean lines of the ship herself. The design was so logical, so basically simple, that within a few minutes Dirrul understood enough of the mechanism to have driven the ship himself.

"Your scientists could do as well," the pilot suggested, "if they wished."

"Not mine," Dirrul said.

"Pardon—the scientists of the Planetary Union. On Vinin we create for the future, for the progress of the Confederacy. We have no patience with petty argument, tedious experimentation or the pointless splitting of hairs that seems to occupy so much of your time here. For us a scientist is a producer, like everyone else. If he fails to do his job we replace him."

Pleased with the comparison the pilot chuckled over his dials as he turned on the power. Above the roar he said to Dirrul, "We must talk again one day, sir. If you ever have the good fortune to come to Vinin be sure to look me up."

II

As the Vininese ship shot smoothly out into the night sky, Dirrul's surface jet slashed back toward the Agronian capital. A synthetic tension, which he deliberately fed with nightmare improbabilities, kept him reasonably alert until he had safely returned the jet to its place in the compound. Then weariness engulfed him. Groggily he staggered to the pneumotube and within five minutes he was asleep in the small two-room worker's apartment where he lived.

The insistent *ping* of the door visiscope woke him. Dirrul glanced at his wall clock and saw that it was still early morning. He had slept less than three hours. Swearing angrily he turned down the visiarms. Dr. Kramer's serene aging white-bearded face was mirrored on the grey-tinted screen.

"Good morning, Edward," Kramer said with excessive cheerfulness. "For a moment I was afraid I had missed you. I've brought a transcription of the lecture you missed yesterday."

Dirrul swung out of bed and pushed the entry release. Soundlessly the thin metal door slid into the wall and the little professor bounced into the room. The door shot back into place.

"But you're not dressed!" the professor exclaimed without the slightest regret. "I always supposed you Air-Command men had to report for work at eight."

"Yesterday I was out on emergency call," Dirrul said dully. "For twelve hours, so I've the morning off. I had planned to pound the pillow until—"

"Good! We can talk, then. I don't have a class until ten and I always like to make the personal acquaintance of my students." Dr. Kramer made himself comfortable in Dirrul's Cloud-foam lounge, clasping his small, white hands over the little bulge of his belly. "Nice apartment you have here, Edward—excellent taste in furnishing."

"You don't mind if I shave and dress and have a bite of breakfast, Dr. Kramer?" Dirrul's sarcasm was quite lost on the professor.

"Do, by all means," Kramer said. "And you might order a pot of coffee for me."

Dirrul touched a button and the bed rolled up into the wall—another and the gleaming metal shower-room slid open. He stripped and bathed, setting the aquadial so that his body was pounded by a sharp rain of icy water. When he snapped it off the massage arms shot out, rubbing him dry with soft, plastic puffs. He sprayed the newly patented No-Beard Mist on his face and, after waiting the required three seconds, wiped it off with a disposable fiber towel. The skin was pink and clean, refreshingly invigorated. When he took a fresh uniform out of the wall-press and put it on he felt very much himself again, scarcely annoyed by his lack of sleep.

He pushed the button and the bathroom rolled out of sight. The whole process had taken less than five minutes.

At his panel-control Dirrul dialed a sizable breakfast for himself and coffee for the professor. Before he could draw up chairs the grey-topped table had rolled from its wall slot, the steaming food containers fixed to it.

"The marvels of invention!" Dr. Kramer said. "When I was young we had nothing like this. Many times, Edward, I had to prepare my own meals—and mighty skimpy ones they were too, some of them. A young teacher in those days wasn't paid very much."

"You survived, Dr. Kramer," Dirrul reminded him dryly. "A little work now and then wouldn't hurt us, either."

"That's the old argument, Edward. How we frothed and stewed over it when this new system was in its infancy! That was before your time, of course." Kramer poured a cup of coffee and after a thoughtful hesitation quietly took a slice of toast from Dirrul's platter. "They said we'd create a race of helpless children—defenseless lazy softies. They said if the individual wasn't forced to fight for his own survival, for the small comforts of life, he would die of boredom, drown initiative in luxury."

Dr. Kramer smiled—and took another slice of toast. "Like so many of the terrifying predictions of the Cassandras none of it came to pass. Today we're stronger and more vigorous than ever. Today we have more new inventions, more new discoveries, more fine philosophical insight than ever before in our entire history.

"Actually what we did was save time on the trivial routines so we could spend our work-potential where it mattered. After all, what was gained by a social system that forced me to spend so much of my energy feeding and housing and clothing myself? Weigh the loss against the greater contribution I might have made if I had spent the same time in research."

"Why, yes, Dr. Kramer—you could have given us the Cloud-foam lounge a generation earlier," Dirrul said bitterly, "or perhaps the Safe-sweet candy."

Again his sarcasm lost its savor, for the professor simply beamed and said, "Possibly, if that had been my field of interest. As it happens I'm a psychologist specializing in emotive linguistics—the symbologies for conveying meanings." The professor smiled.

"Our present vigor and strength, no doubt, is reflected in the sort of thing we do with all this extra time our gadgets give us—the scholarly research in the Arena or the Phonoview."

"You're being very uncritical, Edward. Under any social form a great majority of the people would spend everything on personal pleasures. Why not? Each generation produces only a few leaders—we simply recognize that fact and adjust to it."

"But without the incentive of personal gain, Dr. Kramer...."

The professor laughed uproariously. "Incentive! You amaze me, Edward. I haven't heard the word used in just that context since I was a boy. You're a throwback—an anachronism. You sound like one of the elderly prophets of doom. I thought the breed had died out generations ago." The professor laughed again. "So our system creates no incentives. Tell me, Edward, why are you spending your Work-Equivalents to take my night course?"

"Because, when I've passed enough university hours I can take the promotional test and become a full-fledged space-pilot."

"And still you say there's no incentive?"

"For myself, yes—but all of us ought to have the same kind of drive," said Dirrul.

"Such a condition never existed, Edward. Always there have been a few to make the inventions and the discoveries, a few to create the new dreams and frame the new ideas. Our people are no different. Incentive comes from within the individual—it cannot be imposed from the outside.

"The poorest sort of incentive, therefore, is economic need. Our system provides all our people with the basic necessities for everyday living. Some few of us are content with these and never want anything else. But the great majority work to earn Work-Equivalents, which they can spend as they please—on amusement, luxury, education or the races at the Arena.

"Whatever the goal, it is a personal goal, set by each individual for himself. It's the only kind of incentive that makes any sense. Take yourself as an example—you spend your share of Work-Equivalents on additional education because you want to become a space-pilot. By the time you've earned the promotion you'll have lifted yourself to a position of leadership.

"As you are well aware the space-pilot is the politician—statesman is a better word—of the Planetary Union. Through his ingenuity, his skill with languages, his psychological understanding of diverse racial groups, he holds our planets and peoples together, in one union with a common social philosophy. Think how frustrating it would be if you could never move toward your goal, Edward, because everything you earned had to be spent on trivialities—food, clothing, a place to live."

"All right," said Eddie doubtfully, "I have an apartment given to me but it has to be here in a worker's block. If our system provides for us all alike, as you imply, how is it you have accommodations in the Scientist's Center? Why should you be set apart? Or the poets and writers? Or the space-pilots, for that matter?"

"But there's no difference in the way we live, Edward. In general people who do similar work and have similar interests are happier if they share the same social environment. The average person, living in a worker's block, would feel terribly out of place in a scientist's center, just as I would develop terrific frustrations if I had to live with the mystics or the religious orders."

Dirrul deftly snatched the last piece of toast as the professor reached for it. "I'll dial some for you if you like," he offered.

"Oh, no, Edward! I'm dieting, you see, and I like to think—well, as I've told you so often in class, we all practise self-deception of a sort. Usually it's harmless—and almost always we symbolize it in words. For me the symbol is diet.

"I set up a specialized definition and convince myself that I am dieting if I never directly order fattening food. That gives me an escape hatch. If food is offered to me or if it happens to—ah—to fall into my hands, I can take it and still keep a clear conscience."

"Perhaps you practise more self-deception than you know, Dr. Kramer," said Eddie. "For instance,

all your fine words about the strength and vitality of our new system—when I was a boy we licked the Vininese Confederacy. We couldn't do it today."

"That's a matter of opinion. We're at peace now and we'll remain so."

"Only because we have the Nuclear Beams. And look how we've botched that mess! Our scientists gave the process to the Vininese in order to patch together a peace when we could have destroyed their civilization completely."

"And our own too—with the weight of such a crime on our group conscience. There's one thing you still must learn, Edward—scientific progress is made by the sharing of ideas, not the concealment of them. We build the future upon the truths of the past and the present. If some of those truths are hidden away we create falsely on utterly false foundations."

Dr. Kramer pulled a manila envelope from his pocket and laid it on the table, pushing back his chair. "I must go, Edward; these are the notes on my lecture. As I told you before, I really came here for something else. I wanted to talk to you, to get to understand you better. I think I've learned a great deal."

The little professor was no longer smiling and the gentle touch of banter was gone from his voice. Durrul felt a creeping fear rise within him. How much had he unconsciously revealed? How many of his own beliefs had Dr. Kramer been able to read between the lines?

Knowing them, would he guess Durrul's connection with the Movement? The professor's bland naiveté could be the mask of a police informer. Durrul shivered, remembering the sudden punishment that had overtaken Glenna and Hurd.

At the door Dr. Kramer paused and said, "I'm entertaining two or three of the university faculty this evening, Edward. They've read some of the papers you have written for my class. I'd like to have you meet them. My apartment—eight-thirty."

It was a command rather than an invitation. Durrul accepted.

III

As soon as the professor had gone his fear vanished. What he had said to Dr. Kramer gave away no secrets and, in any case, he was crediting the professor with a perception he did not have. Ever since first joining the Movement, when he was still in school, Durrul had taken such pains to conceal his motives that it would have required a good deal more than Dr. Kramer's clumsy prying to reveal them.

He had deliberately patterned his attitudes and habits upon a composite average, even to a mild and starry-eyed criticism of the system which was more or less expected from the ambitious young men of the Air-command.

Dr. Kramer's ecstatic praise of the system was the typical emotional reaction of the older generation. The professor may actually have been convinced of the truth of his own fuzzy propaganda. It was that sort of blind faith which still held the Planetary Union together.

Before returning to the Air-Command base at noon, Durrul sought out Paul Sorgel and reported that Glenna and Hurd were safely on their way to Vinin. Apologetically, he mentioned Dr. Kramer's invitation, expecting to elicit Sorgel's scorn. Instead the Vininese agent was enthusiastic.

"Wonderful, Eddie!" he said. "Engineer it so they'll ask you back. We've never got one of our people in with the older science crowd before. Feel them out—we might pick up some converts. I won't need you at the next few meetings of the Movement—they'll be largely reorganizational, you know. I've been reading over Glenna's notes on the Plan. With one or two modifications we should be able to carry it out."

At eight-thirty that evening Durrul was admitted to Dr. Kramer's apartment. He was neither overwhelmed by the professor's excessive courtesy nor impressed by the other guests. They were from the faculty of the Advanced Air University, elderly, respected and distinguished, names known for a generation everywhere in the Planetary Union.

To them, Edward Durrul was merely a curiosity, a live specimen mounted for analysis. He had criticised their system. They intended to wring out the strands of his motivation, classify them, speculate and theorize upon them—and perhaps, ultimately, do the whole thing up as a monograph.

Durrul knew why Kramer had selected him for study rather than any of the current crop of university students who held similar views. A product of the educational philosophy of the Planetary Union, Durrul was thoroughly adjusted and decidedly aware of both his own abilities and shortcomings.

He was, first of all, gifted in the use of abstractions and generalities. In rare combination with this flair he had superior mechanical intelligence and a talent for expressive verbalization. He dealt easily in the subtle skills of logic. If he set his mind to it, he could erect absolute proofs of diametrically opposed truths and few minds could detect the delicately concealed flaws in the reasoning.

On the negative side of the scale was Dirrul's complete lack of psycho-biological intelligence, or a sense of scientific semantics. Neither to him seemed important. He missed them not at all and resented the legal requirements that forced him to take Dr. Kramer's course before he could qualify as a space-pilot.

The papers he had written for the professor were beautifully constructed patterns of logic, cast in well-turned phrases. They had clarified the criticism which others put inarticulately. It was the precision of his argument that disturbed Dr. Kramer and his faculty friends.

Dirrul was amused as the distinguished scientists skillfully manipulated the conversation to create counter-arguments opposing his. It was a game played in abstractions, a technique of which Dirrul was an instinctive master. Apparently the scientists found some sort of excitement in the game, since on succeeding evenings Dirrul was swamped with invitations from other faculty members—so many, in fact, that he had to neglect the serious work of the Movement. When he complained to Paul Sorgel, the Vininese agent was delighted.

"We can get along without you for awhile, Eddie," Sorgel said. "You're doing something much more important. You have a real in with the science crowd, and you've got them on the run because your arguments make sense. Every doubt you sow in their minds now will make our work just that much easier when the proper time comes."

Occasionally Dirrul had an uneasy feeling that he was making no real progress at all, that when he talked to the scientists he was a dancing puppet dangling on invisible strings. It seemed impossible that the scientists of the Ad-Air University could be so repeatedly defeated by his logic. Slowly, however, he reasoned his way to an explanation.

The scientists, like the system itself, were in the last wild frenzy of a decaying social order. They had lived so long in the atmosphere of relative truths, they had so carefully schooled themselves to avoid all absolutes, that they were unable to elude the simplest processes of logic. Their very efforts to be objective made them too honest to reject a conclusion once Dirrul had demonstrated the careful structure that seemed to support it.

A month passed. Dirrul felt divorced from the Movement, existing in suspended animation in a cloud of wordy unreality. Then abruptly the slow-moving dream ended. Late one night Paul Sorgel slipped into Dirrul's apartment and announced in an emotionless whisper, "The Plan's ready. You'll have to carry the details to Vinin. We can't use the teleray—the Union monitors might pick up the message and decode it."

"Naturally our Vininese Headquarters will want to know, Paul," said Eddie, "but can't that wait? We'll need every man here when we—"

Sorgel interrupted him. "I've made one or two changes in Glenna's original plan. It was too impractical. A handful of men can't take over half a galaxy."

"Glenna and Hurd weren't after the entire Planetary Union, Paul—that's out of the question. We meant to liberate Agron first. The capital is here and for awhile the government would be disrupted. When the people on the other planets saw how much better our social organization had become, modeled on the Vininese system, they would stage their own revolutions just like ourselves."

Sorgel laughed scornfully. "And in the meantime, of course, none of them would think of attacking you and throwing your people out?"

"Not if we seized the Nuclear Beam Transmitters," said Dirrul, "no space-fleet could come near us then."

"Eddie, you've lived in Agron too long. You're not thinking straight when you try to build the Plan around a single weapon."

"Why not, Paul? It's a perfect defense. In less than thirty seconds the Beam Transmitters can charge the entire stratospheric envelope of Agron. Nothing can move through it without disintegrating, yet life on the surface of the planet would go on quite normally because the atmosphere serves as an insulation."

"Technically it's a change in the form of energy, not a disintegration," Sorgel reminded him. "The beamed electrons unite with the atoms of visible material substances and alter them. I quite understand the process, Eddie—Vinin has the Beam too, you know."

"Because the Agronian scientists gave you the specifications!"

"That always has rankled, hasn't it?" said Sorgel.

"Yes," Dirrul admitted. "If the Vininese scientists had discovered the Beam-reaction first they would have conquered the galaxy."

"Conquer is a nasty word, Eddie," Sorgel said softly. "Vinin makes no conquests. Let's put it differently and say we would have used the Beam to bring peace to the galaxy instead of splitting it in two as it is now."

"Glenna's Plan can change all that, at least here on Agron."

"Face the facts, Eddie! A few conscientious people with ideals can't take over a planet. The Movement has its crews trained to capture the Beam Transmitters. You'll isolate Agron and seize the government offices simultaneously. What happens then?"

"Our people will rise and join us," said Eddie. "We'll create a new government modeled on Vinin's and we'll have young leaders instead of murky thinkers like Dr. Kramer."

"That's effective propaganda for speechmaking, but—"

"Glenna pounded away at it too, Paul," said Eddie. "It was the most telling line in winning our new crop of recruits."

"Which is precisely why the police disposed of her. But it won't work. The people won't rise. A mob is lethargic, too willing to keep things as they are. Here on Agron you've been coddled too long with luxuries and easy living. You have to prod the mob awake with a shock-force, a force coming from the outside."

"How, Paul? We haven't enough people in the Movement to put on any real show of strength. We can't even get outside."

"Now you understand the changes I've made in Glenna's Plan. You people in the Movement will seize the Beam Transmitters as originally planned. Then you'll simply hold them and keep them decommissioned long enough for a Vininese space-fleet to land. We'll set up your new government for you."

"And the rest of the Planetary Union will go to war!"

"It hardly matters," said Paul. "Once we're here the Beams will protect us against counterattack and every planet in the Vininese Confederacy has the same defense. One by one we can liberate the planets of the Union in the same way. But the timing is vital, of course—that's why you have to go to Vinin."

"I had a vacation leave only three months ago. I can't get tourist passage now without—"

"I've considered that. You'll have to have your own space-ship."

"Now wait a minute, Paul! It's one thing to borrow a surface jet but a space-cruiser...!"

"A cruiser, yes—not an old cargo ship. And you can handle that without a crew."

"It can't be done, Paul." Dirrul held his Glo-Wave nervously to the end of a cigarette. "Besides, I want to think this through carefully before I make up my mind."

"A merchant ship made a crash landing at Barney's emergency field yesterday," said Paul. "The damage was slight, but the pilot—unfortunately the pilot is dead." Sorgel smiled enigmatically. "Barney's one of our best men. He's been on the lookout for a chance like this for weeks."

"You'll leave tonight. Avoid the regular space lanes. I'm guessing you'll be on Vinin in a hundred days at the outside. On the fiftieth day after that—exactly one hundred and fifty days from now—our Vininese space-fleet must make a landing on Agron."

"I'll be missed, Paul—they'll make inquiries."

"And get no satisfactory answers."

Pacing the floor, Dirrul asked tensely, "Does everyone in the Movement know about this?"

"The vote was made unanimously yesterday."

"One of the others must have a vacation leave coming up. Send him. We're not at war with Vinin. He could take one of the regular space excursions."

"I can't send a message in writing. It would be picked up by the customs police. And you're the only one who can carry it verbally, Eddie. You know the whole background because you worked with Glenna and Hurd. You've been in the Movement longer than any of the others."

"Why not go yourself, Paul?"

"I can do more for the liberation if I stay here."

"I wish I'd been at the meeting yesterday when the vote was taken. I'd have liked to discuss it with the others before—"

"Why so many questions, Eddie? Why so many doubts all of a sudden?" Sorgel stood and faced Dirrul, holding his shoulders in a grip that hurt. "Are you trying to back out? Maybe it wasn't a good thing to let you play around with the science boys after all. Be honest with me, Eddie. If you're not sure where you stand, say so. There's no room in the Movement for traitors."

When Dirrul said nothing Sorgel added in a voice that rang with fervor, "You're the only man in the Movement who has had any training as a space-pilot. It depends on you now—everything you've ever dreamed of, everything Glenna and Hurd wanted. Can you forget what the Agronian police did to Glenna? Is your courage any less than hers?" Again Sorgel paused but still Dirrul said nothing. "The future of your world depends on you, Eddie—don't let it down."

"I'll go," Dirrul whispered.

As Eddie made up his mind his internal tension relaxed and he was filled with a sense of well-being. When he thought about it he couldn't understand why he had hesitated—unless perhaps what Sorgel suggested was true—that his contact with the Ad-Air faculty had blunted and nearly perverted his established sense of values.

An hour later Dirrul boarded the battered antiquated space cargo carrier on the launching rack at Barney's emergency field. At the last minute Sorgel pressed a curious disk into his hand. Made of a very light metal and suspended from a short chain it was two inches in diameter and covered with a complex grid design.

"Put it around your neck before you land, Eddie. Don't remove under any circumstances until you report. Give it to the Chief then. He'll know I sent you because it's my own identification activator." Sorgel clasped Dirrul's hand warmly. "When you land on Vinin take the North Field below the capital. It's the HQ operational center. Use Wave-code three-seven-three and they'll know you're friendly."

IV

After the launching space-flight was normally a monotonous routine. The course was charted by automatic navigators and the vast pattern of interlocking machinery and safety devices was electronically controlled by robot relays from the pilot master-panel. The chief function of a trained space-pilot, aside from his services as a diplomat, was to handle emergency situations for which automatic responses could not be built into the machinery.

Dirrul, however, could not depend a great deal upon the robot devices. He had to avoid the well-traveled and well-charted commercial space-lanes. He had to be constantly on the alert for the telltale white of a police cruiser. A cargo carrier was the slowest ship in the universe—Dirrul could outrun nothing, not even a playboy's sport jalopy, and inspection by the customs police would have been disastrous.

He followed a roundabout route, keeping as far from inhabited planets as he could, and he made good time. In ninety-five days he had reached the mythical border in space, which divided the territory of the Planetary Union and the Vininese Confederacy.

He was almost at midpoint in the galaxy. On the glazed screen of his space-map the mirrored pinpricks of sun systems glittered like microscopic gems scattered over the curve of a gigantic black saucer. Dirrul had never been so far from Agron. He felt a stifling sense of insignificance.

The meaning of time as he understood it was somehow overwhelmed by the immensity of space. Now and yesterday, today and tomorrow, became a single unity. Dirrul had a new sense of the past in terms of the present. His mind groped for word symbols that he understood which could crystalize the shadowy new concept filling his mind.

New understanding seemed to arise from the space-map. Somewhere among the glowing points of light was the Place of the Beginning, a single planet called Earth. In the far-distant past Earthmen had made themselves rational beings. But for centuries thereafter they had made no further progress, apparently appalled by the audacity of such presumptive evolution. They had fought through a long primitive period of violence, erecting system on system and philosophy upon philosophy to conceal, destroy and wipe out their own biological machinery.

Then out of a final orgy of death and terror the Earthmen had grasped the meaning and the responsibility of the Rational Potential. They had understood the reality of being.

Within a century after that they had conquered space. They had found peoples like themselves occasionally—but more often races that had followed different biological adaptations to different environments. Wherever there seemed to be a spark of primitive rationality the Earthmen had stayed and patiently taught the Rational Potential of being, which they had learned for themselves only after such bloodshed.

The galaxy was theirs, in a sense, for it thought in the patterns of Earthmen, although long ago their direct influence had waned. They were a legend and an ideal, lost in the vastness of space, yet bound fast into the cultures of all peoples.

Yet somewhere the Earthmen must have failed, somewhere there must have been a flaw in their teaching. Fifty years earlier, as the Agronians measured time, the galaxy had been torn apart by war. The Agronians had led one group of planets, the Vininese another. Planet after planet was seared by deadly new weapons—world after world died in the orange flame of gaudy atomic disintegration. Slowly the power of Vinin crept across the sky until the Vininese ruled half the galaxy.

Their first defeat had come unexpectedly. Their great space-armada swung in on Agron, while the people crowded in terror in their flimsy raid shelters. But the Vininese ships had vanished high in the air. Not even debris had fallen on the planet.

It was the first use of the Nuclear Beams. Dirrul had been a schoolboy when the Agronian scientists announced their discovery. He remembered the exciting thrill of pride, recalled how he

and his schoolmates had dreamed of destroying the Vininese with the new weapon.

He remembered too the galling bitterness he had felt when the scientists announced that they had made peace instead.

They had had sound reasons, of course. They said the Beams had a limited value. They could be used only defensively to girdle a single planet in the stratospheric level of its atmosphere. Elsewhere they were harmless. To compound the spectacular timidity, the scientists had given away the secret to all comers, including the Vininese. They had an argument for that particular idiocy too—if each planet could protect itself so easily from all external attack its people could freely decide for themselves their galactic allegiance or maintain isolated independence.

The Planetary Union had been formed and members of the Vininese Confederacy invited to join it. Not a people anywhere in the Confederacy made even tentative exploration of the offer while five sun systems of the Union later joined the Vininese. That was the fact that had ultimately prodded Dirrul into joining the Movement.

Later, when he read the pamphlets brought from Vinin, he had clarified his purposes. On the one hand lay the waste, the confusion, the uncertainty of Agron. Scientists who talked forever of hypotheses and were afraid to stand firm for any absolute truths—moralists who qualified even the simplest standards of right and wrong—philosophers who glorified a condition of eternal chaos which they called an open mind.

On the other hand lay the clean efficiency of Vinin. Scientific certainty, and the progress that stemmed from it—the Space-dragon instead of the Safe-sweet candy, a clear social organization in which the individual was directed by established and inflexible principles.

The whole of it was history as Dirrul had learned it, the chronology of the past. As he looked on the star map of the galaxy, at midpoint between the two great unions of planets, the meaning of the past began to change. The chronology fell into a new perspective.

Against the vast expanse of space time twisted into a new relationship. Time and space began to equate with an exciting synonymity. History was not the past, dead and numbered—history was now. All things, all space, all time, were forever fixed at the instant of now.

In Dirrul's mind a tumult of facts trembled on the verge of a startling new order—the atomic structure of all energy and the black saucer of the galaxy. The violent spasms the Earthmen had suffered before they found the Rational Potential and the devastation of the Galactic War.

But before he could assess such new values and verbalize the new generalization the antiquated warning system of his ship twanged tinnily. On the control panel screen he saw the trim outline of a white Agronian police ship. A moment later the voice came over the speaker, ordering him to state his permit registry and his destination.

Dragged so suddenly back to reality, Dirrul reacted in panic. It was a routine inquiry. He might have bluffed his way clear. Instead he put the cargo ship at top speed toward Vinin and watched helplessly while the patrol cruiser closed relentlessly in.

"Stand for search!" the voice commanded.

When he did nothing the police shot a warning rocket over his bow. A second shot struck the rear of the cargo ship and tore away a section of landing gear. Swearing, Dirrul tried to maneuver out of range, and to a certain extent he was successful. But piloting skill could not make up for the cumbersome bulk of his unarmed ship. Two more blasts hit him, collapsing the forward compartment and knocking out one power tube.

At the point of triumph, however, the police patrol turned away and left Dirrul limping alone in space. For a moment he was puzzled. In another ten minutes they could have boarded the cargo carrier and made him prisoner. But he understood when he glanced again at the star map—the Agronian police had pursued him far into Vininese territory. If Vininese patrols had found them there it might have created an unpleasant intergalactic incident.

Dirrul made a quick survey of the damage. He had only one power tube intact—beyond that, the cargo carrier was wrecked and he had on board nothing with which to make repairs. He could move ahead only at quarter-speed.

Sorgel had put a time limit of one hundred days on the trip to Vinin. Headquarters had to know by then of the Plan on Agron. Dirrul had five days left and as the hours ran out he was still grinding slowly toward the outer atmosphere of Vinin. Quite aware that proper security demanded the message be delivered in person, Dirrul nonetheless faced the alternative of losing everything if he waited.

Logically weighing all factors, he concluded he would not be risking too much, considering the stakes, if he used the teleray. Agron monitors could pick it up, of course, and no doubt the outpost stations were instructed to record all messages emanating from within the territory of Vinin. But Dirrul knew the Air-Command.

They wallowed in the same luxury and comfort enjoyed by the rest of the Planetary Union. Outposts personnel, so far from the capital, would be even less likely to take their duties seriously than Dirrul's own unit.

He tried to make the information enigmatic to the curious and at least suggestive to the Vininese. He used the landing Wave-code 373. The small red light on the control panel glowed and he knew he had established contact. In carefully chosen Vininese he spoke into the teleray mouthpiece.

"Sorgel requires help for Glenna-Hurd Plan. Exactly fifty days, their time."

He repeated the message. As an afterthought he gave his own position and asked for emergency repair assistance. The whole meaning hinged upon the names of Glenna and Hurd. However, since they had been taken to Vinin, they should already have outlined the Plan to the Vininese command. If there were any doubts Headquarters could teleray for clarification. When his speaker remained silent Dirrul assumed he had been understood.

He began to feel the pull of Vininese gravity, found himself in trouble with his ship. He tried to keep the disabled cargo carrier relatively stationary, so that the Vininese repair ships could locate him. With only one power tube, however, maneuver was impossible. The battered ship plunged out of control toward the planet.

For an hour Dirrul fought with all the skill he knew. A thousand feet above the surface he managed to force the ship to level off temporarily. He had no time to seek a proper landing area and in any case his gear had been shot away.

There was a wide flat plain directly below him, in the distance the towering mass of a large city silhouetted against a range of mountains. Dirrul headed his ship for the open fields, setting the safety devices for a crash landing.

He hung around his neck the identification disk Sorgel had given him, tucking it beneath his tunic. If he were hurt in the landing, a Vininese might find him, and the disk would indicate that he was important enough to be taken to the Headquarters Command. If his teleray hadn't been understood there might still be a chance for him to make his report in person.

The ship crashed against the hard ground. Dirrul felt a wrenching pain as the automatic safety arms pinioned him fast to cushion the fall, before hurling him free of the blazing control room. After that he lost consciousness.

V

When Dirrul opened his eyes it was after dark but the triple moons of Vinin were full and the landscape glowed with a yellowish light. He had fallen into a ditch which ran beside a narrow, green-paved road. In the distance, hidden in a dense copse of blue tree-like vegetation, he saw the fragments of his wrecked ship. The purple grass of Vinin spread richly all around him, damp and warm. At the bottom of the ditch a reddish trickle of liquid washed over his feet.

His throat ached with thirst. His tongue clung like sand to the roof of his mouth. He knew that an Agronian could live in the Vininese atmosphere but he was uncertain whether his body could assimilate the native liquids. Yet to ease the torture he dipped his hand into the red fluid and rubbed a few drops over his lips. The sting of salt increased his torment.

His body shuddered with pain as he pulled himself to his feet. He crept a few feet along the green highway, and slowly his will mastered his strength so that he could walk erect. He began to orient himself a little. On the horizon he saw the skyline of the city he had observed from the air and he knew he was following the road in the right direction.

But the distance was greater than he had estimated. He walked for an hour and the city still seemed no closer. Nor had he seen any sign of habitation where he might go for help, nothing except the towering endless yellow stone wall which he had been following for more than half an hour. There was neither gate nor break in the stone. Atop the wall regularly spaced brackets held three naked wires in place.

The wall probably guarded the estate of a Vininese official, he decided. In that case the wires were either a warning device or a charged trap against thieves. Dirrul was puzzled by the obvious deduction. Such things were necessary on Agron to protect important installations like the Beam Transmitters—but he had hardly expected there would be a need for them on Vinin. Yet when he considered it objectively, why not? Every system of society, no matter how ideal, would produce inevitable malcontents—there were fools among the Vininese, as there were among other peoples.

Dirrul saw a towering gate in the wall and ran ahead eagerly, only to fall in disappointment against the thick metal grille. The gate was locked by a concealed device he could not locate. At a considerable distance inside the wall was a second, higher than the first. Dirrul saw a faint light at the inner gate and assumed there was a guard of some sort stationed there. He tried with all his strength to cry out for help but his throat was dust-dry. He could utter only a faint whisper.

When he tried to go on he was overcome with exhaustion. He staggered a few feet beyond the gate and collapsed into the ditch. He lay face down in the warm purple grass, his swollen tongue hanging limply from his mouth. Imperceptibly the thirst began to diminish. After a moment's speculation Dirrul understood why and crushed a handful of the purple grass against his lips. It was warm and sweet—a comforting liquid began to flow down his throat. He plunged his head luxuriously into a thick mass of the weed, breathing deeply the sweet odor of the crushed blades.

A silent grey vehicle darted along the green road and jerked to a stop in front of the gate. It came so quickly Dirrul had no time to call out. The Vininese driver stood up and bawled orders at the inner gate. A faint voice replied. The driver shouted again. The gate swung open and the vehicle moved inside.

Bewildered, Dirrul sat up, his head reeling. He understood a little Vininese, not enough to translate exactly what had been said but enough to make out a tantalizing half-meaning. The driver was searching all the work camps, he had said, for the Agronian girl, Glenna. He wanted to check something or other to see if she were here.

Work camp? Dirrul decided he must have got the word wrong. Glenna and Hurd might still be in hospitals but if they had recovered they would be honored citizens of Vinin. Still—what sort of hospital would have both double walls and alarm wires?

Only an asylum for hopeless mental cases! The realization made Dirrul cold with a terrible fear. Glenna—hopelessly insane!

To save the Movement it was vital for Dirrul to make his report immediately. What help could the Vininese get from a madwoman? He sprang up and ran dizzily to the gate. Before he could shout for the guard shadowy figures rose up around him, silently closing great hairy hands over his mouth and dragging him back across the road.

Tied and gagged Dirrul watched while the black-robed creatures worked stealthily at the central bars of the gate with tiny blue-flaming torches. Beneath their flowing capes they were beings like himself, which indicated that they were either Agronian or Vininese, for by the perverse chance of biological adaptation the people of the two planets were so structurally similar that even intermarriage was possible. One by one they cut out the bars until the span in the gate was wide enough for them to work their way through.

For a moment the band stood in the road, apparently talking. At least their lips moved and their hands fluttered expressively but Dirrul heard no sound. Reaching a decision they went through the gate in single file, carrying long vicious weapons with them. Two of the black-caped men came and stood guard on either side of Dirrul.

Whatever these vandals were doing they were working in stealth and fear and Dirrul realized their aim must be illegal. He fought to break free of his bonds so that he might warn the loyal Vininese garrison. The two guards shoved him back roughly. One of them grabbed Dirrul's tunic in a claw grip and the cloth tore open, revealing Sorgel's identification disk.

Both guards bent over him, fingering the disk, talking soundlessly with their facile fingers. Suddenly they jerked the disk off, snapping the chain. At the same moment a rolling explosion from within the wall shook the earth.

Dirrul heard a great noise and a terrifying fear filled his mind. It was a steady undiminishing fear that gripped every muscle of his body. His throat was ice-cold. His heart pounded and gasped for breath. Every nerve-end in his body quivered and his imagination was swamped with a flood of shattering ephemeral horrors.

Nothing could shake off the terror. Dirrul's skill with reason and logic failed him. It was impossible to organize his thinking to combat the sensory shock waves disrupting his thoughts. Logical patterns made no sense. The very process of trying to build meaning into them—the process of thinking itself—left him weak and trembling.

The guards watched his terror for a moment, watched while he clung close to the ground, trying to dig his fingers into it. Then one of them laughed—a piercing discordant shriek, shrilling louder than the din behind the wall. The second man, snarling viciously, kicked Dirrul in the ribs.

For Dirrul the blaze of pain was almost a relief. As his body responded to it on a level of instinct, the chattering terror in his mind diminished. A second blow on the head sent him reeling close to the brink of unconsciousness. His perceptive reactions went slightly out of focus.

In a wavering mist he saw the black figures emerge from the gate, dragging a dozen or more captives with them. A second explosion rocked the earth and flames leaped high behind the yellow wall. In the glare Dirrul recognized Glenna, struggling frantically in the arms of her masked captor.

Dirrul's memory after that was a vague patchwork of unrelated episodes. He saw huge saddled reptilian bipeds dragged out of the concealing brush. The captives were bound in the saddles and the black-robed figures mounted behind them. Later two of the men pulled Dirrul up and tied him across a saddle too.

At a sickening gallop the caravan moved away from the green highway, striking out over the purple plain. For a while Dirrul lost rational control of sensation. He felt but without understanding. His brain pulsed in a continuous terror that seemed to resolve itself into sound—a continuous high-pitched scream coming from within his own mind. His body throbbed with pain and nausea wrenched emptily at the muscles of his stomach. But he could not sort out the feelings, classify them or adjust to them.

At the edge of the plain the caravan turned up a steep rocky trail which led into the ragged range of mountains banked behind the Vininese city. They came to a stop in a stony ravine, concealed

beneath a tangle of gigantic purple-leafed vines.

Dirrul's captors dismounted and removed their black cloaks, hiding them among the rocks. Underneath they wore the warm gray skintight workers' clothing of Vinin. The majority left their animals tethered to the roots of the vine and began the steep descent on foot to the city. Only three remained behind to guard the prisoners.

They built a small fire and prepared food, serving the hot sweet chunks of white meat in large wicker baskets. As soon as Dirrul discovered that he could stomach the food he wolfed his share hungrily. The guards brought him more. He felt better. Except for the sing-song ringing in his head he might have been able to think clearly enough to evaluate his own position.

But that could be done later. He was overcome by an immense drowsiness. He relaxed and slept.

VI

A shrill scream woke him with a start of horror. His captors had taken him from his saddle and propped him against a mound of rocks, along with the other prisoners. His muscles were numb and dead, so limp it was almost impossible for him to turn his head. Faintly the whirring terror whispered in his mind.

Dirrul's eyes focused slowly on the clearing. One of the prisoners had been carried there, close to the fire. It was Glenna. Two of her captors held her while the third bent over her head, probing her ear with a sharp instrument. His arm moved. Glenna screamed and fainted. For a moment Dirrul saw the side of her face smeared with a spreading stain of blood. Then nausea swept over him. When he opened his eyes again the three men were working over another prisoner at the fire.

Vaguely Dirrul knew he had to escape. He forgot the Movement—he thought of nothing any loftier than his own personal survival. The idea was elemental, built upon the simplest sort of observation and hypothesis.

Yet it came slowly and painfully, as if he had just tried to understand after one reading the Cranmor-Frasher Theory of Diminishing Corelatives. As he verbalized the conclusion two things happened—the drug-like languor in his muscles began to disperse and the shrilling note of terror burst up loud in his mind once more.

Two of the men brought their last victim back from the fire and laid his body on the stones close to Dirrul. Dirrul feigned sleep when they stood over him. One of them prodded him with the tip of a dusty boot—then they both laughed.

They went back to the fire and talked soundlessly to their companions, holding up the identification disk which had been ripped from Dirrul's neck hours before. That amused them briefly, until one of the three snatched the disk and hurled it toward the mouth of the ravine in violent anger.

The three men pulled thick white skins together near the fire and crept into them. Dirrul waited until he was sure they slept. It was the only chance he would have to escape, but when he tried to creep away his hands collapsed from sheer terror. The crying fear in his mind was so loud his head seemed to vibrate physically with the sound.

Thought was impossible. Judgment and decision were impossible. If he tried to consider even a problem as simple as the safest means of passing the dying fire—reason failed him. He could weigh nothing critically—he could not consider probable courses of rational action.

Nonetheless he inched forward. It took all the courage and stamina he possessed. Gradually a strange and foggy understanding formed in his brain. The terror seemed to die if he planned nothing, merely responding without thought to the instinctive urge to escape. Let instinct do the trick then.

Detached from the control panel of his cerebral cortex his body mechanism functioned perfectly. It was like a space-ship smoothly piloted by its automatic navigators. Dirrul gave himself over to his own built-in stimulus-response relays and the screeching fear shriveled and died.

Calm and unhurried he walked past the fire and the sleeping men. As calmly he searched the mouth of the ravine for Sorgel's disk. When he found it he stuffed it into the pocket of his tunic and strode confidently along the trail that led down from the hills.

It was dawn. In the pink morning light he could see the Vininese city at his feet, neat, clean, well-blocked streets and towering buildings of black stone. On the outskirts were the circular space-fields and the long low flat-roofed interplanetary freight depots. Farther away, dotting the countryside at regular intervals, were curious block-shaped windowless structures surrounded by double walls.

Dirrul had never seen anything like them before but, through a process of judicial elimination, he decided they must be the Vininese Beam Transmitters. The defense of Vinin was remarkably thorough, far surpassing anything of a similar nature on Agron.

It came to him with something of a shock that he was thinking rationally once more. His mind was completely clear. He felt ashamed of the foolish, groundless terror that had unnerved him in

the ravine. He tried to understand what had happened to him but it was beyond analysis. In retrospect he realized that the danger had been less than what he faced on any normal day in the Air-Command emergency maintenance service.

The only logical explanation was the food they had given him. It must have been heavily drugged with a new poison known to the Vininese. Dirrul was tempted to go back and rescue Glenna, if she were still alive after the torture to which she had been subjected. But he knew it was more important for him to contact Vininese Headquarters first. He had a message to deliver. Glenna herself would have wanted that.

In two hours Dirrul was on the plain again. All the suffering of the past few hours was gone. The plentiful purple grass had quenched his thirst and surprisingly eased his hunger as well. He felt keenly alert and alive. The sun was warm, the air was balmy. He was on Vinin.

Spiritually he had come home, to the thing he believed in. Not many men had such opportunity to realize their dreams of perfection. To cap the triumph Dirrul knew it might still be possible to make his report and save the Movement on Agron.

From the top of a purple-swathed knoll he looked down across a twisting red stream toward the suburbs of the city. Magnificent black-stone villas, surrounded by stylized gardens, were on both sides of the green highway.

Further on, close to the city, were the crowded workers' quarters, behind them, hidden in a faint mist, the rectangular masses of public buildings reaching up toward the stars. This was as Paul Sorgel had so often described it. Such grandeur could only belong to the capital city of the Vininese Confederacy.

Under the brow of the knoll Dirrul saw one of the stone block buildings within its protective double walls. A huge trumpet-like transmitter was exposed at the top of the structure. In some ways it resembled the Beam Transmitters on Agron but the differences were so striking Dirrul knew it was a totally new device—possibly a more efficient variation invented by the Vininese. The faint hum of machinery and the regular movement of the sending tube indicated that the machine was running—but for what purpose Dirrul could only guess.

The yard between the two walls was patrolled by a smartly disciplined score of Vininese. Dirrul considered going to them to ask for transportation to the city but changed his mind. It was very possible that the installation was secret. The guards might have had instructions to dispose immediately of any intruder. On the whole it seemed wiser to go a little farther to one of the walled villas.

Dirrul walked half a thousand feet along the green highway and turned up the drive leading toward one of the sprawling mansions. As he passed the portals of the open gate an alarm bell clanged—seconds later five Vininese infantry surrounded him, prodding him into the house with their gleaming weapons. In precise Vininese, carefully enunciated, Dirrul tried to explain what he wanted—but the guards made no reply, merely staring at him with cold glazed eyes, comprehending nothing.

They threw him roughly into a dark room, where a slim Vininese waited in a lounge chair. As Dirrul's eyes grew accustomed to the faint light he saw that the Vininese held a snub-nosed rocket-pistol.

"Your permit?" the Vininese asked languidly.

"Yesterday I came here from—"

"Then you have no permit. I must shoot you, of course."

"Sir, I have a message from Agron! You must take me to Headquarters!"

"Oh, you're a tourist. But this is a prohibited area. From the dust on your tunic, I take it you have done a great deal of walking. A pity, my friend—naturally you've seen the transmitters."

"We have them on Agron but it is of no importance."

The Vininese threw back his head and laughed, "Oh, no—of no importance—you have seen nothing!"

"I do not understand you," Dirrul said desperately. "My Vininese is very poor. But you must help me. I bring news of the Movement on Agron and time is short." Anxiously Dirrul plunged into his story, tripping repeatedly over the involved syntax of Vinin to his host's obvious amusement.

Eventually, however, he made his point, for the tall Vininese said, "Then you must be the agent who sent the teleray report. We've been looking for you, sir. We feared, after you crashed, that you might have been taken by the vagabonds." Still holding Dirrul centered in the gunsight the Vininese picked up a portable teleray and asked for Headquarters.

While he waited he added, "You must forgive this reception, my friend from Agron. We have been having so much trouble with the vagabonds lately we must all go armed. Here in the transmission area we must be particularly alert."

His tone was warm but the gun never wavered. When he made his connection he spoke rapidly into the mouthpiece, too rapidly for Dirrul to work out an accurate translation. It seemed,

however, that the conversation was centered around the transmitters rather than the report Dirrul had to make. The Vininese finished the dialogue and smiled engagingly at Dirrul.

"I am to take you to the capital, my friend," he said. "They are preparing a reception for you. You are a hero of Vinin, to have braved so much for the cause."

The Vininese came forward suddenly and pulled aside the torn cloth at the throat of Dirrul's tunic.

"But you—you must have a disk!" The Vininese was suddenly frightened. "There is no tourist stamp on your arm. I don't understand."

"Paul Sorgel loaned me his when I left Agron." Dirrul felt in his tunic pocket. "He said I was to give it to the Chief when I made my report but if you must see it now—"

"No, no—by all means, keep it." The tall man's voice was pleasant again. "I was simply afraid that someone might have come who—but it is nothing. I am weary from all this vigilance against the vagabonds. It is hard to think realistically."

"I was surprised to see so much lawlessness on Vinin."

"Then you're very naive, my friend. There's an element like that among all people, although I must admit ours here have suddenly become excessively active. Their attacks are so systematic and so well-organized! Hardly a night passes without trouble at a work camp or a transmitter station.

"Your transmitters are different from ours. Have you developed an improvement in technique?"

"They are, curious, aren't they? You must ask the Chief to tell you all about them." The Vininese chuckled with delight. "I wouldn't want to spoil his surprise by letting you in on the secret first."

VII

The Vininese drove Dirrul to the city in a heavily armed surface car. Two of the infantrymen sat behind them, their rocket guns ready on their knees. It was testimony to the efficiency and organization of Vinin that such a finished reception could be prepared on such short notice. Dirrul's first intimation of the scope of the ceremony came when they stopped at a school to be cheered by the pupils.

Rank upon rank of boys and girls lined up smartly behind the high wire fence. They ranged in ages from tots, barely able to stand, to young people in late adolescence. Except for the round metal disks, which all of them wore, they were completely naked.

"Clothing breeds such false modesty and so many foolish frustrations," Dirrul's host explained. "On Vinin every child is reared in completely objective equality. As soon as we take them from their parents—about the time when they're first learning to walk—we give them identification disks. Before that, when they're in the instinct period, the disks aren't necessary.

"After their basic education we classify them. The leader-class is issued permanent disks and the others give theirs up. The adjustment is something very severe but on the whole the casualties are light." Suddenly the Vininese seized Dirrul's hand and looked into his eyes. "I trust you follow me, my friend?"

"Yes," Dirrul answered. Reason led him to a conclusion as he looked at the massed children, a conclusion he could not bring himself to face. He felt a new kind of fear, as cold as the depths of space and as devoid of emotion. Instead of trusting to his own logic Dirrul struggled to find a flaw in it—for a man cannot easily watch his dream turn to dust in his hands.

They drove on into the city. Rows of men and women in working clothes lined the streets, cheering wildly in unison. Crossed Vininese flags were draped between the buildings and brave-colored streamers danced in the wind.

"A reception is good for them," the Vininese said. "We need heroes occasionally. It's fortunate you came when you did. The vagabonds have had a disturbing effect on morale and it's impossible to suppress the news entirely."

The vehicle stopped before the towering government building. Dirrul was led up a flight of stone steps to a wide porch overlooking the mass of cheering upturned faces in the public square. He stood motionless while speeches were made and gay ribbon was draped around his neck. The air shook with bright explosions—a huge flag was unfurled over the porch—band music began to blare and a tidal wave of precision-trained Vininese infantry wheeled into the square.

An official touched Dirrul's arm. "You must take the salute of our work-leaders now."

Dirrul was pushed back against the stone railing as an orderly mob filed past, blank-faced and chattering with meaningless pleasure. Many of them pressed forward to touch his hand before the guards tactfully hurried them on. When the organized confusion was at its height a tiny square of paper was slipped into his hand.

Dirrul had no idea which of the mob had given it to him and he dared not glance at it. But he managed to hide the paper in the band of his tunic.

Hour by hour the throng filed past, endless and meaningless. It was an agony for Dirrul. For the first time he looked into the face of his dream and saw the reality of Vinin—order, discipline, efficiency—and utter blankness. Unhappily he recalled one of Dr. Kramer's lectures.

"... Defiance of convention, confusion, frustration, stubbornness—yes and a touch of the neurotic too—these goad the individual into solving problems. And problem solving is progress. An orderly society that asks no questions of itself, a society that has no doubts, is a dying society...."

Dirrul understood the professor at last. He looked squarely at the fact of what he was, a traitor to his own people, on the verge of betraying them. He had been wonderfully deluded by his own self-deception.

But the job wasn't quite finished. The Vininese would not have gone to take Glenna from the hospital if they had understood his teleray. Let them splurge on their reception! He was unimpressed. When the time came for questions to be answered he would conveniently forget why he had been sent to Vinin. Nothing they could do would drag it out of him.

The crowd thinned and Dirrul was taken inside the building, where his Vininese host awaited him. Sighing deeply the Vininese stood up. "These public displays do take so much of our time," he said, "but it's over now." This last seemed to amuse him and he repeated it softly before adding, "The Chief's ready to see you."

Remembering the note and the flimsy possibility that it might suggest a way out, Dirrul answered quickly, "But, sir, I really ought to clean up first."

"You Agronians have such weird notions of propriety!"

"I would feel more presentable to your Chief if—if I could have a bath. Perhaps I might even borrow a change of clothing."

The Vininese fingered his chin thoughtfully. "It might be more amusing. Yes, the Chief can wait a few minutes longer for you to satisfy your vanity."

He summoned a blank-faced liveried servant and asked for a clean worker's suit for Dirrul. Then he took Dirrul to the wall tube and they shot noiselessly to an upper floor. As he left Dirrul at the door of a luxurious suite, the Vininese said, "When you change your clothes, my friend, don't forget to take the disk out of your tunic. The Chief will want it when you see him."

When he was sure he was alone Dirrul spread open the note. It was a crude drawing of a hearing aid and beneath it a cryptic sentence written in Agronian,

I lost mine and so has Glenna now.

The signature was unmistakably Hurd's but the note made no sense. Hurd's hearing was as sound as Dirrul's. He had never used a mechanical device—how could he have lost it then? *So has Glenna*—that must be the key. Hurd somehow knew about the vagabond raiding party that had rescued Glenna from the mental hospital. He must have escaped from the Vininese earlier himself. He was probably hiding somewhere in the capital.

Working on this hypothesis Dirrul made a guess that the thing Hurd had lost was his illusion about the Vininese system. The hearing aid symbolized what Hurd had been told about it, as opposed to the reality which he saw with his own eyes.

But such an interpretation didn't ring entirely true. It was too involved for an idea which could have been better expressed in four words—*I know the truth*. Tossing the note aside Dirrul turned on the water in the shower room and thoughtfully disrobed.

As he threw his tunic aside a violent paralyzing terror seized his mind, making his head sing with a screeching vibration. Blindly he snatched up the tunic in order to stuff the cloth into his mouth so he would not cry out. But as soon as he pressed it against his skin his terror vanished, like a siren suddenly stilled.

The pattern of the real truth fell into place then. Now he understood the power of Vinin. Experimentally he took Sorgel's disk out of his tunic and laid it on a table. As soon as he did so the blinding nameless horror flamed up. When he held the disk again the exhausting emotion vanished.

Looking back Dirrul saw an abundance of evidence that might have given him a clue, had he not spent so much mental effort bolstering his illusion of Vinin. There was the circumstance of his own unrelenting terror when he was without the disk in the ravine—the painful sight of his captors puncturing the prisoners' eardrums—the soundless talk of the vagabonds, like the lip-reading of the deaf—the bleak orderliness of the cheering mobs—and, most obvious of all, the strange transmitters atop the well-guarded stone block-buildings.

It was all there, even to the final cruelty to the children. What was it the Vininese had said? "The adjustment is sometimes very severe but on the whole the casualties are light." And the very young, before they were taken from their parents, didn't need disks because they were in what the Vininese had called "the instinct period."

Dirrul knew what Hurd's drawing meant. Somehow Hurd had lost his hearing, perhaps as a result of the beating the police had given him on Agron. In any case only the deaf could think rationally on Vinin. Hurd was telling Dirrul to shatter his own sense of hearing if he still had the will to

think and act for himself. The nightmare Dirrul had witnessed in the ravine was not torture but the bravery of desperate men attempting to rescue rational minds.

The Rational Potential—the gift of the legendary Earthmen! Like the processes of thought itself it could never be wiped out by argument or reason once it was understood. The Earthmen had wasted centuries trying to undo their own evolved rationality before they realized it could not be done. Now, on a higher level in another plane, the Vininese were struggling to submerge the Earthmen's second achievement of the Rational Potential.

It was done by their transmitters. A wave of some sort—probably subsonic or supersonic—continuously filled the Vininese atmosphere. The Vininese who wore the disks were protected against it. The others succumbed if they retained their hearing. As Dirrul himself had discovered in the ravine, when he did not consciously think the terror diminished.

All Vininese children were given a basic education. It built up their automatic responses, established correct stimulus-response behavior patterns. Then, for the masses, the protective disks were eliminated and the screeching fear pounded at them until the processes of creative thinking were destroyed, leaving a backlog of malleable and obedient habit patterns. The problem solving was done for them by their masters.

The Vininese Confederacy—half the galaxy—was peopled by billions upon billions of robot races, ruled by a handful of men with absolute power. To that Dirrul would have betrayed his planet! To slavery and to the destruction of the Rational Potential, all for the slippery dream of orderliness and efficiency which masqueraded as progress.

He could save Agron today—but for how long? Sorgel would bewitch countless other discontented Agronian fools. The Movement would try again and one day the Vininese space fleet would penetrate the Agronian Nuclear Beams. Dirrul had to escape. He had to go home and tell the truth about Vinin.

And it was impossible. He was completely trapped with no visible way out for himself.

VIII

Dirrul stood in front of the metal-surfaced reflector, fingering the cap of his ear. To survive as a thinking being he must deafen himself. Yet he hesitated. Self-inflicted violence was the negation of the Rational Potential.

Then, slowly, he developed a new idea. He could use the power of Vinin, to save Agron if not himself!

There came a knock on his door. Dirrul drew on his tunic as a stranger entered the room.

"The Chief is impatient—you must come at once."

Dirrul was led through a metal-roofed tunnel into a wide sunny transparent-walled room at the top of the building. The door closed behind him. He was alone with a tall smooth-faced man, exotically costumed in a tight black suit crusted with white jewels and framed by a white cloak thrown loosely around his shoulders. He sat back of a tremendous desk—behind his chair was a tilted panel of dials, levers and tiny glowing lights, running the length of the room under the ceiling-high window.

"It is always a pleasure to welcome a hero of the Vininese Confederacy," the Chief said without getting up. His tone was slow, tired, emotionless. His eyes were without expression. "May I ask your name?"

"Dirrul—Edward Dirrul."

"And you come from Agron with a message from our agent," he said, speaking Agronian. "So much we got from your teleray. In fifty days—actually forty-nine from now, by your time—your local Movement will have use for a Vininese space-fleet. I have already dispatched Sub-units B and C. Now, if you will give me the details of your Plan I can code-wave them to my commander."

"There's been a mistake, sir. What I really meant when I sent the message was—"

"So you've discovered the truth." The Chief's hand darted toward a cubicle of his desk and he held a metal-barreled weapon aimed steadily at Dirrul. "These things are always so tedious. Give me your disk."

"Of course," Dirrul agreed readily but as he felt in his pocket the Chief gestured negatively with his weapon.

"No, keep it." After a pause he added, "You're certain that you know, Dirrul?"

"I've seen the transmitters."

"Then why aren't you afraid? Why do you consent so readily? The others are always terrified—they'll confess to anything if I promise to let them keep the disks. Have you ever heard the sound, Dirrul? Do you really know what it's like?"

"You want information from me. You have no chance of getting it if you deprive me of the ability

to think."

"Granted. And otherwise?"

"You won't get it either."

The Chief sighed wearily. "You are simply trading one romantic illusion for another. You have somehow convinced yourself that one man—one lone Agronian—can hold out against us. Let me tell you a little about our system, Durrul, so you'll understand how futile it is to waste your time and mine like this." Not a trace of feeling came into his voice. He sounded slightly bored, reciting a matter-of-fact chronology of statistics.

"As you have guessed we create our leader-class on each of our planets by protecting them from the sound waves with the disks. If scattered groups among the general public should ever gain immunity—as far as we know only idiots and the deaf can do that—they could never carry out a successful revolt. The only way would be for the transmitter stations to be silenced.

"However, every unit operates independently on its own power. We have thousands of them on every planet. All but one could be destroyed, and that one transmitter would still be enough to control the planet. You begin to see, I think, that any kind of resistance is foolish. In time you can be made to do as I ask. Unfortunately, we have no time to spare.

"Perhaps you're thinking that outsiders—tourists, let's say—could come here and overthrow us. All rational beings in the galaxy are subject to the same physical laws. They still must hear and if they do they're powerless.

"Besides, our secret is remarkably well-kept. The tourists and merchants come to our planet in droves. They notice nothing—because of the amusing idiosyncrasy of Vininese customs men, who are required to stamp the hand of each visitor with an identification mark. The coloring material is atomically constituted to act as a temporary disk while the tourist is among us. He notices nothing amiss. He sees what we want him to see—he goes home favorably impressed—and by that time the mark has worn away. You get the general picture, Durrul? Nothing can ever defeat us."

"Nothing but yourselves."

"Romantic nonsense! Let me show you what I can do, Durrul, even when you wear a disk. I think you'll bargain then." The Chief turned a little to face the panel behind his desk, feeling over the dials while he kept Durrul framed in his sunlight.

"The young man you went to this morning for help is a sadist. The reception was his idea—so was your bath. He likes to have our traitors—and you are a traitor, of course, to your own people—he likes to have them discover the truth before we take their disks away. It's an exquisite torture but in your case annoying, since it puts you in a position to bargain. Now it occurs to me that your host should be disciplined for his bungling."

The Chief pointed to the surface of his desk. "Watch the screen, Durrul." An opaque rectangle glowed with light, slowly came into focus, and revealed a large mirrored lounge, where a number of official Vininese stood talking and drinking. The Chief twisted a dial, pulled a lever and one of the Vininese collapsed, writhing on the glassy floor in violent agony.

The screen went blank.

"I have not only decontrolled your friend's disk," the Chief explained blandly, "but I have doubled his receptability to sound. I can continue the treatment until he goes mad—or I can snap it off and let it serve as a warning.

"From this panel here I control every disk-wearer on Vinin—including yourself, Durrul. You understand, I think, that there can never be any disloyalty among our leaders—they're consciously aware of the consequences. And revolt in the ranks is physically impossible. We're safe, you see, even from ourselves."

Once again there was a slight trace of emotion in the weary voice. "No doubt you also gather, Durrul, who is the real ruler of Vinin. There are a hundred thousand of us, more or less, scattered throughout the Confederacy. All right—tell me what I need to know. If your Plan succeeds I'll deputize you for Agron when we annex it."

Suddenly Durrul saw the answer. His heart leaped with joy and it was difficult to keep the feeling out of his voice when he said, "You have been talking to me in my own tongue." Carefully he inched toward the desk. "And understanding me."

"Entirely beside the point."

"Not entirely. You hear what I say—which means that you must wear a disk too."

Durrul sprang across the desk. At the same time the Chief raised his weapon and fired. Flame seared Durrul's cheek. A red mist welled before him and he reeled back against the control panel as the Chief fired again. The second explosion was so close it seemed to be within his own mind.

The Chief's hand clawed at Durrul's tunic, ripping the disk away from him. Recoiling in anticipation of the dread shock wave, Durrul hurled himself at the Chief.

But instead of the screaming terror he felt nothing. An inexplicable force seemed to close in on him. His head spun dizzily but his mind still functioned. He smashed his fist into the face of the Chief and the body sagged to the floor.

Dirrul stood bewildered, looking at his hand. A mass of flesh-like material, torn from the Chief's face, clung to his knuckles. Dirrul bent over the man and touched his skin. It crumbled under pressure and the lifelike purple coloring ran. Dirrul peeled the putty away until he could make out the shape of the pale wrinkled very aged face beneath.

Sickened he moved away—for he had seen the ruler of Vinin.

IX

Dirrul backed into the desk, knocking a fragile statuette to the floor. When it lay shattered at his feet he understood why he could still plan and reason, even though the disk was gone. The Chief's shot, fired so close to his head, had deafened him either temporarily or permanently.

Dirrul ran to the control panel and twisted dials frantically, pulling every lever he could find. He had no idea what he was doing and it didn't matter so long as something happened. If he could decontrol even half the disks on Vinin it would create enough confusion to cover his own escape.

Twenty-five days later the Space-dragon shot up from the space-field which was hidden among the stony Vininese mountain ravines. As it cut through the stratosphere Dirrul's bonds were released. He felt exhausted and empty. His last memory was of talking to Hurd on the mountain trail. Beyond that was a blank. He looked up at Glenna, as beautiful as ever but somehow more mature.

"You're all right now, Eddie?" she asked in a loud voice that betrayed her deafness.

"I think so. Where are you taking me?"

She touched her ears, still crudely bandaged. "You must say everything very slowly, Eddie. I haven't yet learned to read lips as well as Hurd does."

"Where are we going?"

"Back to Agron."

"We have no right, Glenna—we're traitors!"

"We have a duty to tell them the truth. What they do with us doesn't matter."

He shook his head weakly, still lost in his stupor. "Tell me what happened, Glenna—I can't remember anything."

"You got out of the government building and stole a Space-dragon. Then you came looking for us. Just after you met Hurd your hearing began to come back and of course you lost control of yourself. Hurd wanted to break your eardrums but I wouldn't let him.

"Since we had a space-ship at last we could get away from Vinin and I knew you'd be all right when we did. But it took us a month to steal enough fuel. Something you did in the government building paralyzed a lot of the leaders for a while but by the time we got around to looking for fuel the others had restored order again."

The door of the control room slid open and Hurd dropped down on the bunk beside Dirrul. "Feeling better?" he asked anxiously.

"I guess so. The whole picture's beginning to come back."

Hurd sighed with relief and his face relaxed.

Dirrul asked slowly, "How did you get away from them, Hurd?"

"I lost my hearing in the beating Sorgel gave me on Agron."

"*Sorgel!*" Dirrul repeated unbelievably. It was the last illusion to go and for that reason the most painful. "Then it wasn't the Agronian police—"

"Of course it was Sorgel," Glenna said quietly. "He had to get rid of us because we wouldn't go along with him on the idea of a Vininese invasion. I tried so hard to tell you, Eddie, but I couldn't because of the drugs they gave us."

"The Vininese never knew I was deaf," Hurd went on. "It's easy enough to escape from a work camp when you can think for yourself. The Vininese resistance found me in the hills and I've been working with them ever since. A pitiful band of the deaf, fighting insurmountable odds to win back the human dignity of half the galaxy! But they won't turn tail and run and their numbers grow every time they raid a work camp."

"Were you with the men who kidnapped Glenna?"

"We were all out that night, trying to keep watch on the camps near the capital. We didn't know which one Glenna was in but I was sure the Vininese would try to reach her after they got your teleray message. We counted on the Vininese leading us to her and we knew we had to kidnap her first if we were to keep them from learning about the Plan on Agron.

"Unfortunately I wasn't with the group that picked you up, Eddie. They thought they had taken a Vininese leader and it seemed such a suitable punishment to take your disk away and let you hear the sound for a while. Later—after you'd escaped—when the others described your Air-Command uniform I took a chance and sent my note."

He helped Dirrul to his feet. "You'll have to take over from here on in, Eddie. You said you knew how to pilot this thing. I figured out a take-off but that's as far as I can go."

"Sorgel's pilot showed me once," he said. "What I don't remember I'll improvise. He said a Space-dragon could make the run in thirty days. This baby's got to do it in less than twenty-five if we're going to beat the Vininese fleet to Agron."

"You didn't tell them the Plan, did you, Eddie?"

"No."

"The Vininese won't land without instructions."

"Sorgel may get up enough courage to send a teleray code. We can't take any chances either."

Dirrul drove himself without rest. He cut every corner he knew, used every trick of navigational skill he had ever learned. Nonetheless it was twenty-eight days before the little ship hung in the air over the Agronian capital.

His heart sank. On the space-field, in neat ranks, the Vininese space-fleet was drawn up in proud review. The planet had fallen! Dirrul made his decision instinctively.

The Space-dragon wheeled and swept low over the field, its vicious guns blazing. The yellow clouds of destruction swept up toward the sky—the little ship was caught in the blazing flame. The interplanetary freight sheds loomed ahead. And the world exploded, falling apart into a soothing painless silence.

Dirrul opened his eyes and looked at the neutral blue of a hospital ceiling. Gradually he became conscious of Dr. Kramer, seated by the bed.

"Dr. Kramer!" Dirrul whispered. "Then everything's all right."

"If by everything you mean your companions, yes. There's even a chance we can restore the girl's hearing."

"And the Vininese?"

"Defeated."

"Dr. Kramer, we've got to destroy the Confederacy! I saw their transmitters—I know how their system works."

"Hush, Edward—I promised not to excite you. We know about it."

"Then how could you have been foolish enough to let them land?"

"It seemed a pity not to give a few of their people another chance. It's working out quite nicely too."

"I don't follow you, Dr. Kramer."

"Long ago we became interested when tourists told us about the curious block-buildings on Vinin. Our physics boys worked out an ingenious device for analyzing their atmosphere. It was a little machine concealed in the lining of an ordinary air-freight crate, as I recall.

"A machine is quite objective, Edward—and Customs men don't stamp freight crates with the negative adaptors. When we learned that a Vininese fleet was going to land here we simply issued insulating helmets to all our people and let them come. As soon as we destroyed their portable transmitters the Vininese army proved quite adaptable to a new environment."

"Then—I did nothing to help when I destroyed their fleet?"

"Unfortunately you wounded two of our mechanics."

"I'm a traitor, Dr. Kramer. Even when I try I can't redeem myself!"

"Only on Vinin can you betray an external absolute, Edward. To an Agronian all objective concepts are relative to the subjective interpretations made by each individual. You can only be a

traitor to yourself."

"The words are pleasant to say to a sick man but the fact remains—I would have betrayed Agron."

"But you didn't. Why not?"

"When I saw what their efficiency really meant—"

"You changed your mind before you knew about the transmitters?"

"Yes."

"Then you're libeling yourself. Don't trap yourself in another self-delusion, Edward. All that's happened is that you've grown up."

Dirrul said slowly, feeling for words that would express the idea as he felt it, "When I was in the center of the galaxy, looking out on space, I almost grasped a new concept but I lost it when the Agronian patrol attacked me. It's coming back.

"Time and space seem to be one and the same. Neither exists as an objective reality. There is no past and no future—all of it occurs eternally in the instant of my own being. I am everything and nothing—infinity and a speck lost in space."

"Thus you discover the Rational Potential," Dr. Kramer smiled. "I think you're ready for the space-pilot promotional, Edward." After a pause Dr. Kramer inquired, "Did you see the Chief of Vinin, Edward?"

"Then you know about that too?"

"I've guessed—it seems likely."

"I scraped off the putty and the face color. Beneath it he was an Earthman. A hundred thousand of them rule the Confederacy."

"All time and space, forever occurring for each of us in the instant of now! Yes, he would be an Earthman, Edward—quite logically. Both good and evil begin with the same source. Both have the same Rational Potential. The act of being has always been the same struggle of constant forces, between the absolute and the relative. The time never changes nor the event but merely the passing illusion of place."

Shaking his head the chubby professor departed. Dirrul closed his eyes, at peace with himself.

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