

# Astounding SCIENCE FICTION

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AST-1B

# PRIVATE ENTERPRISE

BY EDWIN JAMES

*The problem of an intelligence agent among an inhuman race is tough; he can't pass for the aliens. But what bothered him was why the alien should be trusted so fully by the human Intelligence Service . . .*

Illustrated by Miller

The knocking began at exactly 17:53 Earth time, 27:36 Rigel V. Bill Stewart noted it, since he was in the act of setting his wrist watch which compared Earth hour, day, month, and year with that of Rigel V.

The taps on the door began in a commonplace way but quickly became peremptory. Stewart felt a shiver of apprehension as he walked toward the viewer. It had come at last.

He flipped the switch. The figures and faces of the three Rigelians which sprang into view were almost human. They were not in uniform, and the expressions were, pleasant by Earth standards. Earth standards, however, did not hold true on Rigel V.

The thought triggered a memory

cell and a fragment of training flooded into his mind. The expressions were—official. Not police. Government investigators. Secret, probably.

The hammering on the door continued. Stewart clicked off the viewer and walked quickly to the communicator. Unhurriedly, without wasted motions, he turned it on, reached behind the set and twisted another switch.

The screen blurred, became shot with crooked shapes, and cleared into recognizable images. The image of a Rigelian appeared on the screen.

"Z," Stewart said. "Plan H-30."

The native nodded. A loud crash came from the door as if a body had been hurled against it. Stewart

switched off the -communicator, reached behind the set and pulled, sharply.

His hand came away holding a small box from which trailed several short wires. Stewart walked swiftly to the kitchen. He pressed a button on the box and tossed it into the incinerator chute.

The crashes against the door threatened momentarily to break through. Stewart went to it quietly and slid back the bolt. He stepped back in surprise as the door banged open and a Rigelian blundered into the room. The other two followed quickly.

"Yes?" Stewart said in astonishment.

The Rigelians faced him uncertainly. Then one of them regained his composure and stepped forward.

"William Stewart?" he asked.

"Yes?" Stewart said, his voice still holding a question.

The leader flashed an identification card. They were secret investigators, all right.

"Your passport," the leader said crisply.

Stewart fished it out of his wallet. The investigator glanced at it.

"Native planet: Sol III. Purpose on Rigel V: trade," he read aloud.

He snapped it closed and slipped it into a small leather case. Stewart was about to protest and thought better of it. The other two investigators immediately began to search the apartment.

"What is the meaning of this?" Stewart asked.

"We will ask the questions," the leader said. "You are in the export business?"

"Yes," Stewart said.

"To what places do you export?"

"To the Nine System Trade Alliance," Stewart said.

"Specifically?"

"Sol III."

The investigator nodded slowly and then snapped out a question.

"How much did you export last year?"

"The legal maximum," Stewart replied quickly, and added dryly, "which wasn't much."

The Rigelian's eyelid, a grayish film, slid part way over his eye.

"Do you mean to imply by that remark a criticism of the government?"

"Of course not," Stewart said, and cursed himself silently.

"It will be placed in the record, nevertheless."

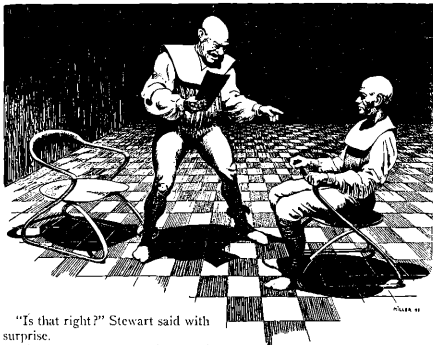
The searcher who had been roaming around the apartment tapping the walls, the floors, looking behind ornaments, pictures, cushions, came back and shrugged.

"There isn't a thing here," he growled.

The other was investigating the communicator now. Stewart watched him out of the corner of his eye. The native looked up.

"This thing is wired for a scrambler. There's space for one, but there's none here."

The leader turned to Stewart.



"Is that right?" Stewart said with surprise.

"Where is it?" the leader asked coldly.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"The scrambler," he said impatiently, "what did you do with it?"

"This is foolish," Stewart said angrily. "I don't have a scrambler. I've never had one. If the communicator is wired for one, I never knew it. It must be an accident."

He started as a knock came at the door. The leader opened it, and another Rigelian came in, carrying a pail filled with water.

"This dropped into the incinerator," he said.

The leader reached into the pail and pulled out a blob of metal.

"It was molten when it got to me," the newcomer said.

The leader eyed Stewart for a moment and then dropped the featureless lump of metal back into the water.

"It might have come from anywhere," Stewart shrugged.

The leader was silent for a moment.

"What calls have you made in the last hour?" he asked finally.

Stewart thought for a moment.

"None," he said, and a subtle change of expression on the Rigelian's face warned him. "Except," he added quickly, "I tried to call my office a few minutes ago but there

was some kind of interference."

The leader sighed.

"Very smart, Stewart."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Stewart said stiffly.

The leader sighed again.

"Come along," he said.

The four of them grouped around Stewart.

"Where?" he asked in alarm.

"We'll tell you when we get there," the leader said wearily.

"I demand that the Sol III consular office be notified," Stewart said indignantly.

"You are not in a position to demand anything," the leader said.

They urged him toward the door.

"I object to this infringement of my rights as defined under your Agreement and by treaty between Sol III and Rigel V," Stewart said.

"Your objection is noted."

Stewart's mind raced. They didn't have anything against him but suspicions, he knew. No proof that would stand up in a court. But he could be made to talk. There were ways. And a few words would be enough to ruin everything.

He was suddenly conscious of a lump in his throat. It was not emotion. One odd word would shatter it and an almost instantaneous poison would flood his system. It might come to that.

It was up to Calr Mtar. But why should Calr betray his people, his planet?

Stewart suspected, as he had suspected all along, that Calr was play-

ing along to feather his own nest, that when the time came he would slyly betray the plan and retire, incredibly wealthy. Calr didn't have to worry. His tracks were well covered.

Stewart shrugged.

"This is all a big mistake," he said. "You can't hold me for long."

That was true enough, he thought wryly.

The room was not exactly in the classic tradition. It was fairly large and softly lit, but something in the color scheme or decorations seemed to plead for confession and repentance.

They were clever. They had searched him, X-rayed him, and found nothing, it is true. But they were clever. Stewart steeled himself against the soft-voiced questions:

"With what company are you connected in your export business?" asked the investigator who had taken charge at his apartment.

"None," Stewart said in a flat, dead voice. "I am independent."

"No agreements of any kind with any other businesses?"

"No," Stewart said.

"How many persons do you employ?"

"Twenty-eight," Stewart said. "All Rigelians."

"How much was your net for the last year?"

"Fifteen thousand credits."

The questions droned on and on,

investigating the structure of his business, his reasons for coming to Rigel V, his reasons for staying. His living expenses, his bank account, what were his future plans? Was he planning on leaving soon?

Stewart sat up a little straighter.

"I object to the whole nature of this inquisition and its apparent object—to force me to leave Rigel V. Everything about this is contrary to all the laws of the galaxy and Rigel V. I shall make a public complaint as soon as I am freed from this illegal imprisonment."

The investigator shrugged.

"That is your privilege. What associates do you have in your business?"

"None," Stewart said sullenly.

"What interests do you have in other businesses?"

"None," Stewart said.

"None?" the investigator echoed in astonishment.

"A few shares of stock," Stewart shrugged. He named them; they were in minor Rigel enterprises.

"Have you ever speculated on the stock market?"

"Yes," Stewart said.

The investigator became alert. Stewart smiled inwardly.

"When?"

Stewart gave him the dates.

"Stocks?" the investigator asked.

Stewart named them.

"What was the result?"

"I lost about five thousand credits," Stewart said dryly.

The investigator looked disap-

pointed. He probed deeper into Stewart's stock market escapade and looked even more disappointed. He questioned him about his taxes, his tariff payments, his export license, and the filing of government information blanks.

"What do you export?" he asked.

"Luxury items," Stewart said.

"Unrestricted finished machinery of light weight and exclusive design, gems."

"And what do you import?"

"A few luxury items on order," Stewart said. "Chiefly for the Sol III colony."

"Write down a list of your friends and acquaintances on Rigel V," the investigator said and handed him a pencil and a piece of paper.

Stewart hesitated for a moment and then looked up.

"This is uncalled for—" he began.

"I know," the investigator said.

"You object. Go ahead."

Stewart began to jot down names.

"Natives of Rigel V as well," the investigator said.

In a few moments Stewart was finished. The investigator scanned the list.

He queried him about a Rigelian of great wealth and power who was not included. Truthfully, Stewart denied knowing him. The next question was about Calr Mtar. In the same tone Stewart denied any acquaintance. The investigator went on down what must have been a list of Rigel V's richest men and ended baffled.

"Who have you used as an agent for your trickery?" he blurted out.

Stewart looked up in surprise.

"I don't know what you mean," he said.

The investigator recovered himself quickly.

"You realize, of course," he said, in a quiet tone that did not conceal the subtle menace of his voice, "that we can force this information from you."

Stewart jumped up angrily.

"You wouldn't dare try anything like that. It would be an offense against the dignity of Sol III and might well lead to war."

"Sit down," the investigator said firmly. "Who would ever know? And who, knowing, would ever dare tell? And, if you are as innocent as you keep protesting," he added slyly, "you would have had no idea we would be calling on you."

Stewart sat down. They had him there. He couldn't say he had left a warning to suspect Rigel V's secret investigators if he were missing.

"Of course not," Stewart said with irritation.

"Have you ever done any of your business through an intermediary?" the investigator went on.

"No," Stewart said wearily.

"Has anyone ever bought any stocks for you under their name?"

No. No. Stewart said the word again and again until it became meaningless, an improbable sound he had to force his lips to shape.

They kept pounding away at him.

The chief investigator would retire for a moment and another would take his place with the same questions, the same insinuations. Relentlessly they went over the same ground again and again.

They wanted the exact details of his business; how many times had he repeated the figures?

Did he have any interests in other businesses? What about the stock market? Again and again. Denial after denial. No. No.

Where did you get the money to enter business?

"Eh?" Stewart said, half-drawing himself out of his stupor.

"Where did you get the money to enter business?"

It was something new; they had got around to that.

"From my grandmother," Stewart said.

"Grandmother?"

"She left me one hundred and fifteen thousand credits when she died."

They absorbed that. They would check on it. Let them check. The questions droned on and on, a spiteful buzzing through which Stewart slipped farther and farther away.

Poor grandmother. If she had known what use would be made of her treasured inheritance. A comfortable sum, she always said, a comfortable sum.

"A comfortable sum indeed," the chief said, the day after he was graduated from the School—the

school that had no name and no official recognition.

The chief sat behind the big polished desk in the luxuriously furnished room without windows. He placed his fingertips together in that characteristic way of his.

"That is one of the reasons you have been chosen for this job," the chief went on. "We could supply you with a documented inheritance, of course, but we prefer it this way. The Rigelians are a suspicious, clever race, as you know."

Stewart nodded. He had spent eighteen exhausting months studying Rigelian psychology, history, economics, sociology, philosophy—the list was almost endless. He knew Rigel V as he had never known Earth.

"It is not enough to be successful at a job in this service," the chief said slowly. "One must be successful—and unsuspected."

Stewart cleared his throat.

"A difficult task," he said.

The chief eyed him keenly.

"Of course," he said. "That's why our requirements are so exacting. It's more difficult than being a spy. A spy can operate undercover, but you must act in the open."

"What is my business to be?" Stewart asked.

The chief inspected his file.

"The export business. Rigel V has just lifted its ban on exports, although they are still limited to a small figure. Imports are restricted to practically nothing."

"What kind of businessman am I to be?" Stewart asked.

The chief smiled.

"That's the kind of question I like to hear. A smart operator could probably make thirty thousand. You could clear forty-five thousand or more. But, through various small errors of judgment, you will restrict yourself to twenty thousand or less."

Stewart nodded. That much was obvious. The chief went on to discuss the details of the business arrangements, the places to which he should export, what his exports should be.

"The crux of this business front is that everything must be open and aboveboard," the chief summed up. "There must be no connection between this and your other activities."

"Your character must be that of an eager young businessman, slowly building a modest fortune, not too bright, not overly interested in anything else. Outside of business you will be a conspicuous pleasure seeker, sociable, gregarious. You will have no time, apparently, for any extra activity."

The character would not be too hard to assume, Stewart thought. With the training he had absorbed in the last three years it would be simple to run an export business with a small segment of his mind. The problem would be to seem completely preoccupied.

"Your living expenses must come



out of your income," the chief said. "But all these things you know. Your training for this kind of work has been as adequate as we could make it."

"I feel—qualified," Stewart said.

The chief nodded.

"Your qualifications are good. That is why you have been chosen for the most difficult job on our agenda."

Stewart looked up.

"That's right," the chief said. "Rigel V is strategically located and violently isolationist. Without it, the Alliance can spread no farther, and the Alliance is in the critical stage of its development. It must continue expanding or crumble."

"And without the Alliance," Stewart said slowly, "the Galaxy would soon be back in the old imperialistic, isolationist rut, a group of jealous blocs, easy prey to the first wave of war hysteria."

"The Alliance is a great ideal," the chief said, his eyes fixed unseeingly in a corner of the room. "It must not be allowed to die."

"My goal then," said Stewart, "is to see that Rigel V joins the Alliance."

The chief's eyes drifted back to Stewart's face. He relaxed.

"Exactly. You must use every means at your disposal to effect that end."

"How will I receive my initial resources?" Stewart asked.

"You will make a bid of one thousand credits for the fuel dross of

each ship that brings you freight. Within that dross will be a substantial amount of refined uranium. You will pass that on to your native contact."

"And who will that be?"

"We'll get to that in a minute," the chief said. He cleared his throat. "If caught, you will be the innocent, injured party as long as possible."

"And that will be—" Stewart prompted softly.

"Until they begin to use duress, of one sort or another. And then—"

Stewart swallowed, but the lump remained in his throat. It would always be there, but now it was newly inserted and he was achingly aware of it.

The chief's voice was distant.

"And, if you are caught, you can expect no help from Earth or this organization. The government will have to deny you. You realize that, of course."

Stewart nodded. When he stepped off the spaceship onto the alien soil of Rigel V he would be all alone. His fate, success, or failure would be up to him.

"I have no doubt of your ability," the chief said warmly. "If there had been even a shadow, you would not have been chosen for this job. But," he added dryly, "it is well to be aware of all eventualities."

"I was made aware of them when I entered the School," Stewart said.

The chief's voice was once more businesslike.

"When you arrive on Rigel V,

you will be followed until it is certain that you are not being shadowed. At that time a Rigelian will approach you, call you by name, and say: 'Welcome to the fertile soil of Rigel V'—in Rigelian, of course. You will reply: 'Fertility must be properly cultivated.'

"And that Rigelian will be?"

"Calr Mtar, known in our records by the code name of 'Carl.' You will trust him implicitly, but yours will be the guiding hand. You will organize a communication system and give detailed instructions on all important activities."

"But a Rigelian!" Stewart protested. "Why should he—?"

"I can't tell you that. It might influence your actions adversely. You must act as if he were an extension of yourself."

"But," Stewart went on, "is he safe?"

"Safe?" the chief repeated, and a smile curled his lips. "Absolutely."

So Calr was safe, Stewart thought dully. The chief had confidence in him. And Stewart had never known the chief to be wrong.

The question returned as it had returned and returned before. Why should Calr betray his own planet—if betrayal it was? How safe was he? A muscle twitched in Stewart's jaw. The next hour or so would tell.

"Why do you always buy the fuel dross of the ships that bring in your freight?"

*So they didn't know everything,* Stewart thought.

"I make a few credits on the transaction," he said.

"There is some other reason," the inquisitor shouted. "What is it? Tell me?"

Stewart looked at him, a smile in the corners of his lips. Then a door to the room opened, and the smile faded. A gross, incredibly obese figure of a Rigelian waddled into the room, made his way to a chair, and eased his huge bulk into it with a sigh.

The newcomer's expression was pleasant, and the tone of his voice was gentle. But the original investigator to whom he turned his face quivered with fear.

"I should have known better than to leave the conduct of important business to fools," the fat Rigelian rumbled.

The other trembled. Stewart watched the scene with interest. The newcomer, despite his appearance, would be dangerous. He was feared; he must be powerful.

"Leave us alone," the fat one said.

When the door closed behind the other investigators, he turned to Stewart. He sighed heavily and smiled.

"Now, Mr. Stewart," he said heavily, "let us talk."

"What about?" Stewart said warily. "If you have some influence around here, I would like to register a protest against this unwarranted invasion of my rights, this perse—"

"Please, Mr. Stewart," the huge Rigelian interrupted, raising a plump palm. "Let us dispense with pretenses. I said 'let us talk.' I meant let us talk frankly. There is no one to hear us. What is said is just between us. I shall be frank with you; I hope I shall convince you that it is worth while to be frank with me."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Stewart said stiffly. "I have nothing to conceal."

The fat one chuckled.

"Good," he said. "Good. If you will not interrupt me now with outraged protests, I would like to assume some conditions. Everything perfectly hypothetical, you understand."

Stewart shrugged. The Rigelian's voice was soft and confidential.

"Let us suppose that Earthmen are not popular on Rigel V—at least with a considerable, informed minority. This lack of popularity extends to all members of the Nine System Trade Alliance."

"An unreasonable attitude," Stewart said.

"Not if you know the background," the other said, his eyes narrowing. "The Alliance is a tyrannical group, bent on subjecting the Galaxy to its rule, only its weapons are financial instead of physical. Rigel V stands in the way of that domination; it must fight back or be crushed."

The fat one was dangerous. That

soft, lulling voice could easily lure him into a confession.

"I had understood," Stewart said coldly, "that the Alliance was run democratically, its only purpose peaceful trade."

"Ah, yes," the other said. "But what of those who do not choose to trade. They are invaded as ruthlessly as if by force of arms."

"Invaded!"

"As you should know," the Rigelian laughed jovially, his rolls of fat bouncing in the chair.

"Is this still hypothetical?" Stewart asked coldly.

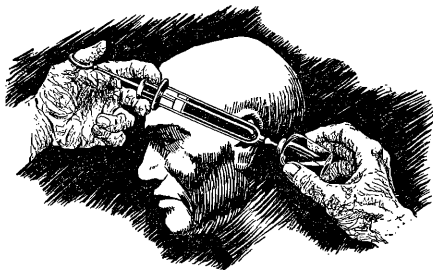
"Of course," the other chuckled. "Let us assume further that on a certain member planet of the Alliance, known hypothetically as Sol III, there is a secret school which has made an exact science of the haphazard art of economics and is engaged in teaching that science to a select group of students."

The fat one stopped and eyed Stewart pleasantly, expectantly.

"I'm listening," Stewart said.

"These students," the inquisitor went on, "are then sent out to recalcitrant planets, ostensibly as independent businessmen, to secure positions of great economic influence which they then use to procure political power. They bring pressure to bear"—the fat one's voice became sinister—"they pave their way with money, they corrupt, they make traitors of half a race."

The Rigelian paused and then



added slowly, "It is not a pretty thing."

"Nor is the sight, I suppose," Stewart said softly, "of a group of men willfully or unwittingly pushing the Galaxy into a dark age of anarchy."

The fat one eyed him keenly and chuckled. "A state of anarchy is when strong men and strong planets come to power."

"Power for good or evil?" Stewart asked.

"Either," said the inquisitor, "depending on how one looks at it. But the fact remains that Rigel V is determined not to join the Alliance. At the moment it stands between the Alliance and the rest of the inhabited Galaxy—a very profitable position, which it would lose if it became a

tenth member of the Alliance."

Stewart noticed that the discussion had drifted from the hypothetical.

"But a position which would amount to nothing if the Alliance were to crumble."

"That," the fat Rigelian said shrewdly, "is the Alliance's problem."

He chuckled and the chuckle grew into a roar of laughter. When the noise had subsided, Stewart cleared his throat.

"A problem which Rigel V must soon assume. Without Rigel V the Alliance is stifled. Without the Alliance the Galaxy degenerates to feudal warfare."

Like a snake the fat one struck.

"Then you admit the truth of all

these things. You are an agent of the Alliance, bent on perverting Rigel V to your ends."

Stewart eyed him coldly.

"I admit nothing. The discussion was, I believe, hypothetical."

The Rigelian sighed and sat back.

"You make things very difficult, Stewart. You force me to courses I would not choose of my own free will. We have, you know, a truth serum—"

Stewart looked up. Did the Rigelian read anything in his eyes?

"The serum," the fat one said softly, "is not gentle in its action. It often leaves the faculties of the user sadly impaired, I'm afraid. But—"

He shrugged.

"You wouldn't dare," Stewart whispered. "A private citizen of another planet! You have no proof. It might mean war—"

"We are reasonably certain," the fat one said. "We can afford to gamble."

*This was the end, Stewart thought. Whatever Calr might do would be too late. If Calr was doing anything. Calr . . . Calr—*

"How far have you got?" the Rigelian's voice came thinly, as if from a distance. "How close—?"

Calr—

Stewart had walked a long way through the winding streets of Prayl, capital city of Rigel V, before Calr approached him. Calr had looked like any other Rigelian—better

dressed than most, perhaps. He was already rich, but he carried his wealth and position without ostentation.

He had approached straightforwardly, without expression, given the key phrase, and accepted the return. With an almost imperceptible nod of his head he had motioned Stewart to follow and led a tortuous way through side streets and alleys until they were alone in a small, soundproof cellar room.

Calr turned to him.

"I am yours to command," he said simply.

Stewart was blunt. "Why?" he asked.

Calr shrugged.

"That is not important. It is sufficient that we are both working for Sol III of the Alliance and the future of the Galaxy."

Stewart stared for a long moment into the unrevealing eyes of the Rigelian, but he was the first to look away.

"All right," he said, but his misgivings remained.

He made arrangements. From that moment he saw Calr no more than twice in the flesh. But in everything he did the thought of Calr was in the front of his mind, a wonder, a doubt, a fear.

When they plotted by scrambled communicator, Stewart wondered if he were being betrayed. When a raid on the market was about to go through, the thought struck Stew-

art that the whole organization could be wrecked if Calr were a little too greedy.

But months went by, and Calr was faithful in every detail. Gradually Stewart lost his fears and put more trust in his native front.

For the first year Stewart was relatively quiet, building up his export business in a modest way, plotting the course of Rigel V's economic pattern, testing his conclusions through small amounts placed on the stock market by Calr, establishing, memorizing, and destroying plans, building a reputation, doing the hundred and one things that had to be done to set up an organization that was almost self-sufficient—and conceal all evidence of it.

The second year he began operations.

A large working capital had been built up through black-market sales of several shipments of refined uranium, all handled through the subterranean members of the organization. The economic pattern was established. Several trial runs had come off smoothly.

The first killing was made normally enough. Any reasonably astute market operator could have predicted that the market was due for a sudden rise. Several others did. Calr cleared ten million credits.

A few days later, reaction set in, as it was bound to. Calr made about fifteen million on the drop. Again he had company.

Before ten days had passed, Calr bought up the entire impoverished

stock of a large company which manufactured power equipment. The next day the World Assembly banned imports of such equipment, and Calr sold out for one hundred million credits profit.

In four months Calr was worth five hundred million credits, in six months, a billion. At that point he began to subdivide. He could get no bigger without arousing suspicion. As it was, all Rigel V hailed him as a new financial genius.

Gradually Calr built up the fortunes of a dozen easily influenced Rigelians. Twice he had to break what he had created before the others became fully impressed that it was better not to have a mind of one's own, that those who played along with Calr prospered, that those who didn't were crushed.

Within a year Calr could command resources of five billion credits. Then came the final step of the first stage. When the news of the strained relations between the Alliance and Rigel V was made public, the group around Calr had already sold short. Then they bought, to the limit of their resources. The news of the signing of new treaties found them in subtle control of one-third of the planet.

It has been said that a well-organized minority can control any election. The corollary to that maxim is that a powerful, well-organized economic minority can control a nation, a planet, or a planetary system.

Calr's minority controlled transportation, heavy industry, and, most

important, communications. A sly campaign of re-education was begun in the newspapers and televiewers. A softer attitude toward the Alliance, a longer view of the future of the Galaxy, admiration for the manufactures, scientific advances, art of the Alliance planets.

Gradually public opinion swayed, bent, broke. A few legislators, true to the principles of their election, listened to the voices of their constituents and urged consideration of the Alliance proposals. Many more were bought and paid for out of slush funds. The second half of the program was approaching fruition.

Behind everything was Bill Stewart. His code word was the signal for a specific plan of action to be initiated; he planned the coups, the market raids, the propaganda campaigns, the legislative programs to be pushed.

Within three years of his landing on Rigel V he could see success within his grasp, his job almost accomplished. The control of the planet's economic life was his. And through that control he held public opinion and a near majority of legislative power. Only a small core of die-hard isolationists remained.

They could never be expected to change. They were hard, ruthless, power hungry—and the paths of their ambition lay in the blocking of the Alliance. They would be by-passed, cast aside, forgotten.

The moment was almost at hand. The Alliance would not die.

Then— *The knocking began at ex-*

*actly 17:53 Earth time, 27:36 Rigel V—*

"One last chance, Mr. Stewart," the fat Rigelian said. "Confess everything or be prepared for the consequences."

One last chance, Stewart thought. Only there was no chance. To be so close to victory and have everything collapse like a house of cards!

The fat one's eyes bored deep into Stewart's half-closed lids. Stewart became conscious of the lump in his throat. He had been prepared for the consequences for a long time. Not that his death would solve anything, but it might hold up the exposure of the organization for a few hours or days. In itself it would be a final admission of guilt.

"Bring in the serum!" the fat inquisitor roared suddenly.

The door opened, and the harried, nervous inquisitor of an hour ago scurried in with a hypodermic held gingerly in his fingers.

It was late then, Stewart thought. A few moments left, and he would say the word that would shatter the lump in his throat and release the virulent poison. A few breaths left to draw, a few heartbeats, a few frantic thoughts. And then nothing.

*Oh, for a messenger from the king! Let the frantic courier ride his foam-flecked steed through the open door and thrust forward the message that said: Release this man—he has the king's pardon!*

"We are sorry to do this, Mr. Stewart," the fat one said, but his

eyes glittered as he poised the hypodermic above Stewart's arm. His voice came hollowly, booming as if from far away.

Stewart closed his eyes and waited for the first pin prick that would tell him there was no more hope. He waited, but there was nothing. He opened his eyes.

The messenger was there in the doorway. The fat Rigelian was staring at him, his neck twisted around, the hypodermic dangling forgotten in his fingers. The messenger was ordinary—a mere official, calm, bored.

"Let him go," he said.

The fat one protested. The words buzzed around Stewart's head, senseless bee-sounds. He could make nothing of them. They led him to the door, finally, apologizing, handing him his passport. He was out on the street, dazed, uncomprehending.

After a while his head cleared. He had been walking, aimlessly, through the streets of Prayl. Then he stopped, stood completely still, trying to figure it out. Only one thing came clearly to his mind—the one word which could solve the mystery: Calr.

For an hour he doubled back and forth, until he was certain he had shaken off any possible shadows. When he got to the rendezvous Calr was already waiting.

He was sitting at the rickety table in the small, bare, dark room.

He looked up, and his eyes were blank and unrevealing.

"How did you do it?" Stewart said steadily.

Calr's voice was calm, emotionless.

"Plan H-30. Remember?"

"Then—?" Stewart's voice faltered.

"The treaty has been signed. Rigel V is a member of the Alliance. After that, your release was a matter of only a few moments."

Stewart sank down in the other chair, suddenly, unutterably weary. Calr's voice continued.

"Your business is broken and has been bought up at a fraction of its value through a forced sale. You have no resources and by the laws of Rigel V cannot stay on this planet. The Earth consul will advance you passage money home."

Slowly Stewart got up. Home again. Earth. His job was done. Suddenly the thought struck him: what of Calr? He stared down at the Rigelian as if trying to pierce the veil of flesh that concealed the mystery.

"Why did you—?" he began hoarsely.

Calr smiled. At least it was a good imitation of a smile.

"Tell the engineers at the Electronic Institute, Stewart, that Model Rz 17-3 was a success."

It was a long time before Stewart could tear his eyes away.