

Galaxy

SCIENCE FICTION

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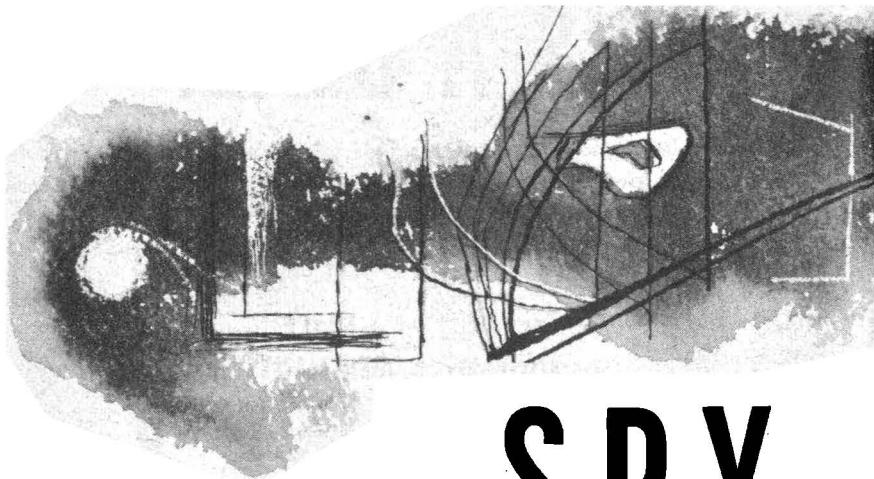
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SPY

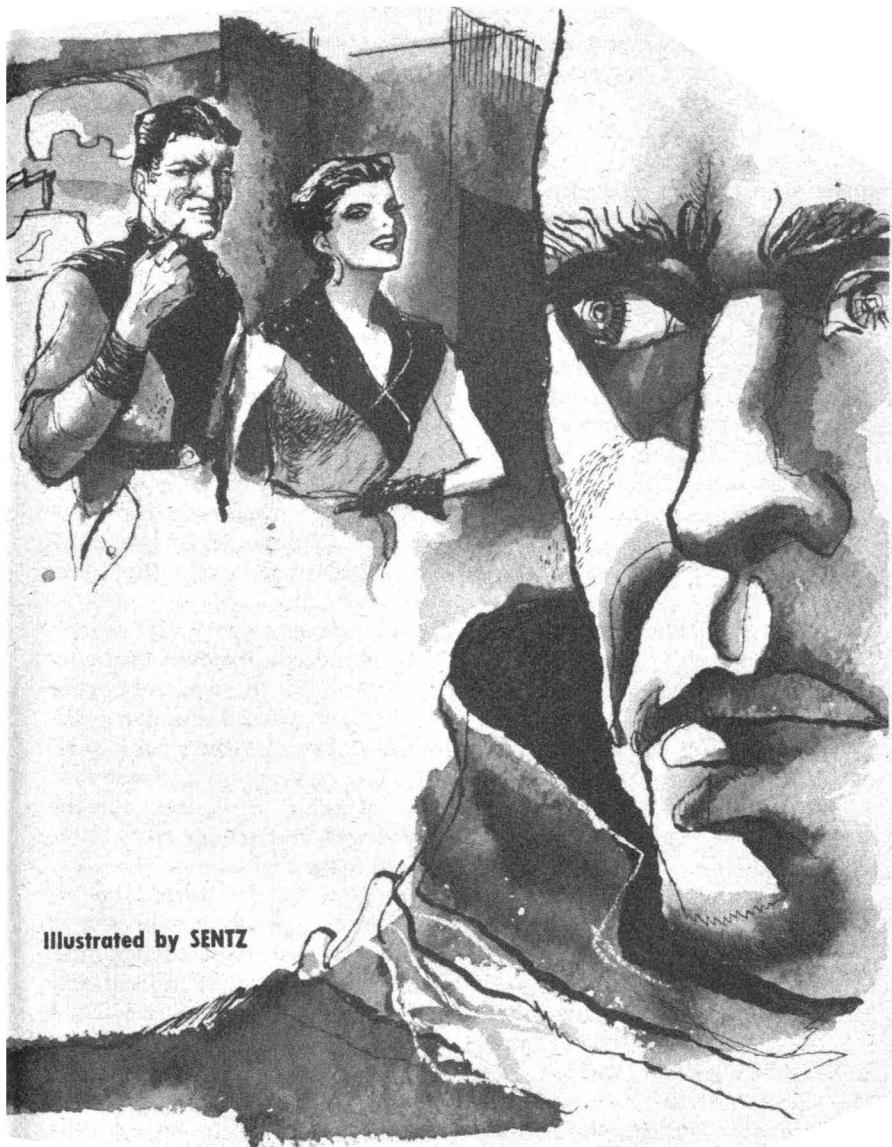
By J. T. McINTOSH

*Corvey lived, laughed, loved, killed and
died a thousand times . . . but which one of
all these lifetimes was actually his own?*

CORVEY fought it off until he had finished writing his story, read it through, put it down the chute, glanced through all the odds and ends which piled up every day on a survey reporter's desk and checked with the feature sub-editors to make sure there were no queries about his story. Only then

did he leave the *Star* building.

He held it off while he walked the three blocks to the Jewel Café. He would have preferred taking a taxi or even a bus, for his legs felt rubbery and his head ached with a quiet, subdued, monotonous throb that swelled with every jarring step and ebbed as he forced one shaky, uncertain



Illustrated by SENTZ

leg past the other. But buses and particularly taxis were dangerously soothing. It was safer, though less pleasant, to walk.

It was a constantly recurring question whether to frequent places where he was known and would arouse no real suspicion even if his behavior were strange, or places where he was unknown but might be remembered as a queer character if anything happened. On previous occasions, expecting something, he had been able to decide one way or the other was safer. Tonight he didn't feel he had the energy to cope with a new restaurant. He went to the Jewel automatically, hoping that he would go on acting automatically, behaving as he had on hundreds of other evenings.

He fought it off while he went into the café, found a dark corner well out of the way, smiled in his usual friendly but unsuggestive manner at Rosie, the prettiest waitress, and ordered ham and eggs.

THE Jewel was a pleasant refuge for people whose apartments were merely places to sleep and shave in the mornings. It was unpretentious, shabby without being dirty, and the food showed a reasonable balance between quality and expense. If one wanted no more than a cup of coffee, that was all right. If one

wanted seven courses, that was all right, too.

When he had his food in front of him, he was able at last to loosen the desperate grip he had been keeping on himself all day. Little by little he let go, the relief of being able to relax spreading delightfully through him in a warm, grateful flood.

It was ironic, almost irritating, to find that, when he did let go, nothing happened. He wouldn't have known if anything had, but it was possible to be almost sure of the negative. You didn't know you were dreaming when you were. You could always, however, satisfy yourself that you were not.

In places where he wasn't known, he could never quite let go. When things were unfamiliar anyway, it was all the more difficult to keep in touch with reality. The corresponding disadvantage of going to a place like the Jewel was that people were liable not to leave him alone.

He had barely started on his ham and eggs when a breath of familiar crushed-petal perfume, mingled with a whiff of light, dry pipe tobacco, announced Babs and Dave Andrews.

Without looking up he said, "No, none of these seats are taken."

"There he goes again," Babs exclaimed, "making out that we

smell." She folded herself violently around him from behind and kissed him moistly. Babs was one of those young wives who have a habit of making love to other men in their husband's company. She still startled Corvey occasionally. He was rather glad that he had never met Babs without Dave.

She dropped lightly in the chair on one side of him, while Dave settled himself more ponderously on the other side.

"You look tired, Ken," Dave observed.

"I am. Dead beat."

"But not off your feed, I see."

"Hell, I'm only tired, not ill."

"You've been tired a lot lately." Babs sounded concerned.

It was vexing how shrewd and observant people could be when you didn't want them to be shrewd and observant.

"It's nothing," Corvey said, shrugging. "You know the newspaper business—you have to be up a little earlier than the next fellow, work a little harder, be a little cleverer, find out a little more. It's not surprising that you finish the day tired."

"You should get your doctor to give you a check-up, all the same."

Ken Corvey shrugged as if it didn't matter.

Of course it mattered. Dave was right—he needed medical at-

tention. But he simply couldn't risk it. All he could do, when the subject came up, was to treat it casually and hope it would soon be dropped.

Babs was small, light, quick and restless. She always sat forward on the edge of her chair, as if on the point of leaping in the air like a frog. Dave was heavy, slow and clumsy, like an overfed dog. He looked older than Babs, which wasn't so. As nearly as they could reason, Babs had been born thirty-six minutes before him, although they hadn't met until twenty-two years later. When they did, it was immediately obvious—to them, at any rate—that they were made for each other. They were married within six weeks and, in the intervening seven years, had frequently congratulated each other on their perspicacity.

A NOTHER illusion was exploded when they stripped for swimming. Corvey had already had it exploded for him, but he noticed it forcibly once more the time he met them at the Rutledge Country Club.

He had driven out for a swim that he hoped would kill the dull headache and, though he looked squarely at the man who had been changing into swimming trunks in the next cubicle, he almost passed him without a

sign of recognition — for Dave, when dressed, appeared to be fat, flabby and out of condition. This man was burly and powerful, with a very handsome torso. Still, it was Dave, all right.

"Pretending not to notice me, huh?" Dave inquired, which was quite a good crack, since he weighed over 200 pounds.

And then, as they made their way to the pool, with Corvey still casting occasional incredulous glances at the you-too-can-have-a-body-like-mine character with him, Babs emerged from the women's dressing-rooms — and she was as big a surprise as Dave, in reverse. Babs, in clothes, seemed wonderful. Obviously, she should never put on beachwear. Her knees were too bony, her thighs too thin, her stomach too flat, the cage of her ribs too visible, her collar-bone positively scrawny. Her bathing suit left no figure fault unrevealed.

Dave showed himself still in love with her, by saying admiringly, "Isn't she gorgeous?" And believing it.

They swam for twenty minutes or so, which was enough for Corvey to lose his headache. Afterward, sprawled in the late afternoon sun, Dave and Babs asked him about his job, just making conversation.

"What is a survey reporter, anyway?" Babs asked.

"Survey reporting is a fairly new thing," he told them. "Remember the old polls, public opinion surveys, random samples and all the rest of it? I just do the same job without the expense of the survey."

"You mean you guess?"

"No, I get my results by a short-cut. The main difficulty in any random sample prediction or test was always the *random* part of it. If you wanted to know how a billion people were going to react, you couldn't be sure you did know, even if you tested a million. Your method of collecting the million might have been biased.

"But if you could be sure you really had a random group, your million would be quite enough. In fact, if there was any way of knowing that ten people were truly representative, they'd be enough. There was no way until recently—so, merely to cancel out bias, it was necessary to take vast samples. Hundreds, thousands, even tens of thousands."

"You say, 'until recently,'" Dave observed. "I should say forever and ever. How can you possibly be sure ten people are properly representative?"

"We can't, really," Corvey admitted. "I'm oversimplifying, of course. There was always what was known as a weighted sample. The statisticians limited the num-

ber of the sample by making it a cross-section. Doctor, lawyer, Indian chief. Following up this principle of weighing, I can generally get from a few small sets—in a series of tests—the same result I'd get from a huge random sample. It's a method of eliminating bias by mathematics and common sense."

"Bet you're often wrong," Babs objected.

"No more often than the past surveys were. I generally split up what I want to know into about ten elements, get ten answers, none of which is individually trustworthy, integrate them so that the variations cancel each other—"

"And guess," said Babs, in satisfaction. "I knew it would come to that in the end."

DAVE and Corvey grinned at each other—Corvey helplessly, Dave fondly. To Dave, everything Babs did was wonderful. If she made a remark, it was bound to be a good one because she made it. If anybody beat her at anything, the anybody must be pretty good.

Yet Dave, in things which didn't concern Babs, was very shrewd indeed.

"And then," he said, "in addition, there's your other job."

"Other job?" Corvey echoed.

"Your real job. We know you,

Ken. Think we don't know you're a spy?"

They were looking at him without hostility, merely amused that he should have thought they didn't know.

"Why, do I look like a spy?" Corvey asked reasonably, trying by sheer will power to keep his breathing steady and his pulse rate slow, trying to act as if it really were a fantastic idea.

"You wouldn't be much good as a spy if you did," Babs observed; then she and Dave burst out laughing. "Who's your beautiful accomplice?"

He didn't have a beautiful accomplice, but Sandra Reid was beautiful, all right. It would be nice to have her as an accomplice. She was that amazing phenomenon, an intelligent girl who acted like a tart, a tart who acted like a nice girl, a nice girl who looked like a particularly seductive movie star, all in one.

He looked down at her as she lay with her eyes closed, unaware of his presence. He would have liked, very much, to spend a long time studying Sandra Reid.

But there was a time and place for everything, except Sandra. There was no time, no place for Sandra and himself. Or, if there ever should be, this certainly wasn't it.

He mustn't have anything to do with Sandra.

As he was on the point of going away—really going away—she opened her eyes. And he missed something.

"... ill?" Dave asked.

Corvey searched his mind but failed to find the rest of the sentence. That rarely happened.

Dave was waiting. Corvey couldn't answer the question, couldn't refuse to answer it, couldn't ignore it and didn't see how he could ask for a repetition.

He checked rapidly. *Was this real?*

Of course it was real. And Dave was waiting.

"Sorry, Dave," said Corvey. "Just remembered something I should have done this afternoon and didn't. What were you saying?"

"I said, is that why you're reluctant to take a few days off, even when you're ill?"

That didn't help much. "Is what why?" Corvey had to ask.

"The fact that there are so few survey reporters, and nobody can finish another man's job."

"Oh, that," said Corvey, relieved. He didn't mind talking about his job. He was so glad the conversation he had missed had been on such a harmless subject that he said something com-

pletely unnecessary. "I told you a little about my job the other day, didn't I?"

"The other day?"

"At the Country Club."

Dave stared at him. "We haven't been at the Country Club for weeks."

"Oh, it must have been someone else," said Corvey easily, though he was sweating. The Country Club episode must have been a false memory. It had never happened. He might have known that from the way it collapsed and dissolved at the end—but he hadn't had time to examine it yet.

"You really are sick, Ken," Dave said, concerned.

Corvey shook his head. "Absent-mindedness is a sort of occupational disease among survey reporters," he said. "I'm working on a lot of tricky problems just now, too. And I'm tired—heavens, how tired I am."

"Leave Ken alone, Dave," said Babs sympathetically. "He's just sleepy. Come on, let's take him home and put him to bed."

Though Corvey protested, they did just that. Twice, before they left him, he checked desperately, sure that this couldn't really be happening. But it was.

Corvey's father had once told him, "Judge your friends by what they'll do for you, son." On that basis, Babs and Dave were

his best friends—and not merely on Earth.

Alone at last, safe, comfortable in bed, in the dark, he longed for sleep. But he had some thinking to do first.

Tonight had been the worst so far. If Dave and Babs had known anything about ritany, they'd have seen he was suffering from it and was therefore a non-Terrestrial.

Fortunately, no one outside the Jernam system—and that was ninety-seven light years away—knew much about ritany, which was a fever peculiar to Aram, the fifth planet. As far as Corvey knew, no one had ever had an attack outside Aram. When he had been sent to Earth, perhaps it had been assumed that, because it hadn't happened, it never would happen.

Corvey was a hospital case, yet he couldn't risk hospitalization. If he did, for a few hours or days the doctors would be puzzled—but eventually they would test for extra terrestrial diseases and diagnose ritany. True, that wouldn't be a hanging matter. If his Aramin origin were on record, it would be no offense at all to have ritany. But for Kenneth Corvey, survey reporter on the *Rutledge Star* with a manufactured history going back through 31 years to a counterfeited birth in New York, to turn out to be a

native of the planet Aram . . .

He would obviously be a spy. And they still shot spies, he believed. Spies had to be discouraged, somehow. There was no guarantee they would shoot him—much, much less that they would not.

There were no arrangements to get him home to Aram until his job would be over, successfully or unsuccessfully, in three weeks. Could he last three weeks?

He could go away somewhere and live quietly until the time came for him to leave Earth. By so doing, he would save his life, at the expense of the job he had been sent to do. Or he could stay where he was and probably fail in his job as well as lose his life. But as long as there was a chance of success, he had to stay.

WHAT were the chances? On the basis of this night's attack, no good. Spies always had to tread carefully in case some tiny, unsuspected difference betrayed them.

Corvey had another handicap to add to the crushing total. He was in the grip of a fever which weakened his limbs and thus diminished his control over them, which made his head ache continuously, causing him to shiver uncontrollably sometimes—and which gave him sporadic delusions.

It was a physical, not a mental illness. The hallucinations that accompanied it were not markedly psychotic. This made them all the more difficult to identify. They were not simply wish-fulfillments, or memories, or fears, or warnings, or guilt feelings, or any of the other things which formed the material of ordinary dreams.

Generally they were extrapolations of what was actually happening — there was nothing whatever to show that they were delusions. Corvey might easily have been at the Country Club with Dave and Babs. Only Dave's saying that Corvey was a spy was bizarre, like something in an anxiety dream. On the other hand, when Dave and Babs put him to bed, it was hard to believe it was really happening, was not part of some crazy scene his fevered mind was putting him through.

ONE of the worst things about ritany was that memories were memories, and it was difficult to judge whether a recollection was a memory of an event or of a ritanic delusion. When he mentioned the incident at the Country Club, Corvey had been aware of no risk. He hadn't checked mentally over the whole incident to make sure it had all happened. He had merely remembered talking to Dave and Babs

about his job at the Country Club.

What he did when he was in the middle of a delusion, he had no way of knowing. From other cases, back on Aram, he knew that a victim of ritany would often act normally, convincingly and for long periods, from sheer habit. On a world where ritany was familiar, of course, it was easily identified and cured. On Earth . . . ?

The cure was simply a month in bed. The hallucinations of ritany, not being psychosomatic in origin, were harmless and, provided the patient stayed flat on his back, the fever died, the delusions faded and, ultimately, nothing remained except memories of some very vivid dreams, neither pleasant nor unpleasant as a rule. Only psychotics had violently disturbing hallucinations.

However, Corvey couldn't go to bed. If he did, a doctor would visit him almost automatically. He'd then have to pretend to be normal, which would not only place him in danger of discovery, but would also prevent the fever from breaking.

He wasn't a weak character—interstellar spies could hardly be weak. But sometimes the danger, the fever, the difficulty of his job, the unattainability of the one thing he really wanted—to stay in bed and rest—piled up and became too much for him. At such

times he wanted, actually wanted, to be discovered. He wanted it to be over and done with.

II

IN the morning he felt terrible, but at least there was very little risk of further delusions. In the morning, his headache was at its worst, his fever only moderate. He could do a good morning's work before ritany took hold of him again.

Just before he left the office for lunch, Jim Neave, the feature editor and, to all intents and purposes, his boss, sent for him. Corvey was on the day shift, since much of his business was with people in their normal pursuits.

Neave was about fifty, a hearty, apparently superficial character. Corvey knew his boss's manner was merely the building in which he worked and had ceased to pay much attention to Neave's eccentricities. He knew that, when Neave praised anybody expansively, or seemed to delight in his own cleverness, or talked at length about something not very important, no conclusion could be drawn except that Neave had something on his mind and found it necessary to throw a veil over it.

He was a good man to work for, though. He seemed to know everyone's capacities, he always

asked for just a little less than he was going to get, always gave credit for anything over demand.

"Look, Ken," said Neave, "you're working too hard."

"Maybe a little," Corvey admitted cautiously.

"Why?"

"It's the nature of my job," he said. "It has to happen sometimes. Somebody else could hire an assistant, but an assistant wouldn't be any good to me. No one can follow through on any survey reporter's line of investigation except himself. It's like a train of thought. Someone else can think, may even reach the same conclusion, but he can't reach it the same way. I will admit I'm pretty tired."

Neave nodded. "Let's see," he said, looking through a black notebook. "We'll need your story on settlement recruitment . . ."

"Nearly ready."

"And the survey on comparative intelligence in America and Europe — how's it coming? We need an answer to that London professor."

"I'll have it by Saturday."

"After that, there's nothing vital until you start the big series on the defense tests. No, I'm not going to brief you on that yet. Tell you what, Ken. If you put in for a week starting Saturday, I'll see you get it."

"Thanks, Jim. I'll do that. I

know I could do with a rest."

Corvey was pleased, and didn't try to conceal it. A week of convalescing wouldn't finish the rigmarole, but it might enable him to carry on.

THE welfare state idea had spread around the world. People had a lot of freedom, certainly. But the root idea of the welfare state was security—and security meant certain restrictions. Some things had to be automatic, and the health service was one of them. Anyone who was absent from work two days was visited by a doctor.

Corvey could take a week's holiday if it were offered. If it weren't, asking for it might lead to a medical check-up he couldn't refuse. Staying off work for two days would have the same result.

Things had worked out better than he could have hoped, for he hadn't been with the *Star* long enough to rate any vacation.

He lunched alone after seeing Neave. Leaving the restaurant, he almost ran into Sandra's arms—a good place to be, though he had hitherto refused to acknowledge his awareness of the fact.

"You're looking very pleased with yourself," she said. "Won a bet?"

Corvey told her about the week's holiday.

"That's great," said Sandra.

"Let's go have a drink to celebrate."

Sandra was popular with every male of her acquaintance, young or old, and disliked by almost every woman. Babs hated her.

They went to a cocktail bar, all mirrors, a really delightful little place. Sandra, sitting on a high stool and toasting him, was exquisite. She was a dark blonde who had resisted the temptation to become a golden blonde. She carried not an ounce too much flesh and not an ounce too little. She had the great gift, a rare quality, of taking charge without seeming to, so that the man she was with thought himself very enterprising, indeed.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

He shrugged. "South somewhere—Florida, I guess."

"Now it just so happens," said Sandra, "that I was thinking of taking a week in Miami, myself."

"Fine," declared Corvey, the whisky he had just downed killing both the fever and his headache and making him feel wonderful. "We'll fly down together."

Presently he found himself kissing Sandra. It was very nice, as he had known it would be. It was twice as nice as he had expected.

They agreed to meet on the

Saturday afternoon plane and had another drink or two to pledge it.

IT was in the middle of a series of calculations in the afternoon that Corvey became aware that it had really happened.

He had had an attack of ritany once before, on Aram. Usually it happened only once, like measles, but occasionally people had a second or even a third attack before the particular bug which caused it became harmless.

During his previous attack—under the right conditions, of course—he had learned how to treat it. Now he had to fight the delusions and couldn't help worrying, for fear of revealing his true identity.

He had allowed the incident with Sandra to go as it liked, there being no apparent immediate danger. He hadn't even tried to settle the question of whether it was really happening or not, had taken for granted that it wasn't. It had the airiness, the casualness, the lack of detail that was typical of a ritanic hallucination. Only in such a delusion would he go out to a bar with a girl he hardly knew, tell her he was going to Florida, kiss her and agree to meet her on the plane. That was the stuff of which dreams were made.

But, on reflection, he was cer-

tain that it had actually happened.

He could be quite rational and he could always distinguish between true and false, when he really thought about it.

Going away with Sandra was quite out of the question. He had to find the easiest way out. Simply not meet Sandra? No, that wouldn't do. Tell her he had changed his mind? Yes, if he could find a good reason. Go where she wouldn't go?

Once more he was brought face to face with the irony of being a spy. Nothing would suit him better than a vacation with Sandra. If he weren't a spy, nothing would be easier than to cut loose from her. If he weren't a spy, she probably wouldn't have become sufficiently intrigued to want to join him. If he weren't a spy . . .

HE was in Jan Ryter's office, on Aram. Vaguely, this time he knew it was a delusion. But he let it run on, as a man who knows he must get up soon allows himself to drowse just a few minutes more — for Ken felt it was grand to be home for a while. Having made that decision, he promptly lived the scene. That was the way of ritany.

"I could be sociable, Corvey," Ryter was saying coldly, "but this is an unsentimental business, and I think we'd both prefer to

save our sentiment for off-duty hours. Right?"

Corvey nodded.

"Well, what have you accomplished, Corvey? If it's nothing, say so."

"It's more than nothing. Planting me as a survey reporter has been successful in that I've been detailed to do a whole series of surveys on the defense tests. I haven't been able to find out what information will be available to me when the tests start and what will be denied. But if I'm expected to produce any significant results, I have reasonable grounds for demanding just about everything."

"Is your position in any way official?"

"No, I'm merely a newspaper representative, and all my material will be screened before publication. But I'll have to know much more than I use, of course."

"Have you any ideas on what your conclusions will be?"

"I think," said Corvey carefully, "I'll find that Earth's defenses are remarkably good, that they will suggest offensive weapons which would make the result of any war against us a foregone conclusion—and that there will be no particular suggestion of animosity or prospective conflict against anybody, ourselves no more than the other colonies."

Ryter nodded. "I must thank

you for a decided, clear and frank statement."

ABRUPTLY Corvey was staring at a column of figures which didn't make sense — no longer on Aram, but in Rutledge, U.S.A., Earth. He must have done quite a bit of calculation unconsciously — slowly but correctly — on the colonial settlement program.

It was astonishing that he could have failed to notice it before — it was obvious, now, that the colonists were a highly selected group. All colonists, in any colony.

Earth had over four billion inhabitants, but the world wasn't really overcrowded. Not with efficient agricultural methods and half a dozen hydroponics plants in every state. It was natural for a young man, or a young family, to stay put.

Only a particular type — rather, several particular types — would leave Earth.

This obvious fact, which he had not previously seen, ruined several hours' work.

Jim Neave came into Corvey's little office while he was still considering the matter. Corvey pointed it out to him.

Neave frowned. "I'm no survey man, Ken, but that's the first thing I'd have thought of. Only someone who was a colonist him-

self would be likely to miss that angle."

Corvey had been trained long ago not to show any sign of shock in such circumstances. He merely said, "That's so. I suppose I was working from the colonial viewpoint," and talked of something else — his week in Florida.

It was another instance of the kind of thing which could happen to a spy at any moment. Sooner or later someone, unlike Babs and Dave, unlike Jim Neave, would be suspicious. And whoever was suspicious would follow up whatever it was that had aroused his suspicions. The U.S. counter-espionage service would get on the job, and pass it on to AS.

AS was U.N.'s counter-espionage organization, and Corvey was quite frankly afraid of it. If AS got a strong enough clue to justify real suspicion, he would be either definitely convicted or definitely cleared.

AS was so good that nobody knew much about it. Ryter hadn't been able to tell Corvey anything except that the only way to deal with AS was to keep clear of it. AS was a bogey man for every extraterrestrial operative. The only thing that was known about it for certain was that it was a rare event for anyone to find out anything about whatever AS was

supposed to be guarding.

And AS was certain to be guarding the Rutledge defense tests.

This was why Corvey had to be very careful about Sandra. So far, no one had anything that could be turned into proof against him. Sandra very soon would, if he had anything more to do with her.

As it was, there was no question of his going away with her.

It was important, too, that he should shake Sandra off without giving her any hint of why he invariably refused the chances she offered.

HE knew where she worked. Instead of being a model, as she might well have been, she was a highly paid advertising copywriter, which meant that she had brains. Stupid people weren't paid Sandra's salary.

He was at the agency door when she came out. He fell into step beside her and took her arm. "Let's go and have another drink, Sandra," he said.

"But . . ."

"I think we ought to talk this Florida business over."

"Okay," said Sandra brightly. Corvey made quite sure, this time, that the incident was no delusion. He concentrated on the ache in his head. That usually kept him anchored to reality.

They went to the same cocktail bar, which was another anchor.

"Look, Sandra," said Corvey, with a grin. "It won't do."

Sandra didn't pretend to misunderstand.

"Going to Florida together, you mean? You've no right to say that. I haven't suggested anything . . ."

"You don't need to suggest anything. I know what's going to happen."

"Then you know more than I do."

"If I'm right, I don't want you to come. If I'm wrong, there's no particular point in your coming."

"You look," said Sandra. "You said you were spending a week in Florida. I said I was going to Miami for a week. That's all."

"Seriously, Sandra, I'm going for a rest. Now I ask you . . ."

He left the sentence hanging.

Sandra laughed, taking it as a compliment.

"Believe me, I can be a relaxing companion, too."

Corvey shook his head. "With you around, how could I rest?"

"What you really mean, then, is that you just don't want me to be with you—isn't it?"

"Yes."

"All right. I can take a hint, eventually. Good luck, Ken."

"Good-by, Sandra."

"I never say good-by to anybody."

III

CORVEY got away all right and checked in, late Saturday afternoon, at a quiet Miami hotel. No loss of appetite accompanied ritanry — fresh air, good food, sunlight and rest were the things needed to combat it. At the hotel he selected, he could have them all.

He lazed all of Sunday and Monday. There were hallucinations galore, but they didn't matter. He spent most of the daylight hours on a veranda, half dozing, and neither the hotel staff nor the other guests disturbed him. He could answer any question sleepily and absently or not at all, and nobody was in the least suspicious.

He was seldom aware of his headache. Only on the three or four occasions during the day when he moved from his couch did he have to cope with the weakness in his limbs. He didn't have to move for meals — they were brought to him where he was. He had let it be understood that he was convalescing after an illness.

There were some very pleasant delusions, some indifferent ones, some which were unpleasant. They tended to be more pleasant when the victim wasn't fighting them — fighting them produced more anxiety hallucinations.



Once he found himself back on Aram, on the river with Janet, his first girl.

On another occasion, he took a fanciful trip to Venus—very fanciful, since he had never been to Venus.

In one episode — thoroughly unpleasant — he had murdered Babs rather nastily and was helping a grim, vengeful Dave in an effort to discover the murderer. Dave always seemed just on the point of discovering the truth, and Corvey died a thousand deaths in his efforts to keep him off the right track.

The frequency and violence of the delusions, now that he was merely resting, showed the severity of Corvey's case. It might have been mild enough, properly treated, but Corvey had been doing the worst thing possible for the past month, preventing the fever from lifting. Ritany wasn't an illness that could be fought. The way to recover from it was to give in to it.

In another delusion, he wasn't a spy. He had been born on Earth and knew next to nothing about Aram.

That fantasy was very pleasant indeed. It was nice not to be a spy—to be an ordinary Earthman doing a job he liked.

But some of the conclusions to be drawn from this one were upset by the fact that other hallu-

cinations, in which he was an ordinary Aramin living on Aram, were equally pleasant.

ON Tuesday evening Sandra turned up.

He had just re-oriented himself as Ken Corvey, survey reporter on the Rutledge *Star*, on vacation in Miami. Sandra strolled onto the veranda, wearing a sunsuit which indicated she must have been living close by. Her outfit was hardly street wear, even in Miami.

"I thought you'd turn up sooner or later," he said.

She shook her head. "You had no reason to count on it, Ken. If a man plays hard to get long enough, he's liable to find himself with no takers."

"I'm not playing hard to get," said Corvey quietly.

She frowned. "You're married or something?"

"Something. Sit down and I'll tell you about it."

She dropped onto a pneumatic couch and lounged decoratively, waiting. Part of Sandra's appeal was her eagerness, her interest in what you had to say. No bored glamour girl, Sandra — she listened with gratifying attention, fell in with any suggestion that was made, enjoyed any entertainment that was offered.

"There are some jobs, you know," Corvey said, "that are

more important than one's private life."

Sandra shook her head decidedly. "I don't believe it."

"You mean you wouldn't do such a job?"

She nodded. "Yes, I suppose that is what I mean. Are you telling me your job is one of them?"

"Yes."

"Your job on the *Star*?"

"No—another job."

"An undercover job?"

"Yes."

"Why tell me now, if not before?"

"Because now I think I can trust you."

Sandra's gaze locked frankly with his. "I like to be trusted," she admitted. "Go on."

"Have you ever left Earth?" Corvey asked.

"I've been on the Moon, that's all. Why?"

"Do you know much about the colonies?"

"You mean the deep-space worlds—Vokis, Ritchel, Watton and the rest? Not very much."

"How do you feel about these colonies, about which you don't know very much?"

"I thought you were going to tell me something, not ask questions."

"How do you feel about them?" Corvey insisted.

"I don't know. I don't know that I feel about them at all. I'd

like to go there, of course—to all the worlds if I could. Seeing them, I might start to have feelings about them. Meanwhile—no. I've never been to New Zealand, either, and I haven't any feelings about New Zealand. It's a place I've seen pictures of, that's all."

"You don't feel any animosity toward Vokis, Ritchel and Watton?"

"Why should I?"

"Some people do — because they're not familiar places."

Sandra shrugged her shoulders. "There's no idea so silly nobody believes it—no prejudice, no dislike."

"Do you think you could even see the point of view of Vokis, Ritchel or Watton, when Earth had a different slant?"

SANDRA suddenly became more cautious. "I might—but probably not. Are you telling me you've some sort of scheme against Earth?"

"Not against Earth — not really."

"You're working for one of these worlds, anyway — and it may be against Earth?"

"Yes. What's your reaction to that?"

Sandra looked serious. "Even if I saw your point of view, Ken, I couldn't help you. Couldn't do anything but hinder you, in fact."

"Why?"

"Because being a traitor is a terrible thing."

"I don't quite follow that."

"Traitors aren't nice people, even when they sincerely believe the country they help against their own is right. They're working against the country whose protection they're accepting. That, to me, is the vile thing about it. Spies aren't so bad."

"So what are you going to do?" Corvey asked.

He hadn't been looking at her, for it was much easier to carry on a reasonable discussion if he didn't. Now he turned and looked her straight in the face.

"I think," she said slowly, "I shall have to try and stop you."

"Even though I've told you this of my own free will, in confidence?"

She shook her head reluctantly. "You can't ask me to be a traitor, Ken. If this is a joke, it's a crazy one. If it isn't, I have to report what you've said, even though . . ."

"Even though what?"

"Well, you don't think it'll be easy for me, do you? I don't mean I'm going to turn you in. It would be better if you went away—and then, while you were away, I could tell the police what you've told me."

"If that's the best you can offer," Corvey said quietly, "I'm afraid I'll have to make better

terms than you're offering me."

Before she could move, his shoe had sunk deep in her diaphragm. She never recovered from the paroxysm, for he dropped beside her and neatly, efficiently, broke her neck.

HE got that far, but the emotional shock snapped him right out of the delusion.

It had been quite real, for in most of the hallucinations he was unaware of the very existence of ritany. Only when he attacked Sandra had there been any unreal quality.

Still sweating, recovering from the shock, he considered the incident.

It probably wasn't far from what would actually happen if he spoke to Sandra like that. The delusions didn't need any element of truth about them, and prophetic delusions might be wholly untrustworthy. But generally, predictions were as correct as his own knowledge, and he saw no reason to distrust the warning in this incident.

The warning was — not to change his mind about Sandra.

There had been some danger of it—considerable danger—that he might have confided in her. And it was unlikely that she would ever support him against her own world.

But he had no time to ration-



alize it any more, for he was in the middle of another delusion and he didn't know it was a delusion.

He was leaning on the rail of a yacht, a cool breeze on his face. It was night, and there were so many stars that the Moon was hardly missed. He knew, this time, that he had been born on Aram, and that this was Earth.

Over his shoulder came a familiar compound scent—crushed petals and mild pipe tobacco. He put one arm around Dave, the other around Babs and turned back to the rail.

"You haven't anything like this on Aram," said Babs challengingly.

He refused to argue. "I was just thinking that," he said. "When a Terran goes to Aram, he thinks it's beautiful. And so it is—with its greens and purples and browns, warm and hazy and fairylike. But the next day, the next month, the next year, Aram is just the same—while Earth has always something new to show you, something different."

"Every time we talk about Earth and Aram," said Dave in that slow, thoughtful way of his, "you seem to prefer Earth. Have you become a naturalized Terran, Ken?"

Corvey didn't answer for quite a while. His arms were still in close, companionable contact

with Babs and Dave—who would always, to him, represent Earth. Dave was solid, slow, sympathetic. If one thought in symbols, Dave would be the stolid but shrewd peasant who was still the backbone of Earth's humanity. Babs was impulsive, always in a hurry, yet just as ready to help as her husband. She symbolized the pushing, frenetic life of the great cities, something not very familiar to the colonies.

"I think," he said at last, "that intellectually I prefer Earth all the way, but emotionally I'm still an Aramin."

Babs squeezed his arm affectionately. "That's a good answer," she said warmly. "I hate people who get too big for their own people."

IV

WEDEDNESDAY, Thursday and Friday passed easily and pleasantly. The hallucinations became thinner—quite often Corvey would dream a vivid dream, but know it was a dream.

Saturday wasn't so good, for he was due to return the next day to finish an article for Monday's paper. He had to face two things. The first was that the ritany wasn't gone, that once he went back to fighting it, he might have more trouble with it. The second was that, when he got back to

Rutledge, he would again be an Aramin agent, working against Earth.

He had tried to justify himself to Sandra in his delusion. He was working not against Earth, but for his own world.

It was a distinction without a difference.

A spy had no control over the use to which the information he stole was put. He was a thief, no less, a thief of valuable information. He took it back and gave it to his employers. It might be used purely defensively, which was legitimate. It would do Earth no harm for Aram to know and copy Earth's defensive setup.

But defense often led to offense, information about safeguards enabled more deadly weapons to be made, more deadly weapons sometimes led to a test, and the test was sometimes called war.

Corvey knew very well that, in the end, he would do what he had been sent to do. But that didn't enable him to stop thinking about it with misgivings.

He had become a spy because of false ideas about the job—ideas which he soon found to be false. When he did, he didn't give up the job, any more than stage-struck girls, when they found the theater wasn't quite what they thought it was, or writers, when they found their first book wasn't

a best-seller, or violinists, when they found they weren't destined to be concert soloists. Like them he plodded on, his illusions gone, or almost gone, doing a job which still retained just a thread of the glamor it had had for him.

He went on being an agent from Aram because he couldn't see himself being anything else.

SATURDAY evening, Sandra really did appear.

When he saw her, he was in the grip of no hallucination. But he checked with himself again and again before he believed in her reality. He pinched himself, he scanned rapidly back over the day, he oriented himself—and by the time Sandra was within speaking range, he knew she was really there.

In addition to the pleasure of seeing her and the knowledge that he must mean a lot to her to cause her to chase him so shamelessly, there was a certain cool curiosity about how this real meeting would compare with the imaginary one. In one respect it was certainly going to be different—he wasn't going to tell her he was a spy.

She strolled onto the veranda, in the same way, and in a similar costume. But Corvey didn't make the same brash opening. This time he waited for Sandra.

"I came to bring you back,"

she said with a smile and dropped on the pneumatic couch, precisely as she had in the delusion.

"Tonight?" he exclaimed.

"No, tomorrow."

"Then why come tonight?"

She shrugged and smiled again, but said nothing.

"I don't get it," he said. "I used to think you went for me only because I wouldn't go for you. But it can't be just that."

"I don't know either," Sandra admitted. "I should have given you up completely, long ago, and I don't know why I haven't. Partly, it's because I'm pretty sure you're not as indifferent to me as you pretend."

"There's no secret about that," said Corvey. "How could I be?"

Sandra frowned. "You're not married or something?" she asked—exactly as in the hallucination.

He shook his head. "Let's say, instead, I'm sick."

She looked up quickly. "Sick—is that it? You mean there's something permanently wrong with you?"

"In a way, yes." Having been born on Aram was the same as having something permanently wrong with him as far as Sandra was concerned.

"So sick that you've decided never to get married?"

"That's so."

"Who said anything about marriage?"

She held her arms out to him. That he was able to resist such a temptation was a great surprise to Corvey. His opinion of himself went up—for resist it he did.

Sandra sighed and dropped her arms. "Oh, well," she said. "I don't often talk about myself—it's the only thing I'm shy about."

She picked at the cushion under her, looking down her arm at her long fingers. "I don't know what's wrong with you, Ken," she said, "but there's certainly something wrong with me. I should never have been born. Having been born, I shouldn't have lived—a hundred years ago, I wouldn't have. Fifty years ago, I'd have died while still a child. Even as it was, they just barely kept me alive, but life was about all they could give me."

CORVEY stared at her incredulously. She was lean and clear-skinned, not only a beautiful girl but a perfect female physical specimen. There wasn't a flaw anywhere.

"No," she admitted, sensing his gaze, "there isn't much wrong with me now. Given time, doctors can work miracles. They don't even need a strong constitution to help them—they give you the strong constitution first, then build on it. But that takes a long time."

"I never was a child, in the

normal sense. From the moment I was born, I was a patient. I didn't walk until I was seven. I was thirteen before I could run. Not until I was sixteen—seven years ago—could you say I had normal health."

HE had to check again to make sure Sandra was really telling him this. He had never remotely suspected such a background in Sandra's life—though, now that he knew about it, it made sense.

"I was trained," Sandra went on quietly, "from the first moment I could see, hear and think, that my body meant pain. Or if not pain, a constant, nagging discomfort. I never felt really well until I was eleven, and for five years that was intermittent.

"I'm not complaining. I'm the luckiest girl alive that now I'm strong, healthy and pretty. I'm as happy as any girl I know, and with more reason. I'm just telling you about the contrast, the change in me. While I was an invalid, I had a good education—but the thing I was surest of, from my own experience, was that my body could never, never give me any pleasure.

"Maybe now you can understand me better. At sixteen I learned to swim. I was so delighted I'd have swum all day if there hadn't been walking, too.

Can you imagine how glorious it is to walk for miles and miles and never get tired, remembering when you had to stop and rest half a dozen times going around the block? Running was even better. When you're a perfect running machine, sprinting is sheer ecstasy—particularly if you have vivid recollections of how once all you could do was totter along, lungs laboring and a pain in your side.

"There were thousands of things, either things I'd never been able to do before or things I'd done painfully, at low efficiency, with no pleasure at all. Dancing—they had to stop me doing that for a while, I got so excited about it.

"And men — almost at once, kissing, cuddling and affection. My body had been a heavy liability for sixteen years. Now it suddenly and wonderfully became a glorious asset."

She met his gaze defiantly for a moment, then looked down again and went on more quietly. "When I'm a little older, I'll become better balanced. I've known the mental pleasures and the physical pleasures and, in a few years, I'll strike a balance between them. Meanwhile, the physical pleasures are still too new for me to have much time for anything else. Do you understand?"

HE didn't answer, somehow aware she still had something to say. Presently she said it.

"One other thing—I told you I should never have been born. That was my parents' fault. I never knew either of them and perhaps it's as well. I hate them. They're the only people I ever learned to hate and it took a long time—years of pain.

"There aren't many people left whose heredity is weak enough to produce the creature I was. They should never have married, especially each other. And if they did, it was a crime to have children. Understand what I mean when I say I'll never get married?"

"There's no reason . . ." Corvey began.

"I know what you're going to say. Quite a lot of people get married although they can't have children, but I certainly never shall. Though I might, if I knew the man concerned wasn't keen on having children either. But I'd think more than twice before I did."

Corvey nodded. "I understand. Thanks for telling me this, Sandra."

He considered confiding in her, as she had confided in him. But once more he decided against it. A line from a song ran crazily through his brain—*Heaven can't match you—and I'm not a statue.*

He bent and kissed her, very gently. He was thinking how much better the end of the real incident was than the end of the hallucination, in which he had killed her.

BACK in Rutledge, Corvey soon found the answers to the three most important questions he could think of were yes, no and yes-and-no.

Was he going to have access to secret material when the defense tests started? *He was.*

Was he free of ritany and the worry, discomfort and extra difficulty it caused? *He was not.*

Was Sandra going to leave him alone?

That was the yes-and-no. Because there were really two questions, two desired answers. He wanted Sandra to leave him alone, yet he didn't. In fact, it became a question not of what Sandra did, but of what he did.

He found himself, many times a day, thinking of Sandra quite involuntarily and, at the end of the day, missing her perceptibly more. He was falling in love with the girl, there wasn't a doubt of it, and there seemed to be nothing he could do to stop it. He remembered, quite well but with complete puzzlement, a time when he had known Sandra and yet hardly ever thought of her.

He didn't see Neave until

Monday. Neave detailed his part in the defense-test coverage.

"I've done my best for you, Ken," he said. "You know what defense officials are like where security is concerned. They wanted us to present glowing reports without being told anything. But I got what I wanted, apart from you, without much trouble. We argued about you for quite a while."

He paused for encouragement. Corvey gave it to him.

"Security wanted to give me their own survey reports. I said we used our own or none at all. They said they'd supply you with figures. I said that then you wouldn't be able to draw any conclusions except the ones they wanted you to draw. That was just what they wanted, but they couldn't very well say so. They said . . ."

He detailed with considerable self-satisfaction the whole course of the negotiations, ending, as he told it, in a complete victory for himself. Corvey congratulated him warmly.

Survey reporting was still fairly new, and every survey reporter on a newspaper had to make sure, as a first step, that his superiors understood something about the method. In a case like this, Corvey could accomplish nothing unless Neave understood his problems and did all he could

to resolve them. So Corvey didn't mind giving Neave a little soft soap if he wanted it.

WHAT Neave had won for him was permission to go anywhere and ask anything—virtually an *open sesame* to the whole defense test program.

He couldn't have asked for more. There was nothing more to ask for.

Since he wasn't quite free of ritany even in the best possible conditions, it wasn't to be expected that it would leave him alone when he returned to work. And it didn't. In fact, while the hallucinations came less frequently than they had before he went away and the headache and fever were less, the lighter, easily-seen-through delusions deepened once more.

He tried to cover himself in advance by discreetly warning everybody that he would be working very hard in the next week or two, and was liable to be very absent-minded. Unfortunately, he had never been absent-minded before. People who weren't very observant were prepared to accept this story—observant people, or people who were really interested in him, like Dave, Babs and Jim Neave, looked incredulous at the suggestion. However, it was the best he could do.

Those last twenty-four hours he'd spent in Florida with Sandra had been quite perfect. She was a great person to be with, ready to respond to anything, demanding nothing—quite unselfish, devoid of egotism. She could talk about anything. During her fifteen years as an invalid, she had learned something about everything.

She was that extreme rarity, the sensualist who understood that sensuality was only a small part of living.

HE didn't see her Monday or Tuesday, by a supreme effort. Wednesday, he lunched with her, took her to a show in the evening and naturally took her home afterward.

Quite by chance the conversation took a turn which showed him some of her views on the Earth-colonies question. The wine she offered him at her house—it was a house, not an apartment, as he'd expected—was colonial, and as they sipped, they talked about the colonies.

"Colonial politics are often pretty hard to follow," Sandra observed. "Sometimes you'd almost think they were afraid of Earth."

"So they are," Corvey said. "I once knew a colonist pretty well, and from his point of view every colony is a little afraid of Earth."

"But why?"

"Because she's so strong. Because Earth could crush any colony like an insect."

"That's nonsense," Sandra declared.

"Oh, no—it's true."

"I don't mean it isn't true—it's the idea that's ridiculous. You might as well say everyone on the Moon should be terrified, because Earth could blow it to atoms without even sending up a manned ship."

Though he didn't want to put himself in the position of arguing the colonies' case, Corvey felt bound to say, trying to remain judicial, "That's a different matter, Sandra. The Moon is almost part of Earth."

"And aren't the colonies almost part of Earth, too?"

"No, they're independent worlds—or they could be. Independent, but never as strong as the parent world. Always an easy prey, if—"

"If Earth happened to want an easy prey. Ken, you don't believe this yourself, do you?"

"This fellow made a convincing case."

"Ken, surely your friend and his whole world and the other colonies aren't all suffering from paranoia?"

"Paranoia?"

"Well, what else can you call it, when their only reason for be-

ing afraid is that Earth could destroy them—if she liked?"

THE question hung in the air and went on hanging. Corvey never really knew whether he ducked it or Sandra neglected to follow it up. It was about that time that the conversation became more personal.

It was Corvey who mentioned marriage again, tentatively, and impersonally, like the discussion on the colonies. Sandra discussed it in the same way.

She was a little less adamant than when she had expressed her views on getting married. Perhaps she would marry sometime, if she found someone who had some of the qualities of Corvey, and if she believed he really didn't care about not having children.

That was Wednesday.

Thursday, he examined what he had learned so far from the defense tests, fought no less than three minor battles with ritany and, although he didn't see Sandra, felt himself compelled to call her twice.

He hadn't learned much of Earth's defense potential in detail, but quite a lot in general. His Miami report to Jan Ryter, though it had been a hallucination, turned out to be very close to the facts. As he had guessed, Earth was so far ahead of his own

world in technical development that there was no prospect of the gap being closed, even if he had been a technician and could take back all the technical details.

Earth was ahead, not with money in the bank, so to speak, not with talents buried in the ground, but with talents in active use. Earth's potential was in her men rather than in anything they had done. Aramin scientists, given access to the Rutledge tests, could go home and build weapons and defenses every bit as good as Earth's—and it wouldn't matter in the least.

For, in the time taken to bring Aram up to Earth's level, Earth would have forged ahead again.

It wasn't an encouraging report to have to make, but the essential thing about Corvey's report was that it should be sound, not encouraging.

He had called Sandra in the morning, and he called her again in the evening to cancel their date. He had to work at home as well as at the office while the tests were on. The trouble with survey reporting was that ninety per cent of the work was wasted.

Friday . . .

Though he didn't know it at first, Friday was the day. There was nothing he could have done about it anyway. Everything was set to come to a focus at one point, and the point was Friday.

FRIDAY MORNING. The defense tests were run in sections. It was an open secret that Rutledge was being used for some military maneuver or other. Precisely what was supposed to be unknown to anyone except the Army, the Air Force, the Space Navy, Washington, U.N., Security, the F.B.I. and "carefully screened units of the press." This last designation included, apparently, everybody in Rutledge who wasn't already included under the other heads, for everybody in Rutledge knew that the military maneuver was a complete test of all land-based defenses against any known form of attack from space.

On Friday, the main item was reaction time. The initial stimulus for which every warning system was designed was taken for granted. The lag before retaliation took place was measured and correlated with every other lag — the amount of damage which would have been done in the meantime—the time a human being, rather than an automatic warning, needed to react—everything else it seemed worth while correlating it with.

At eleven A.M. Corvey was standing in an open, empty space with about a score of other journalists and observers, two miles out of Rutledge. In front of them, 200 yards away, was something

which looked like an old-fashioned howitzer, manned by half a dozen men and girls. There were as many women as men in defense. To the left, 300 yards away, was the radar post.

Someone spoke to Corvey, but it didn't seem to matter. He was gloomily aware that many defense experts on Aram would have given their right arms to see the things he was seeing and would see. Unfortunately, only a survey reporter could have such opportunities—and as a survey reporter, he wasn't trained to understand more than a fraction of the significance of the things he saw.

There was sudden movement at the radar post. A few seconds later, the spark of activity jumped the gap and the howitzer crew leaped about like flies. The blunt point of the machine swung around and up in one movement, and light stabbed from it. That part of it was rather an anti-climax. The light was only faintly brighter than the daylight it had to pass through, and gave the impression of a nearly exhausted battery.

There was a sudden, startling sound — a crack which was not loud but curiously vicious. With it was a faint stirring of the still air. A vacuum only a foot or so in diameter but eight hundred miles long was being filled—or

rather, had been filled almost as it was being created—and these were the after-effects.

A long moment of tension, as if everyone were waiting for the plop of a penny dropped down a well.

Then a speck appeared and became a ship, dropping. Again someone spoke to Corvey unintelligibly—his eyes and everyone else's were on the ship. It grew incredibly slowly, though it must be falling out of control—the howitzer crew was paying no further attention to it, apparently satisfied that it was no longer a menace. The radar crew was still busy, however, tracking it.

SOMETHING seemed oddly familiar about the ship. Even before he could have known, Corvey was straining his eyes, hoping his wild guess was wrong.

It wasn't—the ship was an Aramin cruiser. It came hurtling down, spinning, its rear section misshapen. It struck about a mile away and was hidden for a moment in a cloud of flying earth and stones.

"*Mr. Corvey!*" came a sharp, insistent bark. "I must ask you to come and see Captain Swan."

With a start, Corvey turned. His eyes took in nothing but a uniform, then flicked back to the wrecked Aramin ship.

There was no ship. There had

never been any ship at all.

He had been embroidering on the test. Vaguely, he was aware that the officer beside him had been trying to attract his attention for some time, without success.

"Sorry," he said. "I was working something out."

The other spectators were staring at the two of them. His trance must have been deep and puzzling. The officer beside him was red-faced, nervous, yet adamant.

"Sure," Corvey said. "Where is this Captain Swan?"

He was led across to the radar unit. He tried to dissolve the appearance of being a prisoner under guard, but without much success. The correspondents chattered as he was led away, and his escorting officer kept dropping a step behind, his hand rather melodramatically thrust into his pocket.

It was difficult to decide which attitude to assume, the indifferent or the indignant. Meanwhile, he pretended not to notice that he was in effect a prisoner.

His escort asked him to stand aside while he talked to Captain Swan, watched him closely while he did so, and generally made it quite obvious that Corvey was suspected of something pretty serious.

Corvey made up his mind. He strode forward. "What is this?"



he demanded. "I'm Kenneth Corvey of the Rutledge Star—a dozen people here can swear to that. And if you want my authorization . . ."

"That's not the question, Mr. Corvey," said Swan bluntly. He was a brusque, neat little man. "It seems there were several attempts made to attract your attention, without success. I'm told you were in some sort of trance for at least four minutes. Have you any explanation?"

"I've given it already," Corvey retorted. "I'm a survey reporter—that means a big proportion of my work is mental arithmetic, so to speak. This requires extreme concentration—"

"I understand that, Mr. Corvey. But it seems your concentration, as you call it, was too deep and impenetrable for any such straightforward explanation. I feel sure there must be some—some further explanation."

"What, for heaven's sake?" Corvey demanded, allowing himself to sound a little angrier. "Is it a crime not to speak when I'm spoken to?"

"If you don't cooperate with us, Mr. Corvey," said Swan distantly, "you will find our cooperation with you will rapidly cease."

"How can I cooperate with you? What do you want? Of what crime am I accused, and what

will you recognize as a defense?"

Swan began to realize his position was weaker than he thought, was weakening further. In a more propitiating tone, he said, "You realize how careful we have to be, Mr. Corvey, and you know yourself how thoroughly all observers have been screened. We must investigate *everything* we can't understand, and this trance of yours—it is possible, say, that you've been telepathically tapped, or that some post-hypnotic suggestion has been planted, or . . ."

"Captain Swan," said Corvey firmly but not angrily any more, "I realize that you must be careful, but surely that doesn't mean fanciful. I've offered you a perfectly reasonable explanation for something which doesn't seem in the least strange to me. You don't know how reasonable it is, unless you've heard the noise that goes on outside the office where I have to work. Now, would you like me to write down for your perusal some of the lines of investigation I covered mentally?"

With still less conviction, Swan said, "You know we don't suspect you, Mr. Corvey. It's just a matter of checking. Would you submit to a brief test? It's simply to establish—"

"No," said Corvey. He hated to have to say it, but there was no telling what a test might show. If they simply stuck a thermome-



ter in his mouth, they would start to ask awkward questions. If they had a skilled lie-detector operator, they would get some very interesting answers.

"Oh?" said Swan, with a rapid return to his earlier manner. "Why not, Mr. Corvey?"

And though Corvey didn't hesitate and gave no outward sign of diminished confidence, he knew that from now on he was going to be less and less convincing.

FRIDAY AFTERNOON. Corvey left the Security office cleared and puzzled. He had submitted to some tests and refused others, and the two men he saw—interrogators in quite a different class from Captain Swan—seemed satisfied. But he knew that those two would seem precisely as they wished to seem, quite independently of what they might think.

He guessed that he was strongly suspected and would be very closely watched, indeed, from now on. It was quite possible, from the way he had been treated, that he had been suspected all along, that Security Headquarters was rather annoyed with its own low-level operatives for pulling him in.

It even occurred to him that, possibly, some close associate of his—Babs, Dave, Jim Neave or Sandra—was watching him, had

been watching him from the start.

At any rate, from now on he couldn't afford to do anything outside the normal requirements of his job. AS might suspect him slightly, strongly or with complete certainty. There was little or no possibility that he was not suspected at all.

He hadn't completely failed by any means. He would continue to have access to secret information, would be permitted to observe many of the further defense tests. But he would be trusted with nothing which really mattered from now on.

When Dave and Babs met him just outside the Security office, his suspicion that they were AS operatives heightened. However, it would be stupid to give any hint of that.

"Say, what's this?" Babs asked, concerned. "Security called us a while back about you. But it's all right now, isn't it?"

"It's all right," said Corvey easily. "Security's checking everyone about half a dozen times while these . . . but maybe I shouldn't say anything about what's going on just now, for officially nothing's happening at all."

"Oh, can it, Ken," said Babs. "You needn't start being super-cautious with us. We gave you a magnificent character — I think you ought to stand us a drink, as

a small token of your appreciation."

Corvey stood them a drink. Whether they were in AS or not didn't make much difference to his liking for them. After all, he had been deceiving them the whole time he had known them. He could hardly complain if they'd been deceiving him, too.

Sandra darted into the bar and kissed him in relief at the sight of him. She ignored Babs and Dave.

"Thank goodness!" she said breathlessly. "The way they talked to me over the phone, I thought you were in jail for life, if not just until they shot you. Will you excuse us, folks? Thanks."

She swept him away to the other corner of the bar, where Babs and Dave couldn't hear what they were saying.

"Tell me, Ken," she said seriously. "Did they let you go because you're not a spy or because they couldn't prove it?"

Things had changed since the last time he considered telling her the truth. "Neither," he said coolly. "I think they know I'm a spy, but they're waiting to see what I do."

"You are a spy?" she asked quietly.

"Yes. Oh, a most unspectacular spy. Not like the dashing spies of romance. I'm not here to steal

the plans of secret weapons, just to get a general idea of Earth's potentialities."

"For whom? The highest bidder?"

The bitterness of her question hurt him, though it was only to be expected.

"No," he said. "For my own world—Aram. And not for offensive purposes. There's no question of Aram ever—"

"There never is," Sandra retorted, not angry but bitterly disappointed. "It's never anybody's hand that fires the shot. Nobody ever wants to fight. Every battle that was ever fought was fought in self-defense, apparently."

Corvey sighed. "I know. Study history and you find . . ."

It stopped just there, for no reason, and Babs and Dave were staring at him. He knew it was a repetition of the morning's hallucinatory incident.

HE was in the cocktail bar all right, with Babs and Dave—that part had happened. But the arrival of Sandra, like the fall of the Aramin ship, had been superimposed, and he had gone dead to all intents and purposes, judging by his friends' expressions.

People returning to consciousness often do ask, "Where am I?"—fatuous though it may be—because the first seconds of interrupted awareness are seldom

characterized by notable alertness and perspicacity.

Dave spoke before he could think of anything else to say. "That's what happened this afternoon, isn't it?" he asked shrewdly.

There was no use denying it. Corvey nodded. "I know about it," he said. "It doesn't worry me, and it is temporary. But it's not an easy thing to explain."

"I can understand that," Dave agreed.

"Say, what is this?" Babs asked. "Periodic trances? How and where did you pick them up?"

"I've been trying to explain that all afternoon," said Corvey wearily. "Mind if I take a rest now?"

"Well, sure," said Dave slowly. "But there's a difference now, Ken. Security organizations are never exactly sympathetic. We are. Like to try us?"

If they were AS agents, they knew about him. If they weren't, they were just Dave and Babs, his friends. If he refused to say anything, they were capable of working out what he was refusing to say.

He was finished anyway. Apparently this was going to go on happening, the gradual merging of a real incident into ritanic hallucination, with trance instead of the absent-minded, automatic

behavior which previously had enabled him to get by without arousing suspicion. When that had been the case, carrying on had been risky but not impossible.

Now it was impossible. He hadn't seen it when he left the Security office, but that had been before the second trance. Trances like this were not part of the normal case-history of ritany. Quite possibly, ritany took a different course on planets other than Aram. If more trances were to be expected, he would have to be content with what little he had learned already, go into hiding, and leave Earth with his job indifferently done — but alive, instead of carrying on until, inevitably, he was arrested.

"All right," he said quietly. "I'll take you up on that. Does what Dave say go for you, too, Babs?"

"Of course," she said. "Shoot." She leaned forward eagerly, intuitively aware that what Corvey said was going to be interesting.

"I've got a fever," Corvey said, "which identifies my world, which isn't Earth. That's why I've had to fight the fever, couldn't admit it, couldn't take sick leave. If I had, it would soon have been discovered that I'm not a Terran as I pretend, that my whole history is false—that, in fact, I could only be here as a spy."

IN several delusions he had admitted to Babs and Dave or to Sandra, in one way or another, that he was a spy. This time, the incident being real, he checked it and found it true. He was sharing his secret with someone at last.

"You're working for another world against Earth?" asked Dave quietly. Babs caught her breath.

"Not exactly. I . . ."

"We can't help you, Ken," said Dave in the same quiet tone. "I'm sorry if I led you to think we could. I didn't believe you could possibly be—"

"Don't make excuses, Dave," Babs cut in. "It was an offer to a friend and I hope Ken's still that. But, Ken, you should have known we weren't traitors. Look—let's forget these last few things were said, shall we?"

Corvey nodded wearily. They were reacting much as Sandra had in the first hallucination—the way decent people, patriotic without being fanatic about it, would act—he supposed.

"I think we'd better go," said Babs, getting up. "We certainly won't give you up, Ken. But we can't help you and we'd better not talk about this at all. If we—when we see you again, I think we should ignore today altogether . . ."

But when she said that, she

knew and Corvey knew they wouldn't see him again unless, perhaps, as witnesses at his trial.

Corvey tested the whole incident for reality once again and found it solid. But everything else was falling apart at the seams.

He should have known how Babs and Dave would react. Yet what did it matter, since Security was so close behind him anyway?

Babs and Dave, he was now certain, were not AS agents. He was also certain that they could be trusted—they wouldn't give him up. What he had to do was get under cover. Now, tonight.

He shouldn't even have thought of Sandra, but he did.

He wanted to go and see her, to find what she would say—really say—whether it would be the same as Babs' and Dave's reaction. For a while, he tried to convince himself that since he was on the run anyway, as of now, it made no difference, his calling Sandra on the way.

But he wasn't sufficiently blinded by love to be able to believe that.

No, he couldn't afford to see Sandra, even to say good-by.

VI

FRIDAY EVENING. The last time he had been at Sandra's house he had been interested only

in her, not the house. He had a little difficulty finding it again in the darkness.

It had taken him an hour or two to arrange things and, after that, he had walked most of the way to Sandra's house. He would have liked to call her, to make sure she wasn't out—but the phone might be tapped. That was another reason why he shouldn't go near her. If AS were really watching him closely, they'd know all about Sandra.

He found it at last, a small house in its own tiny patch of garden. He looked about carefully to make sure no one was watching the place—not that he had thought it likely anyone would be. Moderately satisfied, he still didn't go to the front door, but circled the house cautiously, found a lane which touched the rear wall at one point and climbed over.

There was light in a curtained upstairs window. Corvey had had certain training which he hadn't used for a long time, but which he had begun to call on again from the time he'd decided to go under cover. Within three minutes, he was inside the house and outside the door of the room where the light was on.

Thus ended his determination not to see Sandra again.

He tapped and said, "It's me—Ken."

There was a stifled shriek. Corvey waited. Presently Sandra's voice said challengingly, "If it's Ken, say something else."

He said something that proved he was Corvey. Then, when she sounded somewhat reassured, he slipped inside, flicking off the light-switch as he did so.

"What on earth . . .?" came Sandra's voice in the darkness.

He found her and, despite her surprise and puzzlement, she was prepared to throw her arms around him and kiss him readily enough. But she still wanted to know why he had sought her like that—he could feel the curiosity pulsing through her body.

"This place of yours would be the easiest job in months for housebreakers, darling," he murmured.

"Come on, Ken—give!"

He told her.

She didn't say a word until she was in possession of all the main facts. But she was still in his arms, and her body would have told him if what he was telling her shocked or disgusted her.

Twice in fevered delusions he had told her this—each time she had turned from him. It was natural that he should have hallucinations about her finding out.

NOW it was actually happening—and so far she hadn't turned from him in disgust. Her

arms were still around him, her breath mingling with his.

"You're giving up the Rutledge defense tests altogether," she asked coolly, "and hiding out until you can be picked up and go back to Aram?"

"Yes."

"And—if it hadn't been for this, things might have been very different between us?"

"They certainly would."

"And you're still ill?"

"Yes. But when I'm lucid, I know what I'm saying, and I mean it."

"That isn't what I meant. I'm coming with you, Ken."

He caught his breath. That had been too much to hope for—he wasn't ready for it.

"That doesn't mean I agree with what you've been doing or would help you against Earth. I wouldn't."

He tightened his grip, but she avoided his lips. "Never mind that just now. Have you any plans—workable plans?"

"Oh, yes," Corvey said. "I could have done this for a long time, but I didn't when there was still a chance."

"Forget that. You can't expect me to be sympathetic because you've failed in an espionage job for some other world."

"Wait a minute, Sandra. Why are you coming with me?"

"Because I love you, fool! But

that doesn't mean I love your job, or . . . Don't waste time arguing. What are we going to do?"

He released her, stepped back and snapped on the light. She blinked for a moment, then gave a startled cry.

The man in the room with her wasn't Ken Corvey. This man had lighter hair, held himself differently, had brown eyes instead of blue and a smaller nose. The differences were slight, but she would have passed this man in the street without a second glance.

"I see," she said, recovering herself. "Which is you?"

"Neither," said Corvey. Now his voice was different, too.

HE looked at her as he had never looked at her before—wondering how her appearance could be simply and significantly altered. He had some materials, in case he should have to change his own appearance again, but not a great deal.

He managed it in seventeen minutes, by darkening her hair and getting her to change its style while he made her mouth fuller and her cheeks thinner. She was startled at the latter operation, her hand going to her face.

"That ointment tightens your face muscles," he said. "Don't touch it. When it's dried, it'll last

for twenty-four hours or so. There, you don't look much worse than usual, if quite different."

He didn't let her look at herself until she was dressed in clothes which he selected and modified with her help. When she did look in a full-length mirror, she gasped, horrified.

"I look *awful!*" she wailed.

"Not really. You just look different. Of course, those are clothes you'd regard as all wrong for you—I made them like that. People have a pattern of appearance, speech, walk, clothes. All you have to do to become a different person is to change the pattern. Just remember you're the girl in the mirror, not Sandra Reid."

Sandra locked up the house and left it without any signs of a hurried departure. She also dropped a brief line to her employers. They walked some distance, so that no cabby would remember picking up a man and a woman at Sandra Reid's house, then took a taxi to the airport.

By agreement, Corvey was telling her only the next step, so that, in the event of something going wrong, she wouldn't know his whole plan. If anything did go wrong, she would naturally go home. Corvey could always communicate with her there.

The next step, after the local

airport, was a flight to any big airport. Sandra didn't know their destination from there.

CORVEY reflected, while he paid the taxi driver, that they would certainly be traced eventually to the airport, then to New York or San Francisco or wherever they flew. He would have to make sure the trail was much weaker from there, and quite untraceable from the next check point. His destination was Kingston, Jamaica, but he had to be quite certain he left no trail—Kingston was the last refuge of any Aramin agent on Earth.

They found the next plane was to New York, which suited Corvey well enough. Corvey booked passage under names he didn't even bother remembering—they weren't going to need them again. They went to the waiting room to spend the twenty minutes before the plane left.

And the first person Corvey saw when he followed Sandra inside was Jim Neave.

He paid no attention. Sandra, who didn't know Neave, was saying something which didn't matter, but she might easily switch at any moment to something which did. Corvey cut her off rudely, hoping she would guess why. She didn't immediately. She started and shot a surprised

glance at him. To make sure she had a chance to think for a second or two before bursting out with something catastrophic, he hurried past her to look out one of the big windows at the planes, digging her warningly in the ribs while his body shielded her from Neave.

When she joined him at the window, she had clearly taken the hint. She was docile and quiet, taking her cue from him.

Corvey hadn't looked closely at Neave, but he was aware his boss was still watching him. That Neave was there looking for him was practically certain—he should have been at the office. The only question was whether Neave was an AS agent or merely someone who could identify Ken Corvey. The fact that he appeared to be alone suggested he was an AS agent. But he might not be as alone as he seemed.

Corvey's disguise was designed to defeat descriptions and photographs, not to fool anyone who knew him well. He didn't dare look at Neave. He was hoping Neave wasn't an AS agent for, if he was, he would know his job and have Corvey investigated.

Corvey took Sandra's arm and said in a voice which was not the one Neave knew, "Place stinks. Come on out in the fresh air."

Neave was at his elbow. "Ex-

cuse me, sir . . ." he began.

As Corvey turned and looked at him, he saw complete certainty come into Neave's face. Perhaps Neave, knowing something like this might happen, had carefully noted a tiny scar or irregularity on his face, something which even Corvey didn't know about. At any rate, there could be no further pretense.

CORVEY doubled Neave up with a stomach punch and chopped him behind the ear. The gun which was halfway out of Neave's pocket clattered on the floor. Corvey didn't take time to pick it up. He kicked it and sent it sliding along the floor under a sofa.

All the people standing about had seen the incident, or at least part of it. Corvey decided a bluff wouldn't pay. There was nothing for it but to run.

He seized Sandra's arm again and, from the rapidity with which she got off her mark, she seemed to have the same idea. They darted out to the concrete.

"All right, stand where you are," said a voice sharply.

Corvey didn't know quite what the danger was before it was removed. When he turned, a man was pitching forward, his gun flying from his hand, and Sandra was rubbing her leg.

"Well done!" Corvey gasped.

"I don't know what you did, Sandra, but it was good."

They jumped on a luggage trolley and Corvey sent it trundling away from the brilliantly lit strip in front of the waiting-room windows.

"It would be futile to take up a plane, even if we could," Corvey said. "The thing to do is get back into town and get out by train or bus. That's the only—"

Two of the small fat tires of the trolley were shot out and it scraped to a stop with a final earsplitting scream of steel on concrete. Corvey didn't see where the shots came from, but the shooting was so precise and so obviously intended to stop them, without harming them, that he knew he and Sandra might just as well stay where they were and wait to be taken in custody.

Nevertheless, they did the natural thing and dashed for the edge of the field. It wasn't the first time Corvey had experienced the sensation of crawling physical terror which came with the knowledge that, at any moment, a bullet might tear through any part of his body, but he knew it was probably the first time Sandra had felt it: He was sorry he had dragged her into this.

There were still no extra lights, no signs of undue confusion, no hue and cry. Just Neave, the man outside and the two shots

which had put the trolley out of action.

Sandra gasped suddenly, and Corvey turned his head to see her go down. Someone had made a neat football tackle on her.

He didn't see what happened after that, for something hard came down on his head and seemed to drive him into the ground like a stake.

FRIDAY NIGHT. Corvey opened his eyes a bit and saw Sandra's legs. There could have been worse awakenings — nevertheless, Sandra's legs were an irrelevance in the circumstances as he remembered them. He opened his eyes fully.

"With us again, Ken?" said Neave.

They were in a small office at the airport. Sandra was in an armchair, watching him. She didn't appear to be hurt. She smiled wryly as his gaze met hers. Neave was standing over him and, behind, were two other men.

Corvey didn't say anything. He was now completely in the power of AS. Anything they didn't know they could soon find out by the use of truth drugs. One good thing was that interrogation would show Sandra wasn't involved with him.

"We could put you against a wall and shoot you, of course," Neave said, "but we're not going

to. I'll put you out of your suspense, Ken. First, as you probably know very well, we're going to drug you and find out all you know. Assuming that's no more than we expect, and that your assignment is what we think it is, we'll give you a short treatment and then you can come back on the staff of the *Star* in your old job.

"Wait a minute—don't let's have any misunderstanding. When I say you can come back, I mean you're coming back by order. We'll shoot you if you don't."

"You want me to work for you, for AS, in fact?" Corvey said.

Neave nodded. "That's it. And don't say you won't. That's a waste of breath and time."

Corvey marveled at the way Neave's manner stayed exactly the same, yet seemed much more effective now that he was an AS operative and not merely a feature editor.

"How about Sandra?" Corvey asked.

Neave shrugged. "We've already questioned Miss Reid. We've nothing against her. In fact, she's with us."

Corvey started. "All the time?"

"Yes, but not the way you mean. Aren't you going to take me up on the 'short treatment' I mentioned?"

"I can guess about that," Corvey said shortly. "You mean psychological treatment."

"Exactly. But hasn't it occurred to you that you may need it?"

CORVEY grinned without humor. "If I'm going to stay alive, I do."

"Not only that—you do need psychiatric treatment, Ken. It seems Miss Reid once told you about it, only she didn't know what she was saying applied to you."

"What are you talking about?"

"Paranoia. Like all colonials, you think Earth's against you. You're wrong. And after your treatment . . ."

"I know, I'll think what you want me to think after my brain's been tampered with."

Neave shook his head. "You still won't even admit it's possible," he said patiently. "I wish you would, Ken. It would make us all feel better. We don't shoot colonial spies, because we don't have to, and because they're not responsible. We just cure them and, after that, they're good AS agents. They disappear or report nonsense to their own worlds or they go back—under our protection, of course—and no doubt the colony concerned thinks we've done something terrible to them, because they've changed. Maybe

you weren't told about that."

Sandra joined in. "Paranoia is a sort of inferiority complex, Ken," she said quietly, "and naturally the colonies tend to feel that way about Earth. You're not insane—only strongly prejudiced on one point. They'll take away that prejudice, that's all."

CORVEY looked from one to the other. He knew that what they said was false, that he was going to have an artificial devotion to Earth set up in him and have his love of Aram broken down.

But he couldn't stop them, anyway. And the way Sandra was looking at him showed that she hadn't changed her mind about him since she agreed to come away with him.

"All right," he said. "I'll admit it's possible, if it gives you any satisfaction. I suppose it's a pretty humane way to treat spies anyway—I've no complaints. I suppose AS knew about me all the time, since you were planted at the Star when I came?"

"We didn't know about you until just the other day," said Neave, "and we weren't sure until today. And I wasn't planted, Ken. You should know that. Think I'm an amateur feature editor? No, that's my job."

"What's your AS connection, then?" Corvey asked curiously.

"Same as yours—or as yours will be. I was once a colonial spy, too."

And suddenly Corvey understood the blinding efficiency of AS. Morally right or morally wrong—Corvey didn't know—Earth had and was going to continue to have the best counter-espionage system in the entire Galaxy.

AS was carnivorous. It swallowed the operatives of every world in the Galaxy except Earth and turned them into its own flesh.

It was a pretty good system.

—J. T. MCINTOSH
