

PLANET STORIES



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Formula For Conquest

By JAMES R. ADAMS

August Q. Twilken had a formula, Freebooter Tod Mulhane had a nose for adventure and Mon Pordo had an urge for Interworld domination. When those three got together, hell had to explode — and did.

Illustration by MURPHY

"I HAVE a formula," the little man said loudly.

I punched him ungently in the ribs and jerked my head toward the mangy crew whooping it up in the close confines of the ill-smelling Martian *musk-parlor*.

"Shh. Not so loud, guy," I whispered from the corner of my mouth. This bunch would slit your throat in a minute, if they knew you had something on you that would bring a credit or two. I don't know what your game is, but let's go in the back room where we can talk without startin' someone's ears to burnin'."

I wrapped my arm around the guy's shoulders and steered him toward the back room, singing and laughing, as though I had an overload of *Meez-musk* and was feeling a little bit happy.

I didn't know what had brought the little fellow to me. I'd never seen him before yet he seemed to know me and had made his way directly to the bar where I stood and addressed me by name. Anybody that knew that much about Tod Mulhane, soldier of fortune, needed looking into, and I was determined to give this mild-mannered, shrimp of a man a thorough going over.

I bolted the door behind us and seated myself at the table always kept there for various games of chance.

"Mousie" nervously assumed a seat and sat staring at me, his big, milky-blue eyes blinking nearsightedly and a withered, vein-covered hand tweeking incessantly at a bedraggled gray mustache.

"I'm Professor August Q. Twilken," he essayed. "I have a formula."

"And I'm Tod Mulhane, as you seem to know, and I have a couple of great big ears, open and waiting. What can I do for you, Twilken?"

Twilken's face suddenly became grim

and the milkiness left his eyes a moment, to disclose dancing, hard lights of determination.

"Nothing for me, Mr. Mulhane," he said slowly. "This is for the world! Yes, for three worlds!"

I nodded patiently, thinking maybe I had a nut on my hands.

"Of course, Twilken. And just what is it we're going to do for these worlds?"

"We're going to save them from the coming Interplanetary War!" Twilken said forcefully. "Here's the way things—er—stack up. We know Jupiter, Saturn and Uranus have their armies poised for a quick thrust at the Allied Worlds—Mars, Earth and Neptune. But, so far, they have hesitated, knowing both sides are pretty well matched in strength and fearing the assault might be drawn out in a long, destructive conflict that would gain them nothing. They won't wait forever, however, and, sooner or later, they'll find a weakness in the Allied Worlds' armor and strike with all the force at their command. Mr. Mulhane, the Allied Worlds *must* be the ones to break this deadlock. *We* must be the ones to gain an edge in strength and force them to disarm, or be destroyed by the ruthless machine of the brain behind their mad plot. But, I forget, you know all of this, Mr. Mulhane."

"Tod's the name," I said absently. "Yes, I know all about Xan VIII's scheme to defeat the Allied Worlds. So what? There's nothing I can do about it. Naturally, being a Martian, I am anxious to see the Allied Worlds win. But I can't see—"

"You're a Martian?" Twilken stared, aghast. "But—but you look like an Earthian!"

"I have many disguises," I smiled. "And many pseudonyms—among them being that of Tod Mulhane. A soldier of fortune such

as I must resort to numerous devices to elude his enemies. Incidentally, how did you know who I was and where to find me?"

"I have—uh—contacts," Twilken stammered. "But your disguise seems so realistic! I would swear you're an Earthian!"

"I put my entire being into a part. I would long since be dead if I were unconvincing in my characterizations. But we digress, Twilken. Come to the point."

"The point is this," Twilken recovered from his astonishment. "If we had the

support of one of the lesser planets, such as Venus, we could easily overthrow Xan's regime and bring a lasting peace to the System. But, at the time, the inhabitants of Venus are in a crude stage of evolution and are too stupid to be of much help. They have expressed their willingness to help, but their ignorance might well be a weight on our progress and turn the tide against us."

I shifted uneasily in my chair and glanced at the door.

"But supposing evolution could be



Professor Twilken clubbed futilely at the Jovian's back.

speeded up on Venus," Twilken continued. "Supposing the inhabitants could be developed as much in two months as would ordinarily take a thousand years. They would soon emerge to a state of intelligence as to be of immense value and aid to our cause. I have something that will do this very thing, Tod!"

I LEAPED from my chair and wrenched the door open, just about scaring Professor Twilken out of a year's growth.

A short, fat Jovian fell into the room and lay grinning up from the floor. His pink, shaggy-browed eyes searched our faces briefly, then he arose, bowing deeply.

"Gentlemen," he intoned. "I hope I am nod indruding. I was leaning wearily againsd dis door, half asleep, and den I suddenly find myself lying here on de floor!" He gestured at the bare planks and laughed. It sounded like a snake hissing. "Mosd clumsy of me!"

The Jovian's inability to pronounce the letter "T" made his speech sound like that of a Venusian gunman. I wondered how much he had overheard.

The Jovian bowed again, brushing dust from his gleaming, spun-metal tunic.

"I drusd I have nod inconvenienced you gentlemen. I musd be more careful, in de future. I have a nasdy habid of falling asleep ad odder people's doors! Now, if you will excuse me . . ."

The Jovian slid through the door and lost himself in the hubbub beyond. I had a hunch we were going to have trouble from him. People just didn't go around 'falling asleep' against strange doors without a purpose.

Twilken had sat all this time, his milky eyes looking about for a hole to crawl in to and his hand clutched his breast, as thought about to have a heart attack.

"Is that your formula?" I indicated his tunic pocket.

"Yes! It must never fall into the hands of the Jovians, Tod. They could make fearful use of it! We must carry out my plan quickly, or that son-of—" Twilken clapped a hand over his mouth, to stifle the strong words he had been about to utter. "—that mad devil will warn his consorts and they'll be after us like hounds. In all fairness, Tod, you must know the Allied Worlds Council is not endorsing

my venture. The diplomatic relations between worlds are stretched to the breaking point, and, if the Jovian government thought the Council was supporting such a plan, they might strike immediately with devastating results to the morale of our people, for there are some who think we can't possibly stand against such an efficient organization as Xan's. That's why I need you. You have a fast ship; you have courage and the brains to carry out my course of action if I should fall by the wayside. Will you help me?"

I grinned and hitched up my pants, Earth-fashion.

"When do we start "

WE WERE well out in the void, thundering toward Venus, when Twilken pointed excitedly at a small speck on the telescreen.

"That's a ship, Tod!" he yelled. "That blasted Jovian's following us!"

I poured more power to my craft and slammed down frantically on the meteor-shield stud—but it was too late. A great blast rocked the ship and girders groaned their protest as they buckled under the terrific pressure. A piece of flying metal smacked Twilken on the head and he sank to the floor, out cold.

I ran to the navigation room locker and snatched out a couple of spacesuits. I tugged and stuffed Twilken into one and barely made it into my own when the air began to hiss out through the torn plates.

We were caught up in the vacuum and whisked out into the dark, cold vastness, to float about like two corks in a millpond.

The Jovian ship, for such it proved to be, rushed in quickly and fastened a grappling-beam on our helpless figures. In less than a minute, we were inside the cruiser and facing the leering Jovian of the *musk-parlor* incident.

"I am mosd pleased ad dis oppordunidy do renew our acquaintandce," he smirked. "No doubd you know whad I am afder? I shall wasde no dime in playing cad and mouse. Give me de formula and dere shall be no drouble."

Twilken came to long enough to shout: "You shan't have it!"

"Bud I will," the Jovian assured him. "I have bud do search you. I am cerdain we shall find de formula on your person.

Will you surrender id volundarily or musd we use force?"

"Give it to him, Augie," I said. "We're cold turkey."

"Misder Mulhane is quide correced," the Jovian agreed. "You have no aldernadive bud do relinquish your secreed."

TWILKEN groaned despairingly and removed his bulger. He dug in his pocket and brought out the formula, somewhat the worse for wear.

The Jovian snatched it eagerly and beamed toothily at us, his thin, pointed tongue darting like a snake over his bloated lips.

"Dank you, Misder Dwilken. Never fear, I shall make good use of your formula. Would you care do know how I indend do defead de Allied Worlds wid id?"

We remained silent.

"Very well, I shall dell you. Jusb as you have a podential ally in Venus, de inhabidands of Pludo are likewise sympadedic to *our* cause. As you know, dey long ago reached and passed de poind of greadesd indelligence, and are slowly reverding do de savage sstage from which dey evolved. I propose do hald dis redrogresion, wid de assistdnce of Misder Dwilken's formula, and resdore dem do deir former greadness. Dey will be dankful do us Jovians, yes, and dey will be happy do assist us in our conquest of de Allied Worlds."

"You—you fiend!" Augie spluttered ineffectually. "You're going to use *my* formula to swing the balance of power in *your* favor!"

"Dad's righd," the Jovian bowed. "Is nod dis de very same ding you indended to do for your own worlds? Durn about is fair play, I once heard on Eard."

"But we weren't planning to destroy you and your crummy bunch with it!" Augie shouted, incensed at the Jovian's condescending air. "We were only going to use it to force your armies to disarm and to remove your cutthroat clique from power."

"No doubd," the Jovian waved a plump, bejewelled hand. "And dad musd never be. Xan VIII has udmosd confidence in my abilidad as chief of de Jovian Secred Police and, if I fail, he would surely kill me

before rediring indo exile. I remember his exact words: 'Mon Pordo, if you bedray de drusd placed in you, dere can be nodding bud dead as a reward!' You can readily appreciate my predicamend, gentlemen. I musd give victory do my governmend or perish as a resuld. Nadurally, when I overheard your conversashion ad de musk-parlor, I realized dad here was a means do an end."

"You're a sly devil, Mon Pordo," I said harshshly.

"Dank you, Misder Mulhane. Dad is a necessary evil of my—ah—profession. Dis ship has sed a course for Jupiter and, dere, you will be held prisoners, pending de oudcome of our experimends wid Dwilken's formula."

"And then you'll kill us!" Augie said hotly.

"Perhaps, Dad is for me do decide. You certdainly have no choice in de madder. And now," Pordo indicated three hulking Jovian brutes, waiting to pounce on us, "dese gentlemen will escord you do your cells. Id is regredable I cannod allow you de run of de ship, bud de oppordunidades dus offered might prove doo dempting do resid. I advise you do go quiedly, gentlemen."

We went quietly.

We were placed in adjoining cells and Twilken spent his rage in rattling the bars and cursing Mon Pordo for a bloody, ill-spawned, war-mongering idiot. The Jovians paid no attention, however, and Augie soon simmered down to a slow boil, pacing his cage like a trapped animal.

We got to talking and Augie wanted to know all about me, why I had chosen such a career and did I have any immediate plans for escape?

At first, I was reluctant to talk about my life-history as a free-booter of space, but Augie was persistent and I soon broke down. I hardy knew how to start, but the words came easy once I got going. Augie listened attentively, interjecting questions here and there.

"I *am* a Martian," I began. "But I was reared and educated on Earth and, consequently, I think, act and talk much as an Earthian. I suppose that's the main reason I most generally adopt the role of Tod Mulhane when hiring out my services. My real name doesn't matter—it

wouldn't mean anything to you. As to why I became a soldier of fortune, perhaps it's because of an insatiable appetite for adventure I possess or maybe because I was left an orphan at an early age and just naturally drifted into it. That doesn't matter either. I've put a lot of space behind my tubes in my brief span of years and seen a lot of things that would make your blood run cold—things I've never talked of before, nor will I tell of them now. So you can sketch in the details yourself, if you care to. I've told all that's worth listening to."

WE HAD BEEN conversing in low whispers and Augie glanced up and down the corridor to make sure no guards were present before voicing his most imperative query.

"Most interesting," he approved. "But, surely you have a method of escape planned? We can't just sit here and let these devils go through with their mad deed."

I motioned for silence and Augie subsided, watching my antics with great interest. I placed my hand between two bars and pulled gently, with an even pressure. My companion stared bug-eyed as the hand came loose, exposing a pink tentacle ending in five, wire-thin appendages.

Augie gasped, suddenly remembering his Martian anatomy.

"Of course!" he breathed jubilantly. "I'd forgotten! If Pordo had realized you were a Martian he would never have placed you in an uninsulated cell!"

I laughed.

"We're not going to escape yet, though," I said softly. "It would do no good. Pordo would merely recapture us and lock us away in the insulated cargo-hold. We wouldn't have a chance then."

"What do you plan to do, then?" Augie asked perplexedly.

"We'll let them think we're helpless," I explained. "They'll go ahead with their scheme and, at the crucial moment, we'll step in and queer the works." I replaced the false hand.

"How?" Augie wanted to know.

"That," I said, "remains to be seen."

* * *

The pilot brought the cruiser in for a perfect landing and the unceasing throb

of the rockets sputtered, died and gave way to a loud silence.

Mon Pordo came down the passageway, flanked on each side by a stony-faced guard. His cruel lips parted in a wide grin as he unlocked our cells and motioned us out.

"We have arrived, gentlemen," he hissed. "I am pleased to note you have made no effort to escape. We shall proceed immediately to the governmental palace where you will be interned in the underground prison-block. You will accompany these men who will lead you to your quarters."

The musclemen hustled us from the ship and into a waiting surface-car. I had refitted the false hand, fusing the ends of the plastic together with a quick jolt of electricity. The stupid guards didn't suspect anything as we roared from the Jove City Spaceport, headed for the luxurious palace which housed the high officials of Jovian government. I could have burnt them to a crisp where they sat, but Twilken was to one side of me and he would be the first to get it. I decided other avenues of action would present themselves in due time, so I relaxed against the cushions and stared casually out the window, mentally mapping the route we were following, to use as reference in our coming escape. Twilken sat dejectedly, his milky eyes playing tag with a small insect beating frantically against the window. I felt a strange kinship for this mild little man. He was so *darn* concerned over our plight; so *terribly* anxious to regain the formula he had labored long and hard to perfect. I wasn't so worried about our present unfavorable circumstances as he—having built up an immunity to such misfortunes in my past escapades. Nevertheless, my brain was working overtime—seeking a way to circumvent the Jovian plot once we had escaped.

We braked to a halt in the palace courtyard and the two ugly Jovians prodded us toward a massive, solid-steel door. The damp, moss-covered tunnel through which we passed ran deep under the palace and row after row of tiny, unlighted cells lined each side. Many of them were occupied, and I didn't care to look twice at the wild-eyed, disease-wracked bodies of Xan's victims. There was a hopeless look on those

hollow-cheeked faces; a blank, "why go on fighting?" stare in the eyes of the more sane—the ones who hadn't been there very long yet. The cells were wet and filth-littered and the suffocating stench of the place was so dense you could almost see it.

We were more fortunate in the matter of living conditions. The cell in which we were placed was large, tolerably dry and was supplied with a couple of candles for illumination. Still, the unrelenting smell and the tortured moans of the prisoners was enough to drive a man mad.

"Pordo wands do keep you alive awhile," one of the guards explained, referring to the clean cell. "If dis formula doesn't show results, id's going do be doo bad for you fellows! Pordo don'd like do be dampered wid, so, if all dis is jusr a drick—look oud!"

The Jovian slammed the door to and the pair went off down the tunnel, echoes of their laughter rolling back to bounce gleefully through the cells, plucking one more anguished groan from the lips of the half-dead men within.

The old-fashioned wax candles were relics of a long-gone day and age, manufactured solely for ornamentation. But some scientist had whiled away a few idle hours by adding a couple of new features.

AUGIE removed the cap from the wick of one and it burst into a brilliant, vnflickering flame. Even it was far superior to the crude electric lighting of the ancients.

"What now?" Augie asked.

"We wait," I said. "This cell isn't too uncomfortable and we can bide our time here; play the game Pordo's way and lull him into a sense of invulnerability. Things may come to a head sooner than you think, and you can bet we'll be in there fighting at the end."

Augie's eyes flamed and his face screwed into a mask of hate.

"I despise that tyrant Pordo!" he breathed soulfully. "D-damn him, if I may use such a vulgar term."

I glanced about the cell and located a musty, well-worn cot. It was the only one the room contained, so it was the floor for one of us. Night must be spreading its black cloak across the world outside and we were both dead-tired.

"We'll flip a coin for the bed," I said. "Then we'll alternate in its use for as many nights as we're here."

Augie chose heads and flipped the coin. It came up tails.

"D-damn," he reiterated. "Seems my luck has flown the coop for good!"

He crossed the room and snapped the cap down over the candlewick. Darkness rushed in, probing inky fingers under the cot and in crevices, eager to strangle any loitering mote of its fleeing enemy.

Pordo visited us the next day, anxious to let us know how he was progressing. He bowed his silly, condescending bow.

"I drusd you have slepd well, gendlemen. I am indeed sorry dere are no bedder quarders available, bud de choice rooms of de palace are quide well-filled wid de visiding diplomads of our allies. Incidendally, de Pludonians have also arrived for de experimend!"

"You mean you're going to conduct the experiment right here on Jupiter?" Augie exclaimed, wide-eyed.

"Dad is precisely whad I mean!" the Jovian bit out. "Do you objecd?"

Augie was too confused to offer a reply. He just stood staring at Pordo, tiny beads of sweat popping out on his forehead.

"You will ask why," Pordo divined. "And I can see no danger in delling you. We have god do desd de formula firsd on a selected few individuals from Pludo. Accordingly, de dwendy-five mosd highly advanced indellecds of Pludo have been broughd here do de palace and will undergo de speeded up evolushion process. In dis way, we may make advance condacd wid de enlightened Pludonians, before evolving de masses, and make a pacd wid dem, pledging deir planed's aid in our projecd. Den, de millions of odders will receive de dreadmend and we will be ready do acd! We are nod doo sdupid do realize de evolved creadures mighd possess animosidy doward our purpose. Dus, in our firsd experimend, we are evolving no more dan can be easily eliminaded, should dey prove hosdile. De formula is even now being prepared and will be applied immediadely. According do Misder Dwilken's dada, de process should be complede in dwo monds, ad de mosd. Id is pleasand to condemplade, isn'd id, gendlemen?"

"It will never work!" Augie shrieked.

"Your plan is utterly mad!"

"Id *bedder* work," Pordo said significantly, "or I'm afraid I shall be forced do adminisder drasdic punishment do dose who have dus waded my dime. Good-day, gentlemen!"

We watched the receding figures through the bars and, when Pordo was out of sight, Augie said through grim lips:

"I don't like it, Tod. He's hitting into something he can't handle!"

The fifth day of our confinement, Augie did something that almost put the fat in the fire.

A guard brought our food and water each day and would dawdle awhile in the cell, heaping salt on our wounds by informing us of how well the experiment was going forward. This day he was exceptionally boastful and Augie was feeling particularly testy about the whole thing.

The Jovian had explained in much detail how you could actually *see* the Plutonians evolving as the formula took effect. His eyes bugged in awe as he told how the skin and flesh stretched and twisted on the skeletons, forming itself into new substance.

As he turned to leave, smug in the knowledge he had paved the way for a sleepless night, Augie jumped from the cot and hissed after him:

"*Misnu T!*"

THE GUARD whirled, eyes blazing.

The Jovians were extremely sensitive about their vocal defect that made forming of the letter "T" physically impossible. Augie's hot expletive was the equivalent of telling Pordo's underling he was too dumb to pronounce the sound.

The enraged dupe leaped at Augie, snarling fiercely. The two went down in a tangle flying arms and legs, the Jovian pouring sledgehammer blows into Augie's midriff—blows that were meant to kill. He wore no gun, or he would have used it. The Jovians were giving us no opportunity at escape.

I jumped into the fray, knowing if I didn't intercede in Augie's behalf the guard would maul him into a bloody pulp.

The Jovian turned on me and closed in, fists flailing and teeth gritting in fury at my interruption. I sidestepped his wild

body punch and heard bone crunch as I caught his chin on a well-timed uppercut. The guard screamed, blood dripping from his torn lips and Augie came in triumphantly from behind, raining mince, bird-like blows on his head.

It didn't last long. The other guards, attracted by the clamorous uproar, came on the run and quickly subdued us with clubbed flame-pistols. Our badly-beaten opponent was dragged from the room, uttering garbled, vengeful threats, and we were left to lick our wounds.

"You shouldn't have done that," I mildly reproached Augie.

"I was mad." He thrust out a stubborn chin. "They're stirring up a hornet's nest, Tod, and I won't be responsible for what happens! My formula was meant to be used on the native worlds of the subjects and there's no telling what kind of monstrosities they may evolve by not following the natural laws embodied in it. The resultant organisms may be intelligent, yes, but—"

Augie broke off, tenderly fingering a swollen eye and munching thoughtfully on his lower lip. He was sure down in the dumps all right, and I couldn't blame him. We were in a hell of a mess, putting it mildly. Three worlds to save, and we couldn't even save ourselves!

We spent two full months in the dungeon. I fretted away the last thirty nights on the floor, since contact with the cold stone had goaded Augie's rheumatism into full-flare.

News leaked in now and then and, on the sixty-second day, our guard disclosed the experiment had been completed and the high officials of Jupiter and its cohorts would meet that very day with the evolved Plutonians in the Grand Assembly Hall of the palace to form a pact that would seal the fate of the Allied Worlds.

"Now is the time, Augie!" I whispered excitedly.

Augie was electrified into action. He backed off in a corner and pulled the cot down over him. There would be tremendous heat.

I placed one hand under a foot and heaved up. The false hand remained on the floor, leaving my prehensile tentacle free to act.

I strode to the door and glanced up

and down the tunnel. No guards were present—they were probably outside discussing the conference, which was now in progress.

I twined my "fingers" about a thick, steel bar and gave it all the juice I had! The metal glowed red-hot slowly fading into an incandescent white! The stuff began to melt, flowing out into the tunnel and forming bubbling puddles at my feet. The door didn't last long; all that was left was the cooling pools of metal and a gaping frame that yawned invitingly! The way was clear!

"Willing to take a chance?" I asked.

Augie gulped and nodded weakly.

I boosted him to my back and made a sudden dash through the hissing, liquid steel, taking care not to slip. I wasn't afraid for myself, I'm non-conductive to heat. But Augie, perched precariously on my back, would certainly be engulfed and devoured by the stuff if I should fall.

THEN we were through the molten hell, making our way cautiously down the passageway. Pitiful moans assailed our ears; frenzied pleas for us to release the sufferers inside welled forth from the dark cells. But I was adamant.

"Time enough for that later, if we're successful," I said to Augie. "These half-dead creatures would only be in our way in the coming fight."

We reached the outer door and I pulled tentatively on the handle. It was unlocked! Apparently, the guards thought the thick cell-doors were enough protection against escape and hadn't bothered to fasten this one. Anyway, they would return soon.

"You wait here," I whispered to Augie. "They're probably outside the door and would raise a hell of a noise if we came rushing out fighting. I may be forced to use a little persuasion on them."

I opened the door and stepped casually outside. The guards were huddled in a circle not ten feet from me, absorbed in an abstract debate on what would arise from the palace conference. One of them spotted me and let out a squeal.

"L-look!" he stammered. "One of de prisoners is loose!"

They marshalled their forces and advanced on me slowly, quietly, seeing no

reason to summon aid. There were five of them—I was but one.

They made a concerted rush and clamped eager hands on my arms. Mon Pordo and Xan would reward them liberally for thwarting such an ill-planned coup. It was so easy, too.

I placed my exposed tentacle on the shoulder of one and let go with a few thousand volts!

The Jovians were packed together tightly and the electric charge dispatched them with grim ease. There was nothing left but a sickening mass of blackened, cooked flesh.

Augie poked his head through the door and gagged wretchedly at the charnel sight.

"It was necessary," I said.

We stuffed the charred bodies inside the tunnel door and fled swiftly across the courtyard to the palace-proper where I pointed to a high window. Vines ran rampant on the wall. It would be an easy matter to climb up them to the window.

We started up, gaining footing in small cracks between stones and going hand over hand toward the opening. Augie looked down once, and turned a pale green. From then on, he kept his eyes fastened to our objective.

I reached the window first and held out a hand to Augie. I pulled him through and we stood looking about. We were on a huge balcony, overlooking the brilliantly lighted Grand Assembly Hall. The most eminent political figures of three planets were there below us.

Here was Taj Morkus and Klex II of Saturn. There was Wen Dorn and the intellectual, if perverted, scientist, Haljin from Uranus.

The wily Mon Pordo was all about the Hall, like a fretful hen, bowing and shaking hands and directing the villainous delegates to seats at the council table.

At the head of the table sat Xan VIII himself, adorned from head to foot with rare, exotic jewels, watching the redundant proceedings from bored, seemingly-sleepy eyes.

There were more, many more, but those six were the main cogs of the machine. I counted exactly one hundred figures

seated around the table, and some of them were strange beings indeed. . . .

I knew immediately these were the evolved Plutonians. There were twenty-five of them, ranged along one side of the immense table, fidgeting uncomfortably under the concentrated attention of their hosts. There was something odd about those creatures, although I couldn't say just what. Certainly their color was strange; a sick, yellowish-white—but that wasn't what bothered me. I could tell by their actions they were rational, thinking beings. It was something about their "flesh" that had me going. Augie solved the problem with his next words.

"My lord!" he whispered loudly. "Those creatures are composed almost entirely of an impure form of calcium carbonate! I thought something like this would happen! Away from the native world, the Plutonian process of evolution was torn between its natural tendencies and the contradictory characteristics of its new environment. This is the result!"

It was then I knew what we must do. We went over the plan hurriedly, yet making sure there were no flaws. Down below, Mon Pordo was beginning a speech. He stood at the table importantly, white teeth flashing against the purple background of his corpulent lips.

"Gentlemen," he began blandly, as if that was the only form of address he knew. "I have de unequalled honor of presending do you a mosd marvelous revelashion. I have de privilege of making known do you dad which hras been keptd secret from your eyes; dad which we have ofden hindd ad in the pasd dwo monds, bud have nod yed divulged. Once I have mad dis gread disclosure, you will realize viddy is widin our grasp—judd as our enemies will realize furdur resisdance is endirely fudile and will abandon deir idealisdic cause. I—"

HE RAMBLED on like that for half an hour, finally getting around to introducing the Plutonians. Things moved more swiftly then. The Plutonians were just the least bit reluctant to form an allegiance and the experienced diplomats argued, pleaded, thrust and parried and generally browbeat them into a decision. The confident delegates finally withdrew

to other parts of the palace to give the beleaguered Plutonians a chance to think it over in private. This was what I had been counting on, and we took quick advantage of the situation.

Augie scurried back through the window and clung to the vines outside, to be a safe distance away from what was to come. An hour, the diplomats had said. We would make good use of those sixty minutes. I leaped to the balcony-rail and plummeted down in the center of the Hall.

The Plutonians didn't have time to get out so much as a peep. I had divested myself of both false arms and, even in mid-air, I released a killing charge of electricity that left the duped creatures slumped in their chairs—lifeless hulks. If the armed Mon Pordo had been there, things would probably have been different. The Jovians were quick-eyed and quick-acting and he would have blasted me to pieces with his ato-matic the minute I appeared on the balcony-rail. That's why I couldn't risk it before. I didn't want Augie facing the devils alone.

I spent quite a little time in the Hall, standing in the center of the table and sending out wave after wave of electricity over the dead Plutonians—doing things to their bodies.

Finally satisfied I had accomplished my purpose, I arranged the beings in life-like poses along the table and moved silently to a spot beneath the balcony-rail.

Augie had succeeded in tearing one of the tough vines loose from the palace wall and now he lowered it to me, keeping a wary eye on the Hall door.

Going quickly up the thin fiber strand, I stepped jubilantly over the rail—and found myself looking directly into the venom-filled eyes of Mon Pordo!

He was standing in back of Augie, a little to one side, so the deadly ato-matic held unwaveringly in his hand could cover us both.

The frozen surprise on my face caused Augie to turn and stare sickly. All the heart seemed to go out of him at that moment. His shoulders slumped wearily and the hard lines of determination in his face dissolved into a black pool of despair beneath the caustic solvent of a big, unashamed tear. We were beaten!

For once, Pordo was so infuriated he forgot all about bowing. His eyes smouldered like blobs of hot grease, about to burst into flame; frenzied, unholy hate seemed to ooze from every pore. Even so, he spoke quietly.

"A nead plan, gentlemen. Bud id has failed, jusb as all plods againsd Xan VIII will fail! Drue, you have given us a demporary sed-back by killing de Pludonians, bud we sdill have de formula and dere are odders who, dough nod as indelligend, will well serve our purpose. Id is doo bad I decided do visid you during de recess, isn'd id? Odderwise, your rash acd may have succeeded! When I found you gone and your guards dead, I knew insdandly whad you were up do and came here as de logical poind for you do sdrike from. I am sorry, gentlemen, bud you are doo dangerous do be allowed do live. So, I musd eliminade you!" Pordo raised he gun and his finger tightened on the firing stud.

This was it! I couldn't blast Pordo with an electric shock without killing Augie, too. Good-bye, "Tod Mulhane"—you've had a short but interesting life! I steeled myself for the atomic capsule that would soon rip through my body.

Augie acted almost impulsively. He still held the fibrous vine in his hand and had noted slyly one of Pordo's feet enmeshed in the extending end. He lunged suddenly backward and Pordo came down hard on the balcony floor!

INSTANTLY we were on him; clawing, punching—making a desperate bid for the ato-matic. Pordo tried to scream and Augie planted a solid kick in his belly. The Jovian suddenly decided he didn't want to scream; maybe because there wasn't any air left in him to yell with.

I whipped a tentacle about the fat throat and began tightening my muscles, ruthlessly. Pordo's eyes bugged hideously and the wind whistled through his teeth in a vain effort to enter his lungs.

Sure, we were two on one, but fair play didn't enter the picture. We were fighting to save three worlds, and Xan and his henchmen had used the same tactics in their blood-drenched rise to power. This was a case of 'Durn about *is* fair play,' as Pordo would say.

Right now, he wasn't saying *anything*. The fat body had gone limp in my grasp and Pordo's evil soul was probably this minute bowing at the gates of hell and saying, "Gendlemen!"

"They'll be returning any minute!" Augie panted anxiously. "We've got to work fast!"

I handed him a small chunk of stuff I'd gouged from the body of a dead Plutonian and retired to my place at the balcony rail.

Augie took the stuff gingerly and placed it on the flat, upturned butt of Pordo's ato-matic. He crossed the slanting balcony to a point where the ceiling almost met the floor and waited there breathlessly.

A network of pipes ran across that ceiling. Pipes that contained water. This part of the palace was much the same as it had been many years ago, when the first Jovian dictator had met with his underlings here in the Assembly Hall and formed the policies of government that had laid the groundwork for eventual System domination. The Jovians entertained a sentimental attachment to this outmoded room and wouldn't think of modernizing it, except for inconsequential details such as lighting. Even the ancient, automatic sprinkler system remained. Originally used to combat fire, it was now nothing but an ornament; a relic of bygone days. The Jovians didn't need it now; scattered about the room were dozens of the recently invented *Kelecyrine-capsules*, one of which could extinguish the most persistent of flames. But I was staking everything on the hope the sprinkler was still connected to a water pump.

The diplomats were reentering the room! They moved forward confidently—unrealizing of the fact the Plutonians were dead. Xan led the procession, his gigantic belly bouncing up and down in rhythm to his pompous steps.

Now! I waved my hand frantically at Augie. He snapped to sudden life. A stream of saliva squirted from his lips and impaled the stuff on the gun butt. It literally exploded into flames! Fingers of fire danced around the gun butt, questing hungrily for something to absorb.

Augie supplied that something. He moved the gun up under a rusty sprinkler pipe and held it there. Luckily, he had

had the foresight to empty the gun's atomic capsules and wrap a torn piece of cloth about his hand.

The Assembly Hall was big and the men below were walking slowly. Augie's torch had ample time to heat the pipes before the group reached the table.

Xan was getting suspicious. The unmoving forms of the Plutonians had him puzzled. They ought to at least have the courtesy to rise from their chairs to acknowledge his august presence.

At that moment, one of the dead beings tumbled from his seat, breaking into a million pieces as he hit the floor. Xan yelped alarmedly and rushed forward—just as the sprinkler pipes opened up and gushed forth a thick sheet of water; drenching the whole assemblage!

THINGS began to happen then! A tremendous *whoom!* shook the room and a canopy of flame flashed out from the table! In a trice, the Hall was a blazing holocaust. Scream after scream tore from the throats of the victims as the roaring inferno gulped them in and fiery teeth gnawed the flesh from their bones. There wasn't a chance of one of them reaching a *Kelecyrine-capsule!*

We raced to the window and tumbled down the vines. I had the location of the space-port well fixed in my mind, although it didn't matter much now if we were captured. The plot had been foiled!

"We have the Plutonians to thank for our success!" Augie yelled, pounding across the courtyard.

He was right. Calcium carbonate had been almost the sole constituent of the Plutonians. There were other elements, yes, but in a far less degree. Using electricity for heat, I had simply converted that impure carbonate into a crude form of calcium oxide! It was crumbly stuff, but it had stuck together long enough to deceive the conspirators into thinking

everything was shipshape in the Assembly Hall. When those sprinkler pipes let go with their load of water, well . . . any high school boy can tell you what happened.

"What about those devils in the dungeon, Tod?" Augie had to shout to make himself heard above the turmoil. Guards were running for the palace, intent on saving their ruler; screaming court-ladies were dropping from windows, enveloped in clouds of dense, black smoke. I knew the *Kelecyrine-capsules* had long since burst and put out the flames, but not before they had done their grisly job.

"They'll be released when the Jovians find their government has collapsed about them!" I flung back. "We've got to get away from here before these people come out of their daze!" That sounds cowardly, but, to me, it was prudence.

We found a surface-car and sped for the Jove City Space-port. It was deserted. Everybody had been drawn to the palace by the frantic emergency calls of the Jovian Secret Police. We scrambled in a small, private cruiser and were soon far out in space, making for Earth.

"In a way, I'm glad the formula was lost," Augie said reflectively. "I can't reconstruct it from memory, you know. Too complicated. I don't think I would, anyway, seeing what havoc it can cause."

I nodded, setting the automatic control and relaxing in the bucket seat. "Tod Mulhane" had pulled through one more scrape.

"Too," Augie continued, "there would be no need of it now. Our enemies will be practically helpless now their leaders are dead, and we can easily force them to capitulate. The Jovians and their allies should welcome a democratic government after so many years of tyranny. Incidentally, Tod, where do you go from here?"

I grinned at Augie and lit a *Tobac-tube*.

"I haven't any plans, Augie, but you can bet I'll not sit home knitting!"