

PERRY IN PERIL

"KILL RHODAN!" A fraction of political fanatics on Earth has secretly organised to murder the Administrator of Terra.

A radical group known as the Nature Philosophers is no less determined to see him dead.

And when they band together—these mad would-be assassins, 30 to 40 strong and backed by 8,000 misguided supporters—Perry's life is truly imperilled.

Rhodan having outlawed the death penalty in the Solar Empire, a different kind of fate awaits the audacious killers and their cohorts who are dedicated to the death of the Peacelord.

You'll hold your breath as you see them in action, the—

SOLAR ASSASSINS

1/ STRANGER IN THE NIGHT

"THE BIG DAY is not far away!"

Huang's eyes widened in startled reaction. "Can it be possible? You mean you plan to—?"

Mullon nodded gravely. "That's right—I am! The time is ripe to put a stop to this man—this arrogant dictator who thinks he's ruler of the world!"

Huang clapped his hands happily. "It will be a day of jubilant celebration," the Oriental cried enthusiastically, "for every right-thinking person in the Solar Empire!"

Whom could they be discussing? Some new rogue mutant of the ilk of Monterny of the previous century? Some fresh madman on the terrestrial scene, hurling defiance at the law & order of the 21st century political system of the Sol System?

No, insane as it would seem to most, the boast that the 'beast' who menaced the serenity of the solar system would be stopped this threat applied to none other than Perry Rhodan!

The action that led up to this astounding declaration had begun a few minutes earlier. "Fight the tyrants!" a man named Mullon had answered in response to an innocuous "What do you want?" asked by a suspicious man who opened a door a mere crack in response to his knock. "Fight the tyrants!" seemed a somewhat overly melodramatic password to Mullon, nevertheless he spoke it with conviction.

The door opened just wide enough to admit this full-grown man. Mullon pushed his frame into the dim interior of the dwelling. The other man took care that the door slid back into its slot, then pressed a button that illumined the entrance hall.

"Mullon?" After a nodded affirmation, the Oriental continued. "We didn't expect you till tomorrow."

Mullon removed his coat, hung it on an old-fashioned hall stand of the 1909. "I had a flight on a freighter that carried only a few passengers. It didn't fly to schedule so I'm here earlier."

The man who had received him opened a 2nd door and escorted his guest into a room darker than the hallway.

The summer in Tientsin was hot. A person could just barely endure the heat during the 3 hours post meridian if he made sure not the slightest tendril of air from the blast furnace outside was permitted through the tiniest crack into the interior.

Mullon sat down sweatily. His host, a small, slightly built southern Chinese, busied himself at a cabinet, producing a cooling refreshment.

Mullon's beet-red face brightened even more, though not with heat but at expectation of the soothing draught. "Great, Huang—I was about to die of thirst!"

Huang smiled as he placed 2 glasses on the small tea table. "We too. But of course with us it is a thirst for information. We live here in the shadow of the great capital city yet are cut off from the world. The 5 True Democrats we have here in Tientsin are apparently not of sufficient importance to be kept au courant."

Mullon caught his cohort's reproach. "That may have been the case for the last couple of months," he said defensively, "while everything has been in turmoil. But the big day is not far away!" He continued:

"Actually, I'm only the advance agent. About 20 more men will follow me and they will have to be concealed in inconspicuous places in Tientsin. Tomorrow I'll be going on to Terrania. You'll hear from me when to send on the rest of the men. It'll probably be 4 to 6 weeks before I can have everything set up to insure the success of our main blow."

Huang hung on every word, growing more enthusiastic by the moment. "What good fortune we have that such a capable man as yourself is leader of the True Democrats! Where would we be..."

His was not idle flattery but Mullon shrugged it off. "Anyone could be doing the same as I, Huang. All it takes is a conviction that the democratic form of government is the only one capable of upholding human dignity and that this man in Terrania has shown himself to be a dictator of the worst kind. He alone holds all the reins in his hands. Nobody has a thing to say about his operations and he presumes to make decisions for 5 billion people on his own authority.

"Once a person has come to realize this, his thoughts are not far from revolution. There are 10,000 True Democrats on the American west coast. That's not much in comparison to the overall mass of the indolent and impassive ones but they are prepared to sacrifice everything they have so that our great goal may be achieved.

"Perry Rhodan must die!"

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According to plan, Horace O. Mullon flew on to Terrania the next morning.

Terrania stood where 70 years previous the endless, desolate expanse of the Gobi Desert had stretched away from the shores of an almost dried-up lake of gleaming salt. But there was now nothing to be seen of the desert. Scientific irrigation had transformed the sandy waste into a flourishing garden land.

Terrania was the seat of the highest government authority of the Solar Empire as well as the administration of Terra and thus it was the home base of the Administrator—the man that Horace O. Mullon had taken it upon himself to kill: Perry Rhodan.

The viewscreens of the landing rocket presented a broad panorama of the tremendous city. Mullon could not help marvelling at its advanced architecture and its spotless beauty.

He had been certain that there would be some kind of customs control at the disembarkation point so he was somewhat surprised to see everybody changing over immediately to a gyro-bus and getting on board. He joined the other passengers and went with them across to the reception building. By some mysterious route, Mullon's baggage had already arrived there. Mullon didn't know what to do with his 2 suitcases since he still hadn't found a hotel so he followed the arrow of a lighted sign that said Storage. He looked a bit helplessly along the row of counter booths until he suddenly heard a friendly voice calling to him:

"Step right over here, Mr. Mullon, if you wish to store your luggage!"

At this statement, Mullon whirled around. For a person who had a plan up his sleeve to murder the top executive of the Earth, it was a considerable shock at this proximity to the target to be addressed with his correct name by a perfect stranger. A man with a friendly smile had appeared behind one of the counters. Mullon approached him.

"I still don't know what hotel I'm going to get," he explained, "so I'd like to leave my bags here."

The man nodded good-naturedly and pressed a button on some kind of writing machine, then picked up the plastic strip that shot out of a slot.

"Your receipt," he said, handing over the plastic claim strip. "Please, Mr. Mullon—everything else will be taken care of; you don't have to worry about a thing. When you've found a hotel, just drop the strip there in the mail tube. Your luggage will be delivered as soon as possible."

Mullon gaped at the strip of plastic in his hand. "Well, all that is very nice," he muttered, "but how come you know me?"

The man returned an indulgent smile. "The airport's electronic equipment, including all rocketships stationed here, comprise in their entirety a single cybernetic unit," he explained. "Whatever is known to the electronic passenger register of your rocket is known also by myself."

"How? What? Do you mean to say that you know the names of all the people who arrive or leave here?"

"Naturally. My memory consists of around one billion storage cards, each of which holds 4096 cores, Mr. Mullon. I am no exception. All robots of class C-4 are so constructed."

"All robots—!" gasped Mullon.

Somebody behind him was tittering. Mullon was hardly aware of it. It was a considerable shock for a fervent revolutionary from the old-fashioned city of Seattle to have somebody he'd taken for a man reveal himself as a robot. Back home at the airport ticket office there were only 2 local robots, carefully camouflaged to look like automatic computer cabinets.

The C-4 robot was not offended in the least.

"Your reaction doesn't upset him," came a clear, friendly voice from behind him, and he detected a slight laugh. "He goes through this all the time."

Mullon turned and saw a girl. "Good Lord!" he sighed. "Are you perhaps a robot too?"

"No," she laughed. "But I get along well with them. I've been living in Terrania for several years."

The appearance of the girl enabled him to recover from the shock over the robot. His cool deliberation returned to him. "Then perhaps you might be able to help me," he suggested, with a mock expression of concern. "I'm just a tourist on my own hook. I don't have any big-time facilities behind me, such as with a giant corporation. Where can I find accommodations here?"

The girl spread her hands and shrugged her shoulders. "Anywhere. It depends on how much you want to spend."

Mullon smiled. "How rich do I look?"

The girl looked at him appraisingly. "It's hard to say. I'd figure that Flattner's is about right for you."

"A hotel?"

"Yes."

Mullon pretended to be a bit shy and self-conscious. The girl looked at him questioningly so he gave the situation a try. "You know, I wouldn't want to be a burden on you but if you don't happen to be busy—would you show me where it's located?"

The girl nodded.

"Incidentally, my name is Mullon."

"Yes, I know. The C-4 spoke it loudly enough. My name is Nicholson. Freddy Nicholson."

During his first day in Terrania, Mullon didn't concern himself very much with the mission that had brought him here. Instead, he dedicated his attention to Freddy Nicholson, who apparently was very much in love with her city and was therefore an excellent guide.

They were together until just before midnight. They agreed to meet on the following day and Mullon was pleased at the prospect of seeing the pretty young woman again because he had already grown fond of her.

It took him some time to get in a relaxed enough state to get some sleep.

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When he awoke in the darkness later he found his responses a bit sluggish. He had to scrabble about in his brain for awhile to figure out where he was.

Then he began to wonder why he had awakened in the middle of the night. At an angle behind him he saw the outline of the big window that gave a view of the hotel grounds.

He was startled by a sudden sound and groped for the nightstand. He had placed his pistol in the drawer. He felt about for it in the dark. There!

But it did him no good. For somewhere a needle-sharp pain hit him and in seconds a numb, stupefying lassitude suffused his entire body. With a soft moan, Mullon sank back onto his pillow and in the next moment lost consciousness.

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When he awoke the 2nd time it was bright daylight.

Mullon's memory came back only in fragments at first. When he finally saw the blue knob on the drawer of the nightstand, things came back into focus for him.

That's right! Somebody was there! He had tried to get the drawer open in order to get his gun. But before he succeeded, somebody had paralysed him—apparently with some kind of nerve drug. Why?

He sprang out of bed and stumbled against the dresser. He had to hold on tight to keep from falling on his knees. The after effects of the dosage were still with him.

The nightstand had been closed again. Mullon remembered that he had not had a chance to close it. Therefore, it had been closed by his unknown assailant.

What had he been after?

Mullon went to the bathroom and turned on the shower, allowing its cold needle spray to pummel his head. After that he was able to think more clearly.

What had the stranger wanted?

Which was of course a ridiculous question! People in Terrania knew what he was up to and they had attempted to find sufficient evidence to justify a warrant for his arrest. They had forced entry into his room and looked through his belongings.

Mullon checked his luggage and opened the suitcases that he had not taken pains to unpack on the previous day. He discovered that their contents were in obvious disarray.

They had rummaged through everything.

For a long moment Mullon was seized and held by terror. They knew why he had come to Terrania! Rhodan's secret police had been informed! There was nothing to do but get out of here! At any moment they could come and arrest him.

He didn't even take time to wash up. He got dressed hastily but as he was zipping his shirt the thought came to him: why should he bolt out of here, after all? He had been careful not to include anything in his belongings that could reveal his seditious intentions. The very fact that they had ransacked his personal effects was proof enough that they still didn't have anything on him but were merely suspicious.

They couldn't hold anything against him on pure suspicion alone. And even if they did and he tore out of here there'd be the same status quo in any other part of the Solar Empire he might choose to go to because after all Perry Rhodan's jurisdiction wasn't limited to just Terrania.

Conclusion? Stay here!

Mullon stripped down again and treated himself to a leisurely shower. The result was startling. The steamy heat of the water seemed almost to be an antidote to the nerve drug in his system. When he stepped out of the shower he no longer felt any trace of the after effects he had suffered as a result of the assault during the night.

While dressing for the 2nd time, he looked at his watch. He was startled to note that it was almost 1 o'clock. He had agreed to meet Freddy for lunch at 1.

But of a sudden he failed to generate the same enthusiasm as on the previous day. During the night he had been reminded a little too painfully that he had not come to Terrania merely to fall in love with a strange young lady.

2/ GAME OF CAT & MOUSE

Freddy was shocked when she saw him. "Good grief, you look a sight! What happened to you?"

Mullon laughed nervously. "I didn't sleep well," he said.

They sat down and placed their orders. Completely in contrast to the previous evening, it was difficult to maintain a conversation. Mullon chafed under Freddy's secret surveillance.

"Do you want to know something?" she asked suddenly. "You've had a very sizeable dose of Cepheidin."

Mullon's eyes narrowed. "What did you say?"

"Cepheidin. It's a nerve poison that is extracted from plants that are only obtainable from planets belonging to a Delta-Cepheid variable type sun. It's fairly treacherous stuff. A millionth of a gram of the concentrated extract is enough to paralyse the human nervous system for a matter of days. How did you get hit with it?"

"Who, me?" protested Mullon evasively. "Nobody has 'hit' me with anything of the sort. I don't even know what you're talking about!"

Freddy made a deprecating gesture as though she didn't believe him. "I'm studying galactic biology at the Terranian Academy and the first thing a student learns there is all about the dangerous plants the galaxy has to offer. A few hours after a dose of Cepheidin, the eyeballs take on a bluish colouration. Take a look in my mirror."

She had already taken out her pocket mirror and held it up to him. Mullon grasped it and examined his eyes. They gleamed back at him with a sky-blue brilliance!

Mullon realized that it would serve no useful purpose to lie to her so he finally related what had happened to him during the night. Naturally, Freddy wanted to know if he suspected anyone or if he could think of any reason for the assault. But Mullon answered her with a clear tone of conviction. "No. I'm just a hick tourist out of one of the farthest back woods areas in America. I came here to take a look at the biggest city in the world. I haven't anything up my sleeve against anybody and I can't figure out what they could have been looking for in my room last night. Maybe a case of mistaken identity?"

"Perhaps," replied Freddy.

From then on the subject was not discussed again although Mullon had the impression that Freddy continued to ponder the mystery.

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This day was not as cheerful and uninhibited as the previous one. But it was nevertheless gratifying in certain respects. Mullon used the opportunity to see as much as possible of the great city and to learn incidentally how the one big dream of tourists here could be attained: to catch a personal glimpse of Perry Rhodan himself.

"Whenever he has time," Freddy told him, "Rhodan comes to the main seminars at the Academy. As far as I know, participation in the discussions is open to anybody. I'm sure you'd be able to see him there."

"When are they holding the next one?"

"I'd say in about a week."

"Will Rhodan be there?"

"If he's in Terrania you can count on it."

Mullon was interested in knowing what kinds of subjects were taken up at such open discussions and he was surprised to learn that the topics were always of general interest.

"For the most part," explained Freddy, "the discussions concern the position of the Earth in the galactic framework and its various forms of government. For me these public conferences are among the most interesting features that Terrania has to offer."

By and large, Mullon was considerably surprised. This did not conform to the picture he had formed of the tyrant—that he would make such unrestricted public appearances.

In the course of their tour of the city they finally arrived at the periphery of the gleaming dome that covered the most important administration buildings along with a small spaceport. Freddy parked the car she had rented for Mullon in the circular avenue that surrounded the great dome. While still in the car, Mullon took a moment to observe the gigantic glistening bubble that towered almost vertically into the bright blue sky before him, its vault-like curvature at first hardly noticeable.

Observed head on, the dome was entirely transparent. It gave one the impression that there was no barrier at all between this side of the street and the buildings across from him. But light coming from the sides was partially reflected and above there was a critical angle where total reflection occurred. From there on the dome looked like a silvery half-bubble.

Mullon knew that the entire unusual structure consisted of energy. It was nothing other than a barrier wall that denied entrance to the most important part of the city as well as the whole Solar Empire unless one could produce some kind of an entry permit. This excluded not only intruders in human form but also bombs or other infernal devices.

Mullon and Freddy finally got out and crossed the street. Many people were gathered on that side in front of the glittering wall and were amusing themselves by trying to stick their fingers as far as they could into the protective energy barrier.

Freddy and Mullon joined them. Freddy laughed when Mullon drew his finger back in alarm from the rubbery, invisible obstruction. He tried it again several times and Freddy explained that the actual energy shield was deadly to touch. In consideration of possible danger to tourists, however, an outer repulsion shield was provided at the street level. It was this extra repulsion field that offered the rubbery resilience to finger touching.

For the first time Mullon revealed a glimpse of his true sentiments when he remarked that it didn't seem worthy of the chiefs of a democratic super power to fortify themselves behind a deadly, impenetrable wall of energy.

Which served to provoke Freddy. She advised him that Rhodan himself had no need to hide from anybody and that the main purpose of the energy shield was to protect valuable and in some respects irreplaceable equipment which had been stored in the 'Government Quarter'.

Actually, Freddy appeared to be distressed by Mullon's view, which in turn caused Mullon to be distressed. For how in his whole lifetime could he ever make out with a woman—as he had entertained in his more daring fantasies since yesterday—when he was a True Democrat and for her, apparently,

enthusiasm for Rhodan and the structure of the entire Solar Empire that he had built up was practically a love affair.

However, this small dissension between them was forgotten when a new experience occurred just at the right moment: they happened to reach the edge of the spaceport, which was located outside the city, in time to have a close view of the takeoff of a gigantic EP-Transport ship.

EP stood for Exterior Planets, which pertained to settlements on the moons of Saturn and Jupiter, and the 2 research stations on Jupiter and Saturn proper. Until now, Mullon had only witnessed such takeoffs on a TV screen. The space giant was spherical in shape and towered 1000 feet above the field. The highly accelerated quanta-particle beams acting as start boosters streamed downward from its equatorial section in a glistening bright curtain of light. Except for the high whine of propulsion engines and the roar of wind created by the action, there was nothing much to hear.

"It's hard to imagine," murmured Freddy, "that that ponderous big crate will have landed on Jupiter within 30 hours—considering that it doesn't have even the simplest type of trans-light space drive."

Toward evening, Mullon expressed a special desire to see Lake Goshun at first hand. Freddy drove him there and let herself be talked into a boat excursion. They rented a motorboat for 3 hours and bought a ready-to-eat supper in a hermetically sealed bag as provisions for the ride.

Mullon drove the boat far enough out on the inland sea so that the southern shore they had started from disappeared in the glare of the sinking sun on the horizon. Then he cut the engine and reached for the oars. "It's more romantic this way," he smiled.

Freddy had leaned back deep into the cushions of her backrest and now she looked up at the darkening sky.

A string of small islands appeared in the gloaming and Mullon headed towards them. He searched out the island that seemed best for a landing and since he was making slow progress he turned on the motor again—also in view of the fact that a boat appeared from the north-east and appeared to have selected the same group of islands as its goal.

Freddy sat up and observed the strange boat. "That's funny," she muttered. "Who could be running around out here so far from land?"

Mullon didn't see anything unusual about it but Freddy assured him that normally no one came this far out on the lake. Rental boats seldom came out further than 6 or 7 miles from their service landing.

"But you and I are out here, aren't we?" argued Mullon. "Why shouldn't somebody else have the same idea?"

Freddy shook her head. Mullon's argument was not convincing. "I wish I had brought a telescope with me," she said.

Mullon arrived at the island of his choice ahead of the strangers. With a surge of the engine he drove the boat high into the underbrush on the shore. He helped Freddy out, brought the supper back to the bank and opened it. The food was excellent and Mullon devoured his portion with a healthy appetite. Then he had to get up and light the boat lamps as meanwhile it had become totally dark.

On the other hand, Freddy did not seem to be able to shake loose from her uneasiness. She only picked

at her food while repeatedly watching their surroundings. But the strange boat did not put in an appearance.

It was difficult to get a conversation started. A bit disgruntled, Mullon finally suggested that they return home and Freddy was willing.

Mullon launched the boat again and turned it so that the route of their departure would take them between 2 smaller islands in order to reach open water. Freddy suggested that they extinguish the navigation lights and use the oars but Mullon laughed her out of it. He let the rather old-fashioned motor keep running and guided the puttering boat directly toward the 2 islands.

Freddy sat next to him with her eyes narrowed suspiciously. She was tensely on the alert as if to jump overboard at the first sign of danger. Her attitude began to puzzle Mullon. How could the mere sight of a harmless boat set her so much on edge?

Suddenly the islands were upon them. Mullon had to be careful in his navigation between them. He leaned over the gunwale to his left in order to watch the narrow water passage.

In the same instant something whistled past him and plopped into something nearby. Mullon started and turned to see Freddy's fear-widened eyes as she sank to her side. Sticking out of her plastic leather jacket was a feathered dart.

"Watch out!" she gasped with her last breath. "Ceph..." Then she lapsed into unconsciousness.

At the same moment the boat struck an obstacle. Mullon, who was half raised up to keep a lookout for his unseen opponent, was thrown straight across the seat. He felt the boat spinning and driving itself harder against the obstruction with every turn of the propeller.

He tried to get up and take hold of the rudder again but he had no sooner raised up on the armrest than he felt the same, strange prick of pain in his neck as he had on the previous night. The pain spread out and immersed his entire body in dull lethargy. The last thing he heard was a sudden wild roaring of the motor—then the darkness and the stillness around him was complete.

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He was already familiar with the sensations he experienced when he regained consciousness. His eyes felt swollen and were difficult to open. The light that greeted them was too bright.

Mullon forced himself to keep his lids open as he looked about. His first realization was that he sat on a chair with his arms and legs bound to the back of it and the under supports. A few feet away from him he saw Freddy, who was tied up in the same manner, and she still appeared to be unconscious since her head lay to one side on her shoulder. He was relieved to note that she was breathing deeply.

To the extent that the dull pain permitted, he turned his head to the left and made out at some distance a large, dark curtain hanging on the wall—apparently to cover a window. Not far from the curtain was a small table surrounded by a row of comfortable chairs. In one of these sat a man, legs crossed and in one hand holding a thermo-beamer.

The man inspected Mullon with some impertinence, then stood up, yawning. "Well, finally!" he mumbled. "It's pretty boring to have to sit around and wait for somebody who's too weak to even open his eyes."

Whereupon the man went swiftly through a doorway that Mullon had not previously noticed.

Mullon waited patiently and sought to get rid of the unpleasant pain in his skull and in his limbs. His patience was not put to the test for very long. The guard with the raygun came back in the company of a 2nd man. The newcomer might have been about 30 years old—in fact the same age as Mullon himself.

The guard went back to his chair while the smaller man came and stood over Mullon.

"You are Horace O. Mullon from Seattle, in the government region of North America, and you have been in Terrania since yesterday morning. In Seattle you are chief of an organization known as the True Democrats. The True Democrats have as their objective the overthrow of the present government and the establishment of a democratic regime. You yourself have come to Terrania to assassinate Rhodan. Will you admit these facts or do you have to be brainwashed?"

In spite of his pain, Mullon's brain worked feverishly but clearly. Who was this man? An officer of the Secret Service? Hardly, since otherwise he and his men wouldn't have to be so secretive about taking him prisoner, they would have merely disposed of him. So who was he?

Mullon couldn't figure it out. But it sufficed for him to know that he had not fallen into the hands of the secret police. That meant that the mental manipulation threat was merely a bluff, since nobody outside of the Secret Service possessed the equipment necessary for brainwashing.

"You're out of your head," replied Mullon with new boldness. "Who knows who it is you've mistaken me for? I demand to be set free at once and as soon as I'm out of here I'm going to see to it that you and your bushwhackers are taken care of!"

The little man grinned cynically. "You probably think that's being pretty smart, don't you? How silly would we have to be to let you go free, just to give you a chance to get even?"

Score one in my favour, exulted Mullon secretly. If this fellow is afraid I might swear out a complaint against him, then he really isn't a secret police agent!

"Your name isn't Mullon?" asked the small man. "You don't come from Seattle?"

"Of course my name is Mullon and naturally I come from Seattle!" blustered Mullon. "But not even in my worst nightmares have I ever thought of killing Rhodan!"

The little man nodded. "Too bad," he said softly.

In his astonishment, Mullon widened his eyes and it pained him. "Too bad...?" he repeated.

The other nodded again. "Yes, it's regrettable. My name is Hollander. Ever heard of me?"

Mullon shook his head. "No, never."

Hollander smiled sympathetically. "How can we hope to better the world when we don't know other people who have the same goals? Have you ever heard anything about the Nature Philosophers?"

"Yes, it's a sect that preaches a return to Nature ethic," replied Mullon after some mental searching.

Hollander shook his head. "That is not quite an adequate description. *We* are the Nature Philosophers and we do not advocate a return to nature at all in the sense of the old Rousseau ideas. But we are here in Terrania for the same purpose *you* are! So now will you loosen up and start talking?"

Mullon sneered. "You know, Hollander, if you want to trip me up you'll have to do better than that!"

Hollander appeared to have expected this reaction. He looked at Mullon seriously and said: "Don't worry, we can prove our intentions. But hopefully you can understand that you'll be a dead man once you see this proof and, in spite of it, refuse to work with us."

Mullon nodded mechanically. "Very well. Why don't you begin?"

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Approximately at this same time, inside the giant energy shield, the great positronicon in the computer centre of the capital city spit out a red plastic information strip. The colour signified Top Priority, which was equivalent to an alert. All computer outputs in red were placed immediately before Rhodan himself or his closest subordinate.

The whole process was automatic. A chromatic selector registered the colour of the strip and channelled it into the proper conduit. A few seconds later, Rhodan held it in his hand. He chucked it into the code reader and projected the textual image onto the wall beside his worktable.

The message read: 2 rival insurrectionist groups are active at present in Terrania. Involved are the Nature Philosophers, who comprise a 15 man team and have rented offices in the downtown area, and the Union of True Democrats principally located on the West Coast of the North American continent, whose chief, Horace O. Mullon, has come to Terrania intending to set up operations designed to assassinate the Administrator. Another 20 members of the Union are standing by in Tientsin, waiting to be called to Terrania.

There is no doubt that both groups have a common goal: destruction of the present order. No details concerning further objectives are available at this time. The motives behind the negotiations of the Nature Philosophers and the True Democrats are known.

Precautionary measures for the protection of the Administrator and the institutions of the Solar Empire have been taken. Further information will follow at regular intervals over this channel. End of message.

Perry Rhodan shut off the projector and leaned far back in his comfortable posture chair. Whether or not the message had made any impression on him was not discernible.

After awhile he leaned forward and pressed a button on the wide keyboard that was built into the edge of his table. The compact video-intercom in the centre of the table lit up and revealed the round face of a man with stubbly, sandy-red hair. He appeared to be a generally good-natured type even though at the

moment he frowned rather darkly into the camera.

"Hello there, Mr. Minister!" Rhodan greeted him. "Why don't you come on into the office—I have something for you."

The man nodded. The vid-screen darkened and 2 minutes later the subject himself stood in the doorway of Rhodan's spacious workroom.

"You do your job justice, Bell," Rhodan kidded him. "You look just like a Minister of Security is supposed to with that worried frown on your face."

Reginald Bell was Rhodan's old comrade-in-arms. He waved off the levity with a gesture of urgency. "Some of the reports we've been getting lately aren't anything to be cheerful about," he replied.

"Okay," said Rhodan. "Sit down and tell me what your plans are."

Bell sat down and opened his hands with a shrug. "We wait, we pick them up at the proper time, give them the brainwash to find out the names of all their cohorts, remand them to the courts, get a judgment against them—and out!"

Rhodan appeared to be in agreement with the procedure. "And what kind of a sentence do you think the court will pass on them?"

Bell made a vague motion with his right hand. "Penitentiary... labour camp."

"No."

Bell leaned forward, startled "What do you mean, no? Are you going to prescribe a sentence for the judge?"

Rhodan shook his head. "The Government will present a legal bill to the Solar Council. The Solar Council will adopt the measure at once because there is actually a hole in our penal system that it will serve to close—and it's especially applicable to underground movements, revolutionaries and that sort of people..."

"Oh? And what kind of punishment is it?"

Rhodan smiled indulgently. "Have you forgotten it so soon, Bell? We had a discussion about it not too long ago..."

3/ OF RAYGUNS & RHODAN

Mullon had been presented with the proof.

He himself knew a few people by name who were said to be Nature Philosophers. He hadn't paid them much heed because he had more or less considered the movement to be a weird organization of skons

(Some kind of nuts). But now those names came in handy.

One of the men Mullon knew lived in Portland, Oregon. Hollander set up a videophone connection with him. The man in Portland, named Pattern, apparently recognized his 'chief' immediately. He also described the objectives of the Nature Philosophers, to the extent that was advisable for a member to do so over a public v'phone connection.

Already half-convinced, Mullon recalled the name of a 2nd man. He was put in touch with this man, also, and received the, same information. Since he thought it was impossible for Hollander to have cued these men beforehand, he was finally satisfied.

"Alright. It looks as though we all have a common objective. Where do we go from here?"

Hollander smiled cryptically and indicated Freddy behind him. Although she had been untied and was conscious by now, the armed guard stood watch over her. She had overheard a part of the conversation, and especially the 2-see-phone interviews.

"What about the girl?" Hollander wanted to know. "Wouldn't it be better to get rid of her?"

"Why don't you leave Freddy out of this and let her go? I'm certain she won't make trouble."

But Hollander was against the idea. Cynicism seemed to be a part of his character. "I'd be a great revolutionary if I looped the rope around my own neck," he said. "Loy, take her out of here!"

The guard took Freddy out of the room. Mullon tried to give her an encouraging signal but she didn't even look at him.

"Let's get down to business," said Hollander. "After the overthrow happens, a big factor is going to be who took the first initiative. So the one who takes care of Rhodan is going to be in the driver's seat and the Nature Philosophers aren't going to miss out on that. You can understand that here in Terrania we have the more favourable position. So now you'll just stay quietly in the background and watch us handle the Rhodan situation, right?"

Mullon smiled faintly and did not conceal his disgust. "The first murderer is the hero, eh?"

"I hadn't thought that the Union of True Democrats was anxious to make a solo performance out of the overthrow of the present regime. Certainly we aren't particularly eager to take the sole responsibility for Rhodan's death. So we're perfectly willing to run any kind of a joint operation you want."

"But the way you just put it, it looks like your main concern after the overthrow is to grab as much power as you can. No matter how you look at it, that's not the kind of goal the True Democrats have in mind. So you can't carry it out the way you've been planning it, Hollander. We're staying in as part of the deal."

Hollander smiled. "You think so?" he retorted calmly. "I can force you to operate any way I want. What you're going to do—"

Mullon interrupted imperiously. "Don't talk nonsense, Hollander! I'm in constant contact with my men in Tientsin and they in their turn are in touch with the whole organization in America. Granted, you can do me in, but don't forget that we're democratic, which means that I can be replaced at any moment. If my communication with Tientsin gets broken off, the one responsible will only have a few hours to live."

Mullon had won back his position of strength and he smiled at Hollander's look of consternation. "If you didn't have me on a hot seat here, Hollander, I wouldn't have told you that. But you would have deep-sixed me and then a short time later you and the Nature Philosophers would be wiped out for all time! Pretty tight package, don't you think? But you're the one that's been getting pushy. You'll have to start thinking smarter, man! And in the future just keep this in mind: no True Democrat is going to be intimidated by any knot-headed threats!"

* * * *

The manner in which Hollander finally gave in hinted of possible treachery. Mullon decided he'd have to keep his eyes open.

In the course of many hours of conspiratorial dealings, of the 10 men involved Mullon considered Hollander to be the most dangerous because of his intelligence. The rest hardly impressed him. Hollander had them all tightly in his grasp.

It was a surprise for Mullon that Hollander turned out to be an officer of the city police of Terrania. It wasn't a very important position but it gave Hollander and also the Nature Philosophers an entree into many places that would have been barred to others.

In connection with his negotiations, Mullon saw himself confronted with a problem that was in the final analysis the most difficult of them a—and not alone because he was apprehensive about its solution: Freddy Nicholson!

How could he make clear to her what the True Democrats were after? Before he got a word out she'd probably let him know that she didn't want anything more to do with him.

In a surge of personal courage, Mullon decided abruptly to get answers to all his questions where Freddy was concerned. Hollander made no objections.

So Mullon paid Freddy a visit in the small adjacent room with its single window where they had put her and he sent the guard away from the door. Then he began to talk and to explain—and strangely Freddy didn't interrupt him but listened attentively. At first she listened distrustfully, then with increasing impartiality and finally to his great surprise she answered him:

"Your reasons are good, Mr. Mullon—I'd almost say they were noble. It's only that the suppositions on which you base them are false."

Mullon was dumbfounded. But then he turned on all the powers of rhetoric that he had demonstrated during many evening discussions with his adherents, attempting to set before her the motives behind the True Democrats.

Finally she shook her head reluctantly. "My head is spinning, Mr. Mullon. I think I need time to digest it all. It sounds as though you might be right... but do I have to decide now?"

Mullon gave in on that point. To say the least, he had achieved far more than he had hoped for.

Hollander permitted the prisoner to have lunch alone with Mullon and Freddy appeared to eat her food with an appetite. The suite of rooms they were in had been made to look like offices from the outside but were actually fitted out as living quarters—more or less as though the furniture settings were ‘displays’. In one of these rooms she had been able to take a hot bath and had managed to wash away all the after effects of the Cepheidin, including the bluish colouration of her eyes.

"Speaking of Cepheidin," she said while they were eating, "was it the Nature Philosophers who visited you in the hotel during the night?"

Mullon nodded an affirmation.

"How did they get the idea that you came here to... well, to do away with Rhodan...?"

Mullon shrugged. "I don't have any idea. Obviously they have a first-rate system of agents."

"Incidentally, where does Hollander get the Cepheidin from?" she wanted to know. "To my knowledge, it can't be bought."

Mullon didn't know either but he said, "Hollander is a police officer in Terrania. And maybe that's—"

Freddy's fork clattered to her plate. Mullon looked at her in startled amazement.

"Police officer?!" she almost choked.

Mullon nodded. "That's right but why so astonished?"

She picked up her fork again, attempting to be casual. "Well, it's just that you seldom hear of police officers becoming revolutionaries."

Mullon agreed with her; nevertheless Freddy's sharp reaction to this information caused him to have misgivings.

After awhile the girl continued in an indifferent tone. "At least that gives me an idea of where he obtains the Cepheidin. Police officers naturally have an entree to the Academy and other buildings under the security dome. And in the Academy there's a whole Cepheidin culture centre." With this the subject seemed to be closed for her but a few minutes later she suddenly asked: "How is the poison actually administered to the victim? Do they just sneak up on him and stick a needle in him?"

Mullon laughed. "No. They use high-precision blowguns and small feathered darts—like the Indians in South America."

"I see." After that Freddy silently cleaned her plate. Suddenly she confessed: "I've decided to stay with you and join the revolution with you if that's what you want."

In his surprise, Mullon came halfway out of his chair. "You have?... Do you mean it?"

Freddy nodded earnestly. "There's just one thing I have to make clear so you don't get any false hopes. Your arguments haven't completely convinced me by any means. So I'm neither a True Democrat nor a Nature Philosopher; my reasons are more basic."

Mullon was confused. "Yes?... Then why...?" he stammered.

Freddy leaned forward. "Because I'm fond of you, dummy!"

* * * *

The result was that everything developed very swiftly.

Hollander accepted Mullon's plan to assassinate Rhodan during the open forum at the Academy. The setup was simple: Mullon and one of the Nature Philosophers were to be the actual snipers and the rest of Hollander's men would back them up with fire coverage to protect them from the anger of the public who would be there.

Mullon communicated with Tientsin and instructed his men to come on to Terrania.

On that same day one of the Nature Philosophers learned that the next open forum would take place on the coming Friday. Its theme was 'On the Feasibility of Earth's Collaboration with the Great Galactic Empires' and Rhodan had promised to put in an appearance.

After their arrival, Mullon's men were briefed quickly concerning their part in the plot. He sensed that they held the same aversion for the Nature Philosophers that he did but this was not something to be concerned with at the moment...

* * * *

By means of a red-coloured data strip from the positronicon, Rhodan was punctually advised concerning the arrival of the 20 True Democrats in Terrania. He further learned of the plans that Hollander and Mullon had worked out in every detail and he took the necessary precautions.

The new law involving a penal code reform was accepted by the Solar Council and was submitted to the Supreme Court of the Empire.

Reginald Bell's Secret Service was instructed to stand by for action and for the security men in Terrania this had the same significance that it would have had in any other part of the world.

* * * *

In this area where the energy screen had been cut off, Mullon was caught up in the press of the throng that surged toward the flat-roofed white buildings of the Academy a few hundred feet ahead of him and he was trying to analyse a feeling of premonition. Freddy marched boldly beside him with a grim

expression on her face. To her left was Keable, the Nature Philosopher who had taken the job of assassin #2.

They carried their weapons in shoulder holsters. They were thermo-pistols which Hollander had procured.

The remaining 33 men—14 of them Nature Philosophers and 19 of them True Democrats—had spread out among the crowd.

The great lecture hall of the Academy had an 800-seat capacity and was filled up to the last row. Mullon and Keable took seats in the 4th row and Freddy sat directly behind Mullon in the 5th row. Mullon had arranged it because in case of a misfire he didn't want Freddy to appear to be associated with the assassins.

The program started at hour 15:00 with an address by a high-ranking Fleet officer who laid the groundwork for the forthcoming discussions.

Rhodan had not yet arrived.

Mullon only once ventured to glance at his backup man, Keable. The latter had apparently been waiting to catch his eye and he responded with a grin.

At 15:40 the first lecture came to an end. The speaker was applauded; he took a bow and then sat down in the first row.

Now Mullon's excitement knew no bounds. At this point, Rhodan had to appear!

At 15:45 the main doors of the hall opened and a file of men came in. Rhodan wasn't the tallest among them but he was the most impressive. Cheers rose up all around Mullon. Many of the people were so impressed that they got to their feet and stood waiting until Rhodan had greeted everyone in a friendly and unaffected manner and taken a seat in the front row.

Mullon saw Rhodan shake hands with the lieutenant colonel who had just given the speech. For only a moment he was disconcerted by the unbelievably unconcerned manner of Rhodan. Was this the tyrant of whom the True Democrats and the Nature Philosophers had spoken?

Mullon brushed aside such useless thoughts as he saw Rhodan get up and step to the speaker's stand. A renewed sound of applause broke out. Rhodan waved his hand in a friendly signal for silence.

He spoke with a deep, pleasant-sounding voice that was carried by an unseen amplifier system to the farthest corner of the room. "I am happy to see that so many of you have turned out to take part in today's discussion. You have already become familiar with the situation in which the Earth and the Solar Empire now find themselves, and any details you may have missed have been filled in by the lecture you have just heard."

Mullon glanced a second time at Keable, who had concealed his hand behind the lapel of his jacket. He paid no attention to Mullon. Mullon raised a hand to brush it through his hair. Then, as though he didn't know what to do with it, he let it slip inside his jacket.

There was the butt of his weapon—cool in spite of the sweat that ran down his arm.

At this moment Rhodan said: "Our situation is made easier when we consider that those races we may have occasion to deal with are all humanoid. Although the non-humanoid types are in the majority, whether we consider them as potential enemies or allies they are relatively harmless and useless to us. What we're talking about is the extent of the known galaxy. Naturally we can't draw any conclusions concerning whatever may lie beyond those limits."

Mullon saw Keable lean forward as if he wanted to whisper in the ear of the man in front of him. He performed the same action and in the instant that Keable sprang to his feet he did likewise.

It appeared that Rhodan took no notice of it.

Keable brought out his thermo-gun with unbelievable dexterity. For lack of practice, Mullon was a few split seconds slower. He had no sooner aimed his own weapon than the first energy salvo leapt from Keable's gun and whistled toward the man on the platform. But Mullon's shot followed closely and his aim was equally as good as Keable's.

The 2 shots seemed to tear the words from Rhodan's mouth. Mullon saw a blinding explosion behind the speaker's stand. Glowing fragments shot everywhere and fell among the audience, bringing the startled masses of people into a state of commotion. Shouts went up, a trample of feet rumbled through the hall and order degenerated into chaos.

It hadn't occurred to anyone yet to attack the assassins. And no one other than Mullon observed what had happened behind the speaker's stand.

Where Rhodan had stood there was only a smoking mass of rubble.

One of the glowing particles that had been flung outward by the explosion had fallen within about 6 feet of Mullon in the same row and it had wounded a man there who lay writhing on the floor in pain. With a leap, Mullon was through the press of panicked people and quickly reached the side of the fallen man. The victim did not interest him, however—it was the glowing fragment that he wished to examine, to determine what it was made of.

It had burned a black hole in the plastic floor tiling and subsequently cooled down. There it lay now—a repulsive black piece of metal rubbish.

Mullon straightened up and stared forward. Behind the speaker's stand was the same situation: black holes in the floor and hot, twisted parts of metal.

Rhodan?

That had not been Rhodan up there! It was a robot!

For one long moment Mullon lost his senses. He stood there, gun in hand, jostled by the people struggling to get out.

Then somebody seemed to virtually fall upon him from the higher row behind him. "Get out of here fast!" came a familiar voice. "The police!"

Mullon looked up and around. Due to the steep slant of the seats toward the platform, Freddy, who had climbed over to him, was clinging to his shoulder.

He looked about him. Uniformed men pressed through the main entrance doors. The lieutenant colonel who had lectured earlier rushed toward them and indicated the fleeing crowd of people who were blocking the upper exits. Mullon looked for Keable but he had disappeared and there was no trace of the other 33 backup men.

Freddy tugged at his arm and he yielded involuntarily. His legs moved mechanically. Freddy miraculously found openings through the throng. He noted that police were appearing at the upper exits also. He pointed toward them wordlessly but Freddy only shook her head.

Paying no heed to the people in her way, Freddy led Mullon into the right-hand side aisle. There where the passage led left toward the exit was a door. She pushed it open, shoved Mullon past her inside and came through, closing the door behind her. "Get going!" she panted.

The corridor that ended at the door was brightly lit. Mullon ran and Freddy's footsteps clattered after him.

"Where will this take us?" he asked.

"To an equipment room and from there to a main corridor!" called Freddy in reply.

Mullon ran on. The passage ended after about a hundred feet. The door at the end was locked but Freddy had keys. She opened the door and let Mullon pass through. Mullon found himself in a not too spacious room that was crammed with equipment.

But he found far less interest in the equipment than he did in the 6 men who had stationed themselves in a wide half-circle around the door. They held weapons in their hands and it was evident that they had been waiting for him. He had meanwhile replaced his thermo-beamer back in its shoulder holster.

He heard Freddy's breathing hard behind him and turned around swiftly to face her. She lowered her gaze, not meeting his eye. As though from afar off, he heard a voice:

"I'm sorry we have to inconvenience you, Mr. Mullon, but we feared that you might cause us some difficulty—and we'll have to avoid that now, won't we?"

Mullon turned to look at the man who had spoken. He saw him raise the strange, funnel-shaped weapon and aim it at him. He made no move to defend himself as the man tightened his trigger-finger.

Something struck him like the blow of a fist. There was a loud roaring and then he lost consciousness...

4/ A UNIQUE JUDGMENT

Mullon's next presentiment was a sense of disillusionment—the deepest and darkest that he had ever known in his life. He didn't quite know what it was that had sent him into such a blue funk but he felt absolutely useless, knocked off his bearings, abandoned.

He opened his eyes and found himself on a fairly comfortable daybed in a kind of cell. The walls were

bare, white and windowless. A naked fluorescent light tube ran along the ceiling. There was only one door and from the looks of it he wouldn't be able to open it with anything less than a shell from a howitzer.

What had happened?

Those men! He suddenly remembered the 6 men in uniform who had waited for him behind the door and he recalled that one of them had aimed a cone-shaped weapon at him and fired. They had been wearing police uniforms and were obviously Rhodan's men.

Rhodan... the assassination attempt... the exploding robot! All of it came back to him now in a sudden recollection.

And Freddy!

Freddy had betrayed him. She had deliberately steered him into that passage, at the exit of which the 6 policemen were laying for him.

Could it actually be true?

He remembered that Freddy had lowered her gaze from him when he had turned to look at her.

Wasn't that proof enough?

Freddy was Rhodan's agent!

* * * *

Time passed—Mullon didn't know whether it was a matter of minutes or hours—until finally the door opened and a police guard stepped inside. "You are wanted," the man said. "Come with me."

Mullon obeyed. He walked along the corridor with downcast gaze until suddenly he felt himself borne upward in the invisible force field of an antigrav lift. The police officer followed him and he saw the bright openings of various floor levels flicker past him. Finally the force field guided him to a shaft opening and deposited him on one of the floors.

"To your right, Mr. Mullon," said the officer.

Mullon turned to his right He stopped when a door was opened before him.

"In there!"

He went inside. And suddenly he felt as though a shock of electricity had struck him. This room was fairly large but contained only a few pieces of furniture. The main furnishing was a large worktable equipped with a long, colour coded switch-panel. Behind the table sat the man at whom Mullon had aimed his thermo-gun a few hours before.

Perry Rhodan.

Rhodan regarded him unemotionally. "Have a seat, Mr. Mullon," he said. He nodded to the sergeant of the guard. "Thanks very much, sergeant."

Mullon heard the sound of the door closing behind him.

"Your assassination attempt has misfired, Mr. Mullon," Rhodan informed him. "The legal action against you and your accomplices is scheduled tomorrow afternoon before the Solar Supreme Court. The procedure will be brief because the facts of the case are as well known as the history and development of the 2 revolutionary organizations who took part in the assassination plan. What kind of punishment do you anticipate?"

Mullon had intended to keep his mouth shut since he had felt there was nothing he had to say to this man. But something urged him to answer. "Forced labour," he replied peevishly, without looking up.

"No," answered Rhodan. "I don't think it will come to that."

Mullon looked up in surprise but Rhodan did not appear disposed to develop this theme any further.

"All your preparations for this assault," Rhodan continued, "were known to us prior to the incident at the Academy. One of our special agents covered you so well that you weren't able to take a single step that was not observed."

Mullon nodded, demoralized. "I know—it was Freddy," he said tonelessly.

"That's right," confirmed Rhodan. "Ms. Nicholson. Personally I'm sorry that certain private sentiments were developed—emotions which I believe were shared by Ms. Nicholson. Thus the contribution she made is to be valued the more highly."

Mullon finally lost his self-control. He sprang up and took a few steps toward the table, shouting: "Value *what* contribution more highly! To betray a group of men who are concerned enough about the well being of Mankind to go underground and try to unmask the tyrants? Is that what you call a contribution?"

Rhodan listened calmly. When Mullon paused for a moment, he said, "Of all the things that the True Democrats and the Nature Philosophers believe in, there is one thing above all I can't understand: That is, why do you regard me as being a tyrant?" He watched Mullon carefully as he continued. "Haven't you chosen your own representatives? Are not the laws established through a popularly elected board?"

"Yes!" Mullon shouted tempestuously. "A board of trained dogs who'll jump through your hoop anytime you whistle!"

At this Rhodan smiled and shook his head. "Don't you believe that, Mr. Mullon... I think that you, your people and the Nature Philosophers haven't concerned yourselves enough with the actual facts. You have drawn a distorted picture of the existing state of affairs." Meanwhile Rhodan had gotten up and come out from behind his table. "From an objective standpoint, Mr. Mullon, your ideas and those of the Nature Philosophers can only be regarded as sheer fantasies. But they're the kind of fantasies that the Earth can't allow, particularly in its present situation. And that is why the danger that is inherent in these 2 revolutionary organizations must be eradicated once and for all."

"You won't find that so easy!" Mullon blurted out scornfully.

"Oh, do you think so? You forget that for several decades now a psychological method of examining criminals has been a legal weapon of law enforcement. At this moment there are about 20,000 True Democrats and 5000 Nature Philosophers waiting to be sentenced. What we couldn't learn directly from you we learned from your followers and what they didn't know was furnished to us by others, all of which we added to our original information. I doubt if at this moment there is a single True Democrat or Nature Philosopher who is still at liberty."

Mullon had begun to stare in wide-eyed amazement. "You... you brainwashed me...?" he gasped.

"Yes, we submitted you to a brainwashing. You may rest assured that the procedure does not involve any psychic or health hazards... the only result being that all True Democrat and Nature Philosopher brainstorming are at an end. You may go, Mr. Mullon."

Mullon turned to the door. The police sergeant who had brought him appeared and took him in custody again. Mullon was just about into the corridor when he heard Rhodan's voice behind him:

"Don't ever forget one thing, Mullon: the Earth is a tiny world on the edge of a mighty galaxy. More than half the galaxy is ruled by the powerful Arkonide Empire and its allies, the Springers. We have managed to conceal ourselves from them for more than 50 years because we weren't strong enough to defend ourselves against their lust for power.

"Lately they have picked up our trail again. It will not be long before they will have discovered us and this time they won't let us get out of their sight. What's involved here, Mr. Mullon, is freedom or slavery for all of humanity. Do you believe that under these circumstances we can still afford to tolerate such activities as you and the Nature Philosophers were involved in?"

* * * *

The trial was a unique sensation.

The transgressions, which the defendants were accused of, were registered in the positronicon's information banks. Judgments were generated here through the process of comparing the uncontested points of the prosecution with the record of the laws governing the corresponding crimes. 25,000 judgments were issued within a single afternoon.

The decisions of the computer central were incontestable.

The biggest surprise was that 16,000 of the 20,000 True Democrats and 1,000 of the 5,000 Nature Philosophers were set free without any penalty being imposed, owing to the 'inconsequential nature' of their involvement. On the basis of the data outputs from the positronicon the court concluded that the persons who escaped sentencing were nothing more than 'fellow travellers' and once they were separated from their leaders they would thenceforth constitute no danger whatsoever.

Thus the group of those to receive sentences had been reduced to only 8,000. To the careful observer it became clear that of the 2 subversive organizations apparently the Nature Philosophers had been the most active because only 20% of the Nature Philosophers had been considered to be innocuous

bystanders whereas 75% of the True Democrats had been absolved of criminal activity.

The sentence against the 8,000 responsible transgressors was read by the superior judge of the court in a very uncustomary way. First, he reviewed reforms that had been made in the penal codes since all Earthly nations had become united, pointing out that these changes had become necessary in view of a changing environment and the expansion of the sphere of human influence out into space, and he concluded:

"Penal code reforms are subject to a gradual development as the laws must adapt themselves slowly to the overall complex of environmental exigencies. This development is far from being completed. However, only a few days ago a further step forward was made by the Solar Council when it passed a new bill of law concerning punishment of insurrectionists, members of subversive secret societies and anti-social activists in general..."

"Therefore, in the name of Mankind I hereby sentence the accused as follows:"

"You are to be deported from the Earth, you are to be deprived of your Earthly citizenship and you are henceforth forbidden to return either to the Earth or to any planet belonging to the Solar Empire—for so long as you may live"

There followed a case summary but spectator excitement was too high—nobody was interested in the details of the judgment. Nevertheless, a supplementary observation concerning the sentence served to take the wraps off the entire 'package':

Earth's spacefleet had placed a giant transporter at the court's disposal, to be used as a deportation vessel. The ship was large enough to provide a very comfortable passage for the whole group of 8000 condemned persons. The effective crew of the ship consisted of 150 men, who were officers and crewmen of the space fleet.

The ship's destination was the star Rigel in the constellation of Orion. It was known to Earth's astronomical science that Rigel 3, the 3rd planet of a total of 28 worlds of that system, was similar to the Earth and was suitable for colonization. The technical provisions being carried by the transporter had been selected to insure that the deported people would be able to survive without risk. Moreover, commensurate with the makeup of the 2 subversive organizations, approximately half the colonists would be women.

The sentence was finalized—the first judgment in human history to provide for deportation to another world.

The world had had its fill of sensationalism...

5/ HOLLANDER'S HOAX

"Are you ready, Mullon?"

During the few days of his imprisonment he had gotten used to hearing the guards drop the 'Mister' from

his name, since they considered it to be superfluous. For the last time he closed the lock on the small suitcase they had given him to keep his few belongings in. He nodded to the waiting guard.

"Then come along!"

The way led through bright but windowless corridors, through an electronic security door and then down an antigrav elevator shaft to the street. From other exits emerged more guards with more of the prisoners, all of whom Mullon recognized as members of the True Democrat organization. They did not greet each other.

Out on the street was a string of waiting personnel buses. Each had a capacity for 50 prisoners and one guard. The deportation process was in full swing.

The trip out to the spaceport only lasted a few minutes. The prisoners craned their necks to have a look as the 3000-foot sphere of the giant ship loomed up, the space vessel that was to take them to their distant destination.

The name of the ship was: *ADVENTUROUS*.

A wide escalator ramp reached from the ground to a giant lock in the lower half of the ship. The prisoners disappeared in batches inside.

Mullon heard someone addressing him: "This group to the right! Take the antigrav to E-deck! There you will be given further instructions."

Mullon obeyed like a clod.

Why in the devil, he thought, did Freddy have to occur to him at this moment? Why was it that he felt a twinge of torment when he saw the doorway to Earth close behind him forever?

During the 5 days that he had been imprisoned since the proclamation of the mass sentence, Freddy had sought to visit him on 5 separate occasions. Each time he had refused to leave the cell and say one word to her.

Had this been the right thing to do?

"Get with it, man!" someone admonished. "Over there!"

Mullon turned in the indicated direction. Trailing at the end of his contingent of prisoners, he jogged along a wide, brightly-lit corridor. The group was gradually broken up until finally Mullon found himself with only 5 people, all of whom were True Democrats.

A man in uniform read off names and when the person called answered he announced a number.

"Mullon?"

"Here!"

"2137—over there!"

Cabin number 2137 was the last one next to a passage intersection. The door was closed but Mullon

had been instructed how to make it operate. He placed himself facing the doorframe until the automatic control compared his appearance with a registered likeness of him and then the door rolled to one side.

Beyond was a small room that had been furnished with a minimum of facilities. There was a folding bed, a washstand in the corner, a table, 2 chairs and a small clothes chest. Everything was illuminated by a single light tube that reached from floor to ceiling in one corner. Someone had turned it on before Mullon arrived.

That someone sat on one of the 2 chairs and looked at Mullon uncertainly, nervously and with a small, faint smile.

Freddy!

Mullon stood stock-still, paralysed with astonishment.

Freddy finally got up and came a few steps toward him. "It's all very simple," she said but with such blatant frankness that it was easy to see she was playing her last hand. "I helped get you into this mess so I'm ready to see it through with you. I'm staying here on board and going with you to Rigel 3. I can't go back any more. Nobody can leave this ship now. The only question is, do you want to keep me with you? If not, I'll have to find other quarters."

It was some time before Mullon got hold of himself sufficiently to be able to utter a word. And what he finally said didn't sound particularly logical or even well considered:

"You crazy, lovable blockhead...!"

* * * *

For some mysterious reason, no further formalities were needed to authorize Freddy's remaining on board the *Adventurous*. It appeared that she had obtained permission from very high sources, which emphasized the seriousness of her intention.

After a day and a half of activity, bringing the exiles on board, the *Adventurous* took off.

Since Freddy's appearance on the scene, a transformation developed in Mullon. He suddenly realized that his responsibility to the True Democrats had not been relieved by the mass sentence and judgment. Admittedly the True Democrats as such had ceased to exist; but here were 4000 people who still looked to him as their last court of appeal.

Mullon knew Hollander and his ambitious nature. He knew that Hollander would make an attempt to bring the whole band of 8000 exiles under his control. Unless Mullon concerned himself with the destiny of the True Democrats they would all become involuntary victims of Hollander.

Apparently a preservation of the exiles' 2-party system was in keeping with the intent of the judges and those who were policing the execution of the sentence. For when Mullon put in a request to use the main mess hall as a meeting room the permission was willingly granted.

He also invited the Nature Philosophers to the meeting but Hollander sent a reply to the effect that his people were still too busy getting settled. The pretext was so transparent that everyone could easily see that the Nature Philosophers had no intention of surrendering their position as a distinct and separate party.

Mullon spoke of this before his assembled people, notwithstanding the possible presence of Nature Philosopher spies in the audience. He exhorted them to vigilance and depicted Hollander as being a man who might be suspected of disregarding the imperative needs of the moment, which were a joint unity of purpose and an abandonment of all petty differences.

Mullon proposed that a committee should be chosen to work out a draft of a constitution and this idea was received with approval. He also urged organization of some kind of police force that would not only keep an eye on the Nature Philosophers during the flight but also serve after the landing for the same purpose, in addition to providing security for the first exile encampment. This suggestion was also accepted.

Finally Mullon searched among the audience for a registrar of births, deaths and marriages. He found him and didn't conceal his personal reasons for doing so. Before the entire assembly, he and Freddy were united in matrimony.

A curious development as an aftermath of this was that the True Democrats immediately accepted Freddy as Mullon's wife in spite of knowing what role she had played back on Earth. What she had done, and what destiny she had now chosen in order to atone for her betrayal of Mullon, went through the grapevine and became known to everybody on board. Mullon did not have to use the weight of authority to gain acceptance for her.

* * * *

When Mullon and Freddy returned to their cabin, a man was waiting there whom Mullon had never seen before. He stood in front of the door with an envelope in his hand. "Are you Mr. Mullon?" he asked.

Mullon nodded. "Yes, and you?"

"That's beside the point. I've been sent by Mr. Hollander and I'm to give you this envelope." So saying, he wordlessly departed.

Lost in thought and busied with opening the envelope, Mullon followed Freddy into the cabin. He pulled out a folded piece of paper and began to read. Freddy could see his expression change in the process. First he appeared to be confused, then he looked angry and finally his face twisted into a spiteful grin. When Mullon laid the letter down, he roared with laughter. "Hollander wants us to extradite you!"

"Me?" said Freddy, astonished.

"Read it for yourself!"

Freddy took the letter and read it, noting that Hollander had picked a new name for his organization, which was apparently meant to include all 8000 exiles on board:

The Council of the Free Settlers Anti-Socialist Party has issued the following decision: Ms. Freddy Nicholson, secret agent in the service of the dictator Rhodan, is to appear before a colonial court and to be tried for treason against the cause of the True Democrats and the Social Philosophers.

"The Council of the Free Settlers Anti-Socialist Party demands that those now responsible for offering her asylum, due to reasons which seem inexplicable, proceed at once to surrender her into the custody of the Council.

Signed: Hollander

Chairman of the Council"

"What are you going to do?" asked Freddy anxiously.

Mullon laughed. "I'll just tell Hollander that he and his anti-socialist Council can all go take a frying leap in the sun—and if I know my people they'll back me up."

Hastily Mullon wrote an answering letter. He did not express himself as hard and uncompromisingly as he had originally intended but instead asked Hollander if he didn't think it sufficient that Freddy had also permitted herself to be deported from the Earth along with those who had been sentenced, in order to atone for what she had done. He also asked him if he was going to let this issue destroy the all-important unity that was needed between both groups of exiles.

The letter went out by messenger only a half-hour after reception of Hollander's missive. Mullon's man was told to wait for Hollander's answer.

The answer was returned promptly:

The Council of the Free Settlers Anti-Socialist Party has learned that Horace O. Mullon, former leader of the True Democrats, has entered into matrimony with secret agent Nicholson, who is sought for treason by the Council. The Council maintains that Horace O. Mullon has thus estranged himself from the principles of the Nature Philosophers and the True Democrats. He is to be considered an enemy to the common cause. The Council therefore demands that he also be remanded into its custody for the purpose of standing trial before the colonial court...

Mullon was considerably puzzled by this.

"Hollander is looking for a fight," he decided. "If I only knew what he's plotting!"

* * * *

Mullon called together about 100 of the most influential True Democrats and went into a huddle with them concerning Hollander's 2 letters. As he expected, these then took sides with Mullon. But they were also unable to guess what Hollander had up his sleeve.

* * * *

Commander Flagellan had decided to traverse the tremendous distance between Earth and Rigel in 2 transition jumps. When he reached the orbit of Uranus, he took the *Adventurous* through the first hypertrans stage and it emerged again somewhere halfway between the Earth and Rigel.

Between the 2 transitions, Magellan allowed 20 minutes to pass. He wanted to be certain that the energy buildup in the field generators would be at maximum for the next jump into hyperspace. He was a careful commander who was very conscious of his responsibilities. He did not know, however, that this very cautiousness would bring disaster.

* * * *

The assembly presented the first draft of the constitution that had been worked out by the committee. Mullan was pleased that of the 4000 True Democrats more than 3500 had answered the roll call in order to take part in the discussions and to cast their votes. Political interest was at a high peak and Mullan took this for an encouraging sign.

After an hour or so of debate, a provisional constitution was ratified. All present were in agreement that it would serve no purpose to finalize this work as long as the Nature Philosophers persisted in going their own way. It would be necessary to wait and see whether or not Hollander was going to establish a separate state on Rigel 3.

The provisional constitution provided that the destiny of the True Democrats would be decided in a national assembly consisting of 100 representatives who would be chosen by means of a general free election with secret ballots. The president of the national assembly, to be selected by the latter body, would serve simultaneously as the Chief of State. As Mullan pointed out in his closing remarks, the concept of a Chief of State might smack initially of something a bit ridiculous but, as expressed in his words, after their arrival in their new home such an after-taste would soon take care of itself.

Freddy did not take part in the meeting. Mullan had advised her to remain in her cabin and to let nobody enter.

A few of the men who were quartered in Mullan's area accompanied him. They discussed the results of the voting and, exclusive of Mullan, they were all quite certain that Mullan would be the first President of the National Assembly.

Mullan warded off their flattering inference with a laugh and was about to point out a few things, which in his opinion, would automatically exclude him from this high position. But at that moment he saw the shadow of a man dart away from the passage intersection next to his cabin.

Hollander's agent! This was his first thought.

Without paying any attention to his dumbfounded companions, he rushed over to the door of his cabin and waited impatiently until it opened. There a terrible sight greeted him. Freddy was nowhere to be seen but it was evident that she had put up a brave struggle before she had permitted herself to be taken away.

"Hollander's men have been here!" he shouted to his companions. "I just saw the last of them, he disappeared around the corner there. They have Freddy with them!"

O'Bannon, who had been one of Mullon's closest coworkers, was the first to collect his wits. "We'll bring her back, Horace!" he called. "Come on, men! Hollander's quarters are in section 5. If we take this corridor back here we'll cut them off. It goes straight across but the Philosophers are following a circular route."

There was no hesitation. They took the main passage until they reached the branch corridor that O'Bannon had indicated. However, O'Bannon did not run all the way through. At the intersection of the main passage three-quarters of the way through, he suddenly came to a stop.

"I think," he gasped, "that your wife may be giving them a lot of trouble, Horace. So they won't be making headway as fast as we are. We would be awful stupid to show up right at Hollander's door. We'll turn right here and get to the other main passage ahead of them. We'll wait for them there!"

Everybody agreed. 2 minutes later they arrived at the new destination where 2 main passages made a brightly lit intersection. Both passages were completely empty. Initially none of Hollander's men were to be seen.

Mullon evaluated his fighting forces. They were 7 men.

"They're coming!" O'Bannon cried and he drew back from the corner of the intersection.

He lay flat on the deck and peeked around the corner. Then he signalled to those behind him with his open right hand: 5 fingers 3 times—followed by 2 fingers.

17 men, thought Mullon. This might be a tough battle.

But the odds might not be all that bad, considering wild man O'Bannon, whom Mullon had seen in operation before.

When Hollander's men approached, O'Bannon poised himself like a track runner ready to dash. Finally he raised an arm in a signal and yelled, "Go get 'em!" Whereupon he shot out into the passage.

O'Bannon came across the 5-yard gap between himself and his completely surprised opponents like a high-calibre rocket, closely followed by Mullon and the others. Wild shouts rang out where his powerful fists found their targets and before Mullon and his companions could get fully into the fray O'Bannon had laid out 6 of the enemy. It was not an insurmountable task for Mullon's forces to overpower the remaining 11 men, especially since the latter were slow in recovering from the swiftness and confusion of the attack.

Once released from the rough grasp of her abductor, Freddy leaned against the wall and sobbed. Mullon took her protectively into his arms and consoled her.

"I knew you'd come!" she cried. "You men are wonderful—thank you! Thank you, O'Bannon!"

O'Bannon's big face beamed as he broke into a laugh.

14 of Hollander's men were either unconscious or out of commission, whereas 3 of them were still able to stand on their feet. These were taken in custody. Mullan considered them useful in the first place as hostages to be used as leverage against Hollander and secondly he thought he might bring them to Magellan, the Commander, as witnesses of the fact that it was Hollander who was stirring up the trouble.

He sent one of his men, named Wolley, down to C-deck in order to report what had happened to Magellan.

O'Bannon remarked: "Maybe the skipper will think he's too high class to be interested in us exiles."

* * * *

The 3 prisoners were brought into one of the smaller recreation wardrooms and placed under close guard. Wolley did not come back for a long time and when he finally did reappear he came with a hangdog expression on his face and in the company of 2 heavily armed ship's crewmen in uniform.

"Are you Mr. Mullan?" asked one of the 2 MPs ominously.

"Yes. What's the matter?"

"You'll find out. Commander Flagellan wants you to come to the bridge."

Somewhat impatiently, Mullan looked from the MPs to Wolley. "What's going on, Wolley?" he asked.

Wolley shrugged helplessly. "Hollander's pulled a real lousy trick, Chief! You'd better go along and let Flagellan explain it to you..."

Mullan looked around and saw O'Bannon, who stood nearby and had heard the whole thing. As if he knew what was on Mullan's mind, he nodded reassuringly.

"Relax, Horace! I'm blocking Freddy's door personally so that nobody will try to take her away again."

* * * *

Mullan had never seen the Control Central of a spaceship before but he couldn't have imagined that under normal circumstances the place would be so jam-packed with armed troops as it was at this moment.

Magellan came toward him threateningly and shouted at him almost through his teeth: "*You* are the one who planned to take over this ship by force so that you could escape execution of your sentence! *You* are behind the plot to overpower my crew and place the *Adventurous* under your own control!"

In spite of the astonishing magnitude of the accusation, Mullon remained outwardly calm. When Flagellan paused momentarily, he shook his head in denial. "Sir, I don't know who has played this hoax on you but nevertheless it's a hoax. Not one of us has ever had such a thought."

Without taking his eyes from Mullon, Magellan signalled behind him and shouted: "Bring the prisoners here!"

Mullon saw a door slide open in one of the walls and 4 handcuffed men were shoved into view.

"Do you know these men?" asked Magellan.

Mullon had never seen them before. "No," he answered.

"Is that so!" snapped Flagellan. "Well, what would you say if I told you that they know *you* very well!"

"Nothing," replied Mullon dryly. "For example, all your own noncoms and CPOs know *you* but you don't know every one of *them*."

Words failed Flagellan for a moment. Then he turned to the manacled prisoners. "What group do you belong to?" he asked loudly. "True Democrats or Nature Philosophers?"

"True Democrats," replied the 4 men in a chorus.

"Why have you been hanging around in the vicinity of the Control Central?"

One of the men said: "We were supposed to find out how strongly the bridge was manned when you changed the guards and from which side the Control Central could best be entered."

"And for what purpose were you seeking this information?"

"Because Mullon had worked out a plan to take over the ship."

Flagellan turned triumphantly back to Mullon. "What do you have to say to that!"

"That it's just an act," Mullon answered quietly. "Why don't you ask around among my people and then you'll find out that these men here are not True Democrats."

"Oh sure!" laughed Magellan maliciously. "They've all memorized the script—why not?"

Mullon struggled to hold his temper. "I'm sorry, sir," he said, "that you didn't follow the details of the trial that resulted in our being exiled. Otherwise you'd know which of our 2 organizations is regarded as the most dangerous. From the very beginning the Nature Philosophers have tried to deceive and bamboozle us and apparently they have found in you the person who makes it possible for them to succeed."

"I have to put you in the brig, Mr. Mullon," said Flagellan stiffly. "I assure you that every precaution will be taken to protect whatever rights you may have in this matter—if any. Your case will be investigated and if it is determined that you have been the victim of an injustice I will personally ask your pardon. But you must understand that I'm concerned with the safety of the ship and I have to place you under security until your innocence has been established."

Mullon nodded. "Do whatever you have to," he mumbled.

Mullon was placed in a cabin that was very similar to the one he and Freddy had been sharing.

A man named Milligan locked Mullon in and posted himself by the door. "If you need anything," he said, "knock on the door and I'll do whatever I can."

Mullon thanked him. Then the door closed and the prisoner was left to his own devices. He was determined to ponder over Hollander's trickery and to probe into the meaning behind it all...

6/ THE DESTINY OF THE TD'S

Mullon spent a number of hours in his cell occupied with boring and useless cogitation. Finally he began to wonder when Magellan was going to let him know the results of his investigation and he was about to knock on the door to call Milligan when he heard a strange sound outside.

The noise sounded like a mixture of whistling and clattering. Since he had never before seen a spaceship from inside, Mullon didn't know that the walls and doors of every cabin were excellent sound insulators. He didn't know that what came to his ears so strangely muffled in volume was actually the ear-splitting howl of alarm sirens. He only became aware of this when the door rolled to one side.

"Come with me!" shouted Milligan over the noise of the sirens. "All hell's breaking loose on the bridge. I have to get there!"

Mullon trotted obediently behind him.

The corridor they ran through opened on a circular passage, the opposite wall of which consisted of many doors leading into the Control Central. All doors were wide open and what was going on in there could be seen at first glance.

The circular passage and the Control Central were swarming with men who had no business being here, according to ship regulations. On the far side of the Central a battle was waging. Mullon recognized the brilliant flashes of thermo-weapons and heard the cry of the wounded.

Apparently Milligan's only thought was to jump head over heels into the general confusion. But as he was about to leave the shelter of the side corridor, after having watched the action in the Control Central with his prisoner for some time, Mullon grabbed his arm.

"Stay here, you fool!" he whispered. "Can't you see that you're too late?"

Milligan brandished his raygun. "Are those your people?" he growled angrily.

Mullon shook his head. "No, those are the Nature Philosophers. And from where I am standing it seems that they've just about captured the whole bridge."

Milligan cursed but came back into the side corridor.

Mullon made an attempt to estimate the number of Nature Philosophers who were engaged in the assault and arrived at a guess of around 500 men. The total ship's personnel consisted of 150 men—so from what he could make out apparently about three-fourths of them were on duty outside of the bridge area. Hollander must have succeeded in getting his whole striking force to the Control Central without being discovered. After that, he hadn't had too much difficulty.

Mullon saw a group of about 100 Nature Philosophers, armed with captured weapons, leaving the Central and entering a main passage that led off from the peripheral corridor. The rest started to clean up the Control Central—that is, they dragged out the wounded and laid them out in the circular hallway. Mullon noticed that there were at least 4 wounded Nature Philosophers for every wounded crewman. Apparently Magellan's men had given a good accounting of themselves.

Strangely there didn't seem to be any dead men. Maybe the assault had actually been carried out without any full casualties—something he didn't really believe, because it was more likely the Nature Philosophers had disposed of the bodies in another exit way in order not to advertise the extent of the damage they had caused.

In any case, they had achieved their objective: the bridge was in their hands.

Mullon felt it was time to go back to his own people. He tapped Milligan on the shoulder and whispered to him: "Let's get out of here! There's nothing we can contribute here."

Milligan rose from a crouching position and trotted off ahead of Mullon back down the corridor. The 2 men reached the next main passage without hindrance and they conferred briefly in front of the antigrav shaft as to where they should go from there.

"Come and join us," suggested Mullon. "There you will be the safest."

Milligan was in agreement. Together they soared up the shaft.

Mullon reconstructed Hollander's strategy and arrived at the following results: Hollander had sent 4 of his men to the Control Central and instructed them to be as conspicuous as possible. The 4 had been promptly arrested. Under questioning, and probably with pretended reluctance, they admitted that they were True Democrats and that they'd been sent to spy out the best means of getting into the Central. Flagellan had had no reason to disbelieve their statements so he had sent for Mullon and put him in the brig.

That had been Hollander's psychological trick. From the moment that Mullon had been locked up, Flagellan had considered the plot to be squashed and felt that the Control Central was secure.

At the moment when the security coverage was most relaxed, Hollander had made his strike with the 500 men. There still remained the question as to how he had been able to get that far with such a large contingency without being discovered. But that he had managed to do so was no longer in doubt—nor was there any doubt now that the Nature Philosophers were in possession of all the complicated control equipment that was used in navigating the ship.

Mullon regretted that this clarification had not occurred to him sooner.

When he got back he ordered a full assembly of his people. Since he figured the majority of them would take too long getting there, he mustered out about 15 of the most important men and gave them a report.

Summarizing his impressions, he said: "I would say that for the moment there's nothing we can do. The most important thing is to get an overall picture of what's going on. From what I know about our friend Hollander, he'll soon be sending us the word. He's not a man to hide his light under a bushel for long."

"That may be so," admitted O'Bannon, "but what about the ship? Milligan, you can answer that: whoever has control of the bridge—does that give him control over the whole ship?"

Milligan shook his head. "No. You see it's like this: all control functions are activated from the Control Central. The Commander presses a button and down in the engine room some piece of equipment starts to operate. The engine room and the bridge are mutually dependent upon one another; neither can function without the other. But—"

O'Bannon nodded sombrely. "But you believe," he said, completing the thought, "that Hollander knows this as well as you do and he's cased the engine room the same way he did the bridge. Right?"

"You took the words out of my mouth," confirmed Milligan.

Mullon suddenly let out a groan. "Good Lord, Milligan! Remember those 100 armed men we saw leaving the Control Central?"

Milligan remembered.

"You can bet that Hollander has sent them to the engine room. How much of a crew is down there?"

"About 50."

"Then they probably made light work of it."

Milligan nodded sadly but Mullon seemed nevertheless to have regained his courage.

"Under the circumstances it's clear what we have to do: we have to make up our minds that Hollander is master of the ship. Whether or not he has navigators among his men, or has taken prisoners from the crew that he can force bridge duty from in order to guide the ship where he pleases, we don't know at this time. But we'll soon find out.

"Anyway, one thing we know: Hollander has weapons. Besides, he's completely unscrupulous. He'll try to put us under his heel. So I think we'd better get ourselves some weapons too."

He looked around him. Everybody appeared to accept the logic of his argument but by their expressions it was obvious they thought that logic alone was not the whole prescription.

"Where will we get them from?" O'Bannon wanted to know.

"I'm sure Hollander hasn't managed to overpower every crew member on board. We have to find them and bring them here, along with their weapons."

Suddenly Milligan had an idea. "Up on K-deck there's an astronomical observation station. There are 4 men there. That place isn't well known to ordinary laymen and it could be that Hollander's overlooked it."

"Do you want to take a couple of men and go up there?" asked Mullon.

Milligan nodded eagerly. "Sure! If we take the central gravshaft we'll get there fastest."

There were more volunteers than Milligan could use but he chose O'Bannon and Wolley as his companions.

Mullon remained behind and passed out his instructions. The first concern was for the women. They would have to be re-quartered and housed in an area that would not be in the main line of Hollander's presumed direction of attack. They had to be as far removed from the living quarters of the Nature Philosophers as possible.

Of the 4000 True Democrats, approximately half were women, all in an age range between 20 and 30 years old. Mullon assigned Freddy the task of forming a committee and instructing them so that they'd help her to manage the mass move. Men could not be spared for such a task. Hollander's attack was expected at any time.

Meanwhile, the full assembly was finally formed and Mullon outlined briefly what had happened. The people condemned Hollander's action in a hard-worded resolution and placed themselves on the side of the Commander—of whom it was not known whether he were even still alive—and they demanded that Hollander vacate the Control Central and turn the running of the ship over to those that were assigned to run it.

Not very much was expected from his resolution. Mullon instructed the messenger not to march into Hollander's battle camp but to hand the letter over to the first Nature Philosopher he saw. The True Democrats were holding 3 Nature Philosophers prisoner and no doubt Hollander would be unscrupulous enough to consider any messenger or middleman a welcome hostage.

But the end result was that it didn't work out as planned. Just as the messenger was about to leave, a Nature Philosopher was brought in by some guards who had been standing outside the mess hall. He had a message from Hollander. Typical of Hollander's nature, the messenger was under orders not to wait for an answer but instead Mullon gave him the assembly's resolution, to take along.

Hollander's letter was read aloud. It was exactly what everybody had expected after what Mullon had related to them.

A fighting force of Nature Philosophers has succeeded in removing the ship's crew who were imposed upon us and in taking control of the bridge and the engine room.

"The Council of the Free Settlers Anti-Socialists has designated Walter S. Hollander as the new Commander of the ship. The Commander declares that henceforth a state of emergency exists on board the ship, that all instructions will be issued solely and exclusively by the Commander and that all violations will be regarded as mutiny and will be punished accordingly."

Mullon laid the letter down in front of him and looked out at the people in the assembly. "So now we know where we stand," he said calmly. "Hollander wants to bring us under his lash. Probably the next that we'll hear from him will be a bunch of orders that we won't be able to accept under any circumstances. So then he'll fall back on his state, of emergency proclamation and take us all prisoners."

"If by that time we still don't have any weapons we'll have to hide out. However, I'm hoping that the rest of the former crew will join us. Then maybe we'll be able to throw a monkey wrench into his plans."

The people were very pensive as they left the assembly hall. In accordance with Mullon's direction, loosely organized combat groups were formed on the spot.

* * * *

It was 5 hours before Milligan returned. With him were O'Bannon, who had a black eye, Wolley with severe face bruises and the 4 men from the astronomical observation station.

O'Bannon was in high spirits. "Did we let them have it!" he enthused. "Some of Hollander's men tried to stop us when we were about to enter the main lift. Only one of them was armed and he was the first to catch my fist, before he could fire. Just looky here at the pretty little cannon I looted from him!" He took the weapon out of his pocket and held it for all to see. It was one of the micro-rayguns that were carried by the ship's officers.

Milligan made a report to Mullon: "There's considerable activity going on in E, F and G but beyond that things are quiet. Up above there are only the storage holds and apparently they don't interest Hollander. As I figured, he hadn't thought about the observation station. These 4 men were in a real tizzy when they heard what happened and I had a hard time convincing them."

"Did you run across any of Hollander's men on your way back here?"

Milligan shook his head. "No. Sector 3 is the farthest they've dared to penetrate so far. But I found out something else."

"And?"

"We've got 7 more crewmen! They were up in the storage holds making a routine inventory. We put them wise and they were ready right away to come down here and join us. But O'Bannon thought it best for us to remain split up because a large group would be more conspicuous than small ones. Anyway, they'll be here any time now."

"All together that makes 12 weapons!" beamed Mullon. "With those we should be able to make life a bit more difficult for Hollander. Did you find out anything about the fate of the rest of the crew?"

Milligan nodded. His expression suddenly became grave. "Ask O'Bannon. He's better informed."

Mullon raised a brow at O'Bannon. "Alright—give!"

"Well, it was like I said," began O'Bannon. "They got in our way when we wanted to use the main lift. Like I told you, only one of them was armed and I hit him first. In fact, we had quite a go-round. At first he didn't want to be reasonable but there are various ways to convince people."

"Well, anyway: Flagellan and 3 of his technical officers are dead. They refused to surrender as long as they held their guns in their hands—so Hollander made short work of them. Otherwise the takeover was surprisingly bloodless, as a result of the trick Hollander used."

"At the time of the raid on the bridge there were only 20 crewmen in the Control Central. About 50 men were down in the engine room and maybe 10 more in other parts of the ship. That left 60 men off duty in the crew quarters and wardrooms. When they heard the alarms and received no other instructions, they lit out for the bridge."

"Hollander knew what main passage they would use so he posted his men there and with their weapons they could make an easy sweep of the corridor. The off-duty personnel were hard pressed for it and they tried to get to the Control Central from another side. They took the shortest route, which was through the chart room. Hollander had one of the hatch doors bolted shut and placed his men there behind the chart and micro-slide cabinets. As soon as the mice were in the trap, the other hatch was locked... and so that portion of the crew couldn't do anything else but surrender."

"In the engine room there was a heck of a scuffle but there were only 2 who were badly wounded. The rest of them gave up since they saw no help coming to them and the situation seemed to be hopeless. That's about it."

At this moment there was a disturbance among the men. They opened a path for the entry of 7 uniformed crewmen into their midst. They stopped in front of Mullon and looked about them testily but when they saw Milligan and the 4 men from the observation station they appeared to be relieved.

"Don't worry," Mullon addressed them. "Nobody's going to do you in: Instead, we're offering you a hideout. Hollander has a pretty sharp eye out for anybody in uniform or carrying weapons. Do you wish to stay with us?"

One of the men was a sergeant and he became the spokesman. "I know Milligan," he said. "If he says he saw Hollander take over the bridge, that's good enough for me. Besides, Milligan also tells us that the Democrats are enemies of the Nature Philosophers, so we'd be glad to stay here and help you."

Mullon was satisfied. "Good. I think we can make good use of you. First of all, your knowledge of the ship, its equipment and cargo; and secondly because of your weapons. The question is: are you willing to place your weapons at the disposal of our group, for general use, or do you prefer to keep them on you and give us armed support against Hollander every time he shows his hand?"

The sergeant shrugged. "If you're saying it's okay for your men to go around carrying weapons, then we don't mind handing them over to you."

"Thanks. On your way down here, did you bump into any of Hollander's bunch?"

"We saw a few of them from a distance but since Milligan had warned us we were careful. I don't think they noticed us."

"Where was that?"

"F-deck, Sector 1."

Mullon whistled faintly through his teeth. "That's right above us. You couldn't see what they were doing there...?"

"No, sir."

"But I think I can guess," interjected Milligan. "One of them probably found out that an average-sized

man can get through the airshaft. Maybe they want to climb down and attack us from behind."

Mullon became excited. "Where did you see these men exactly?"

The sergeant couldn't recall any further details but one of his men still remembered: zone F-I-14, section G. So that would be the 14th cabin section of F-deck, about two-thirds of the distance from the centre of the spherical vessel to its periphery.

"I don't think that Hollander will attack us unless we give him provocation," said Mullon. "Of course he'll probably soon force us to give him a reason. Then all his men have to do is break out of that shaft and we'll be caught between two fires."

O'Bannon suggested that some of them should go up to F-deck and hit Hollander's crew from behind but Mullon objected to this. He didn't want to be the one to start the hostilities.

A short while later another messenger arrived from the Nature Philosophers and demanded with a short note that the 3 prisoners connected with Freddy's abduction be handed over at once—also, Freddy herself and, above all, Horace O. Mullon, the instigator of all the trouble, according to Hollander's description.

The messenger was sent on his way with a chorus of scornful laughter.

Milligan watched the man's departure as though he were a strange phenomenon. "Good Lord!" he groaned. "This ship is equipped with an intercom system that can reach every last corner! Why doesn't Hollander just pick up a microphone and tell you over the intercom what he wants?"

Thus far Mullon had not concerned himself with this factor. But now he realized that if Hollander were in possession of all the intercom equipment and all other means of communication on board, and if in spite of this he still used messengers, then either he hadn't yet learned how to make use of the complicated communications gear or else the central intercom controls had been put out of commission during the fight on the bridge.

Moreover, he didn't think this point was significant. More important was the fact that Hollander would consider the negative answer received by his messenger to be mutiny and he would attack immediately.

So it was that O'Bannon finally did receive instructions to take 4-armed men with him up to F-deck and to stand guard in area 14, Sector 1, section G.

6 other armed men concealed themselves in the main mess hall. Hidden behind the material of the wall, the wide airshaft rose vertically behind the centre of the back wall. At this place the outlet for the fresh air was through the porosity of the wall itself so no ventilator crawl hole was available. Undoubtedly when Hollander's men received a signal to attack they would carve out an exit for themselves by using their disintegrators.

In addition, Mullon decided to try a chess play of his own. It was based on the assumption that Hollander still believed the Democrats to be unarmed. By Mullon's evaluation he could not know that almost half of the remaining crewmembers had joined the Democrats. So if the Nature Philosophers came to the false conclusion that they were secure from danger, that was the time to strike. Whereas as soon as there was an attack they would see that the Democrats had weapons, at least to some extent, and then Hollander would be tipped off and would set up guards at a strategic posts.

The idea for this move actually came from Milligan who, although in no sense an officer, had nevertheless proven himself to be quite a strategist as time went on. According to him, the most vulnerable part of the ship was the engine room. This had an especial bearing on whatever plans Hollander might have for the Adventurous. Whoever had control of the engine room could decide whether or not the commands from the bridge should be transmitted to the power and drive equipment.

Undoubtedly Hollander was also aware of these things. Certainly the engine room would be occupied by a considerable number of his men. But the very fact that Hollander had chosen the engine room as his 2nd target after taking the Control Central seemed to point out, that he did not assign the importance to it that it deserved. Milligan estimated that there would of course be guards down there but perhaps not too many. Given the lack of visibility in the giant room, due to all the machinery, he maintained that 2 good and determined armed men might have a chance there.

Mullon allowed himself to be persuaded. Moreover, he himself took command of the small group that pushed out for the engine room. The force consisted of 3 men: Mullon, Milligan and Sgt. Brennan. Brennan was armed with a disintegrator. Milligan and Mullon carried micro-rayguns.

Mullon worried over the fact that he would be out of touch with his people during this attack on the engine room. Milligan had attempted to make a partial setup of the intercom system but it didn't work. Mullon placed the destiny of the True Democrats in Wolley's hands, making him his deputy, and he assured him that he would be back as soon as possible.

He was not able to say goodbye to Freddy. She was occupied with the task of resettling the women in an outlying section of the ship.

7/ A HAZARDOUS PLAN

O'Bannon guided his men through the hubbub of the women who were changing their quarters and brought them out to Section K where he permitted them to use an auxiliary lift shaft which reached a few deck sections above and below.

He himself went into the shaft first. The gentle tug of the antigrav field carried him upward. His men followed him.

It occurred to O'Bannon for the first time what a precious gift a good memory was. Ever since he had joined the Union of True Democrats he had worked closely with Mullon in the front line of action. By this means he had come to know very many people and because he had a good memory he hardly forgot any of them.

He knew the whole 4,000 who had been sentenced in Terrania—men as well as women—and for that he was thankful. Otherwise how easy it would have been for him to get into a situation where he couldn't decide whether the man confronting him was a Democrat or a Nature Philosopher.

He decided he'd try to push the idea of everyone carrying an ID badge of some kind. Not everybody could have as good a memory as he did.

One after the other, O'Bannon and his men passed deck zone 1 of E-deck and deck zone 15 of F-deck. Each of the larger ship decks was divided into 15 zones and each of them was 18 feet high so that there would be room for 2 decks to be built between them. The zones were numbered from top to bottom so that the equilibrium of the ship could be controlled on the landing field as well as when under the influence of artificial gravity fields while in flight.

O'Bannon glided out of the shaft in deck zone 15. He ordered his men to wait for him while he sneaked along the passage from the lift shaft until he was on the edge of Section 1. The rooms lying along the passage to the right and to the left were storage holds. When he learned that nobody was present in this area, he turned back to his men. He checked the shaft carefully. It was brightly lit and offered clear surveillance up to zone 5. It was reassuring to find it empty.

Section K in zone 14 was also empty. O'Bannon pressed on without hindrance through sections I and H to the edge of section G. Up to that point he had not seen a single one of Hollander's men.

He conducted his search thoroughly. He knew that section G was 150 feet long and had an average width of 600 feet. This approximately 10,000 square-yard area, cut into 2 separate floors, was interspersed with many passages and corridors and behind each hallway corner a Nature Philosopher might appear. O'Bannon advised his men to keep their weapons in fire-ready position. In case of an encounter, the enemy must be blocked from revealing O'Bannon's actions.

He figured he had already searched through about half of the area when he heard a strange noise up ahead. He had 2 of his men remain behind and he crept forward with the other two. They directed themselves toward the noise and finally turned into a side passage in which the sound was most audible.

Farther along, the corridor appeared to be filled with a kind of mist. O'Bannon sniffed and soon determined that the mist was nothing other than ordinary smoke.

A few moments later he discerned also the opening from which the smoke was coming. It was an open hatchway. Between 2 of the strangely piercing sounds, coughing and shouting was to be heard.

O'Bannon couldn't imagine what was going on inside the hatchway. When he saw that the smoke was getting thicker in the corridor and was impairing the visibility, he took a chance and pressed forward to the hatchway so that he could look through. Through the pall of fumes he saw the silhouettes of 2 figures moving about by the opposite wall.

Somebody cried out: "Careful!"

Then a needle sharp bright flare was seen and the sound that had first caught O'Bannon's attention burst through the room. Moments later, a further pall of smoke welled outward, obscuring the scene.

O'Bannon had seen enough. Hollander's men were busy making an entrance hole in the airshaft. The tools they were using for the task were thermo-beamers. They had to focus the beams very sharply in order not to burn down the whole wall. It was these narrowed beams which were creating the curious sound, which was like the scream of matter being torn asunder.

It was inexplicable why these men weren't using disintegrators, which worked almost soundlessly and without creating the slightest trace of fumes. O'Bannon guessed that Hollander hadn't gotten hold of enough disintegrators to be able to equip all of his fighting troops with them.

Moreover, these men who were busy at the airshaft seemed to feel quite secure. In spite of the noise

they were making they hadn't posted any guards.

O'Bannon called his men to him and they established themselves in a small adjacent storeroom right next to the big hold that the airshaft passed through. The intervening hatchway was left open just a crack—enough to offer a clear view of the corridor. O'Bannon expected Hollander to send up a messenger when the attack was to be made. Prior to that O'Bannon was not going to make a move.

* * * *

The first part of the way to the engine room was covered without the least disturbance. It was more than Mullon had expected.

Milligan had suggested that they push an entrance into the engine room by way of the hydrogen-tank storage rooms. The main fuel that the ship used for its chemical engines during normal space flight was atomic hydrogen. Millions of cubic feet of this gas were stored in extremely low-temperature liquid form in giant pressure tanks. Thick-walled conduits and ducts ran from these tanks out to the chemical engines and running along the outside of the ducts were maintenance catwalks for inspection and repair work. Milligan presumed that the catwalk hatches high up on the walls of the engine room had not yet been discovered by Hollander's men or that at least they didn't attach much significance to them.

Although it meant a detour, Mullon kept always to the periphery of the ship, which was either section I or K. In the *Adventurous* the True Democrats had been assigned to decks C to E for their living quarters, even though for the time being they were also occupying sectors 9, 10, 1 & 2. The Nature Philosophers lived on the same decks but in sectors 4, 5, 6 & 7.

Mullon and his men felt better when they descended through one of the gravitors past the demarcation point between C & B decks further below. On the other hand, this was the beginning of the area where they would have to keep their eyes open. Hollander would be expecting an attack on the engine room.

With Milligan in the lead they pressed through the centre deck zone here and gradually approached the section closest to the ship's central axis. In section E, Milligan took a turn to the left. Through a narrow side passage they arrived along a wall that was unusually devoid of hatch doors. Instead, in numerous places there were brightly lit signs saying: DANGER—FULL STORAGE!

At first sight it was easily determined that no Nature Philosophers were present here. Milligan opened one of the few crawl hatchways in the wall and allowed his companions to enter.

The aspect of the great chamber they entered was most impressive. The diameter of its circular cross-section was about 250 feet. It appeared to rise upward into dizzying heights and to plunge away below them into bottomless depths. Mullon estimated that the circular maintenance runway they were on must be approximately in the centre section of the huge cylinder.

The form of the chamber was dictated by the shape of the tank that was stored there. From what could be seen, the colossal container was made of a gleaming grey metal plastic material and it occupied almost 100% of the space provided. Between the railings of the circular ramp and the tank wall there was just enough space so that a man with extra long arms could touch the tank itself.

Milligan turned toward his right but he had hardly taken a step before he staggered and clutched at the railing for support. He looked around in bewilderment. "What was that? Did you feel it too?"

Brennan had not noticed anything but Mullon had felt it.

"It was like a small earthquake," he confirmed. "I know the feeling. Back home in Seattle the Earth wobbles once in awhile. But what's an earthquake doing here?"

Milligan shook his head. "Search me—but let's hope it isn't bad news!"

Mullon moved cautiously ahead but there was no repetition of the strange sensation.

When they were halfway around the tank they saw on the other side a jumble of thick tubes 6 or 7 feet in diameter, which were attached to the tank and passed from there on through the walls of the chamber. Each of these giant conduits was served by narrow, metal catwalks, which were all reachable either by ladders or antigrav shafts.

Milligan took a lift shaft down to the lowest catwalk and Mullon and Brennan followed him. By the time they reached him he had already gone forward to the hatch door that brought the catwalk through the wall and had it open slightly.

"Everything's okay," he whispered. "Nobody in sight!"

He opened the hatch all the way and slipped through. A surge of incomprehensible sounds came through the opening—the noise of an engine room working at top capacity. Mullon could see Milligan pause behind the coverage of a pillar to reconnoitre. It was only a few moments before he motioned for Mullon and Brennan to join him.

Mullon sent Brennan out. He waited until the sergeant had also reached the protection of the upright column and then he followed.

He was surprised to find that the fuelling ducts were located quite high above the floor of the engine room. It was about a 100-foot drop from the catwalk railing to the deck below and the total height of the room was about double that. However its length couldn't be discerned from here. The background disappeared back into a tall jumble of giant, weirdly shaped machines, some of which towered to the lofty ceiling.

Mullon didn't have time to analyse his impressions. Primarily it was vital to check on Hollander's men—and they were there.

He paid no attention to Milligan's worried expression because he was looking down below where he saw at least 50 men running about in feverish haste at their occupations. They ran here and there; there were shouted orders and somewhere in front of a small equipment cabinet was a man in a tattered uniform who had been tied up and was being guarded by 2 armed men.

Mullon tried to figure out what Hollander's men were doing but he couldn't so he asked Milligan.

"The main converter is shot!" growled Milligan through his teeth. "It looks like they damaged it during the attack on our people here. Now they have to get it into operation again and the man down there who can tell them what to do is Stokes, one of the technical officers."

Mullon realized immediately what an advantage it would be if the technical officer could be set free. Presumably he was the only one still left alive who was cognizant of repairs needed for the vital machinery and who could give instructions as to how to make them.

The catwalk along the fuel-feed channel led beyond the upright column which by now had been determined to be an exhaust shaft. It was wide open without any cover for a distance of about 30 feet until it reached a vertical, cylindrical tube that served as an antigrav shaft. This shaft led directly downwards past a plasma generator and ended not far from the spot where the manacled officer was standing on the main deck of the room.

Mullon considered the rest to be comparatively easy. Only a few of the men who were running around below were armed. The main thing was to choose the right moment for a surprise. And besides, the technical officer was too important to the Nature Philosophers. They'd hesitate to shoot him once Mullon and his men had set him free.

Milligan did not seem to be troubled about the 30 feet of open catwalk. "Brennan, give me that disintegrator," he said.

Brennan handed him the compact weapon and Milligan aimed it at a point that lay in the background of the boardroom. Then he pressed the trigger. A pale, highly concentrated beam of energy leapt from the barrel and sped toward its goal. In a matter of seconds, a cover plate fell from one of the larger pieces of machinery. The heavy piece crashed to the deck with a resounding roar that caused a panic.

None of Hollander's men had noticed the sure, swift shot above them. But they all turned toward the clattering sound. Somebody shouted a couple of short commands; 10 of the men who had been busy following the repair instructions of the technical officer turned from their work and ran back behind the equipment to investigate why the cover plate had fallen. The other men watched them go.

"Run for it!" shouted Milligan.

None of the men below observed the 3 men hurrying across the catwalk. They went carefully in order not to make any sound but they were quick enough to be inside the gravlift shaft before Hollander's men figured out why the cover plate had fallen.

Mullon was the first to be carried by the grav suction to the lower opening of the shaft. He saw that the exit was fairly large and that anyone outside would easily see him if they were to look in that direction. There were 2 possibilities: either to drift up above the exit and grip the shaft wall against the field pull until there was a favourable moment or to charge forth at once.

Mullon decided on the latter course. "Charge!" he shouted to his companions.

He dropped lightly to the deck, stormed out of the shaft exit and knocked out one of the 2 guards with a running shot, leaving only one to watch over the technical officer. Milligan's shot hissed fairly close by over his shoulder and took care of the other guard.

The other men stood there paralysed. Before they could turn from the men who had gone to investigate the cover plate and before they became fully aware of what was going on here, Mullon had grabbed hold of the prisoner and pulled him back to the antigrav shaft.

Milligan and Brennan provided cover for him. None of Hollander's men had thought it necessary to go around with weapon in hand. Their beamers and disintegrators were either in their pockets or stuck into

their belts.

"You men—come over here!" Milligan ordered imperiously.

They complied reluctantly. Milligan perceived that the greatest danger was in having the men scattered all over the room, so he herded them into a group. "Throw your weapons on the deck!" he ordered.

A few of them obeyed. From in back of them came a shout: "Stop it, you fools! We outnumber them by far! Shoot them, you cowards!"

But Milligan was on his guard. The man had hardly gotten the last words out of his mouth then Milligan's deliberately close shot grazed his head. He dodged to one side, stumbled, and fell to the deck.

His command was not obeyed. The other men followed Milligan's orders; one weapon after the other clattered to the deck.

The man in the background got to his feet again. When he saw that his companions were giving in, he too threw his weapon onto the pile. Then he pushed through the others and only came to a stop when Milligan raised his gun threateningly.

"Okay, why don't you shoot, you fool?" he shouted angrily. "Then who will fix the converter?"

Milligan shrugged his shoulders. That detail didn't interest him.

"So you couldn't care less, eh?" jibed the speaker. "And when Hollander goes into a hytrans within half an hour, we'll all be done for. How does *that* suit you?"

Milligan turned to look at Mullon. "How can Hollander make a hyperjump with a damaged converter?"

"That's just the point! The converter is only partly damaged. The phase alternator still works at about 60% capacity."

Mullon addressed the technical officer whom he had rescued. "What do you make of it?" he asked.

The officer snorted in annoyance. "The first fact we're facing is that Hollander is a fool! He thinks I'm exaggerating the converter damage merely to hinder him. So by holding to a fixed time for the transition, he's trying to drive me to work harder with these men."

"As for Suttney here, he's right. The converter is only partly damaged. Under certain conditions it might be able to take a transition... and under other conditions maybe not. But somebody'd better make that clear to Hollander!"

Mullon looked about him. Milligan and Brennan were still on guard with raised weapons and were holding the Nature Philosophers in check. He knew they had that part of the situation under control.

"Suttney!" he asked the man who stood before Milligan. "How much time do we still have?"

Suttney looked at his watch. "I'd say—28 minutes!"

Mullon turned to the technical officer. "And how long for the repairs?"

"Just about that long. It'll be a pretty tight go if Hollander doesn't give us a reprieve."

Mullon hesitated only a second. "Listen carefully, Suttney," he said then. "We're all going to fix that converter together. Milligan will be able to lend a hand because he's also a tech man. We may be able to do it before Hollander makes his jump. When it's over with, we can look into other matters here. Agreed?"

Suttney nodded sullenly. "Sure! But later there'll be hell to pay."

Mullon motioned the duped Nature Philosophers over to one side. Once they were sufficiently removed from the heap of surrendered weapons, he took over Milligan's position himself and sent Milligan to the converter with the technical officer.

"Get going, men!" he shouted. "We have to be through in 20 minutes!"

Under the direction of Milligan and the technical officer, the Nature Philosophers fell to work again with remarkable zeal. Meanwhile, Mullon cudgelled his brains trying to figure out how to block Hollander from carrying out his hazardous plan.

8/ 8000 LIVES AT STAKE

O'Bannon and his men didn't have to wait long enough to strain their patience. Judging from the noise in the room next door, the Nature Philosophers had completed the work on the porous wall of the airshaft. And at that moment O'Bannon looked through the slightly opened hatch door beside him to see a man coming along the corridor outside. He ran past O'Bannon's hiding place and through the still open hatchway of the adjacent room.

O'Bannon could hear his loud, excited voice. He opened the hatch and crept out. He pushed forward close to the entrance of the next room and was finally able to understand every word that was being spoken inside.

"In a half hour it has to all be over with!" said someone emphatically.

"To do that we'll have to catch Mullon and his people all in one spot," answered another voice. "How does Hollander figure on that?"

"I don't know. In any case, within half an hour we're going into a hyper-transit jump and you know what the effects are. If we're not through with our job by then or if we beg off and hide, the Democrats will be on our necks as soon as the transition pains have passed."

"Okay, okay—we'll give it a try. When does Hackney attack?"

"In 5 minutes. He's going directly from the radial" passage at sector 5 right up to sector 1. If you men arrive in the mess hall at the same time, you'll have Mullon in a pincers grab."

"If he's down there in the first place."

"Then take whoever you find. Get going now! We don't have any time to lose!"

O'Bannon heard the tap of approaching feet. Then other footsteps followed toward the hatch opening. Until now he'd been lying on the deck. He got up. There was no time left to hide. Hollander's messenger came unsuspectingly out of the hatchway and was halfway past him before he noticed him.

O'Bannon gave him no time to shout a warning. He jumped on him and choked him until he was unconscious. Inside where the Nature Philosophers were preparing to get into the airshaft to climb down to E-deck, no one had noticed the incident. Unhindered, O'Bannon got back to his hiding place with his prisoner. Hollander's man was bound and gagged. Then O'Bannon and his men pressed in to the adjacent room which had just been vacated by the Nature Philosophers.

The hole in the wall was just large enough for a man to crawl through. O'Bannon looked down into the shaft and discovered that a row of plastic-metal rungs had been installed there vertically about 15 inches apart, serving as a ladder.

O'Bannon had long since worked out his plan. He intended to go down into the shaft with 2 of his men and leave the remaining 2 at the hole in the wall so that they could apprehend any chance Nature Philosopher who might escape O'Bannon from the shaft.

The descent proceeded without hindrance. The 7 or 8 men that Hollander had sent to surprise the True Democrats from behind were creating such a noise that O'Bannon and his companions had no fear of being discovered.

He must have passed the borderline between F- and E-deck by the time that a blinding brightness flashed beneath him in the shaft. Seconds later a blast of hot air rose upward and almost took his breath away. The Nature Philosophers had begun to create an opening in the wall of the airshaft. They had reached the level of the main mess hall on E-deck.

O'Bannon knew that they would need at least a quarter of an hour to make the opening because they were working with thermo-beamers. This meant they would have to maintain a distance from the wall and keep the beams needle-sharp. It also meant that they would have to wait a sufficient time for the material of the wall to cool down enough at the edges of the hole to permit them to go through without harm.

Nevertheless O'Bannon didn't waste any time. In a few minutes he had progressed downward far enough so that he could see the highest positioned attacker standing in the light flashes of the thermo-pulses only a few rungs beneath him. The man was concentrating his entire attention on the men below him.

There were no formalities in O'Bannon's next move. He lowered himself as far as he thought he dared to; he bent down and used the barrel of his weapon to prod the unsuspecting victim's shoulder.

"Take your finger off the trigger!" he ordered, just loud enough to be clearly understood. "And hand over that weapon, buddy. Come on! Time's a-wasting!"

The Nature Philosopher obeyed, bewildered and scared out of his wits. O'Bannon took the firearm from him and barked further instructions.

"Now climb up around me. A couple of guys up at the other hole are waiting for you. On the double!"

O'Bannon supported himself on the ladder rungs with his left hand. He had shoved the captured weapon into his pocket and held his own weapon in his right hand. Stray thermo-flashes from below were bright enough to reveal to the bushwhacked enemy that he didn't have a chance.

Obediently, he disappeared into the shaft above.

O'Bannon climbed down farther. Using the same procedure as before, he surprised 3 more of the Nature Philosophers and sent them up the shaft. His pockets were beginning to bulge with all the captured weapons.

Meanwhile, however, the remaining attackers had been able to finally burn a hole through the wall. The bright illumination from the main mess hall broke into the shaft. Outside there was uproar, a hiss of raygun shots and in the middle of it all Wolley's bellowing commands.

The battle in the mess hall was in full course.

The Nature Philosophers below him chafed with impatience. The edges of the hole were still glowing dark red and yet it seemed that Wolley was still not aware of what was going on at his back.

Then O'Bannon opened up. He hurled a blinding raygun shot down into the shaft below him and yelled: "Surrender, you men down there! Your game is up; 4 of you have been captured already! You only have one way to go!"

For a long moment there was nothing more to be heard below than the clamour of the battle in the mess hall. But O'Bannon observed that the silhouette of the man nearest him began to move. He saw a hand lower to a belt and return into view again with a weapon. O'Bannon flipped his own weapon around, butt first, and before the other man could fire, he struck. The heavy handle struck the man's wrist and with a loud cry he dropped his weapon. O'Bannon could hear it thumping away down into the shaft below.

"Another one down!" he shouted. "Throw in the towel, chums—but make it snappy because we're awfully edgy!"

The problem might not have been so quickly resolved if by this time the edges of the hole in the wall had not cooled down sufficiently to permit the sudden entrance of a prodigious bald head from outside. Wolley's triumphant voice was clearly heard. "O'Bannon! Are you there already? We've sent Hollander's troops running! Do we take the rest of these prisoner?"

The Nature Philosophers in the shaft gave up. Wolley told them to throw their weapons through the hole into the mess hall and to climb out by themselves. Since everything was going along without a hitch, O'Bannon and his men climbed back up the shaft. In a few minutes they arrived at the upper exit on F-deck where the 2 other men were just finishing the task of binding the prisoners.

O'Bannon did a double take when he only saw 3 prisoners. "I sent up 4 men! Where's the missing one?"

The 2 sentinels knew nothing about him. "Only 3 guys came out here," they confirmed.

"I can see that!" roared O'Bannon. "But where's the 4th one gone off to?"

The 2 men who had been with O'Bannon confirmed that 4 of the Nature Philosophers had climbed up

around them. Since on the return climb one of them had not been seen, only one possibility remained: the 4th one had managed to continue climbing up farther in the shaft.

"After him!" rasped O'Bannon. "We have to get him! God knows what kind of mischief he can start!"

The prisoners had been secured. They would not be able to free themselves. O'Bannon and his 4 companions reentered the shaft and began to climb upward as fast as they could.

He had hardly gotten farther than 10 rungs of the ladder before he discerned, far above him, a brilliant flash of light. Without slowing, he called behind him to his men: "Watch it! That character's got another weapon! He's trying to cut his way out up there. If he hears us coming he'll shoot!"

O'Bannon climbed so hard that he almost lost his breath. After he had ascended what he estimated to be about 600 feet, there was another series of flashes above him in which he could make out the shadow of a man against the wall of the shaft far overhead. He let out his final reserve of energy and kept climbing, unheeding of the fact that he was outdistancing his companions.

But the man discovered him before he could get very far. "Stay where you are!" he shouted. "Otherwise I'll shoot!"

The voice sounded nervous and uncertain. Which served to give O'Bannon confidence as he tried a new strategy.

"Listen, you up there!" he yelled. "You know that Hollander is going into transition in 2 or 3 minutes! Have you thought out what will happen then?"

The man appeared to be thinking it out. "So? What's supposed to happen?" grumbled the man, still uncertainly.

"For a few seconds you're going to be dematerialised and even when you come back your senses will be distorted; you won't have control over your muscles. You will lose your grip on the ladder rungs and at the end of the transition you're going to drop like a rock down this shaft. It reaches clear down to B-deck. Do you know how deep that is?"

The Nature Philosopher didn't answer. O'Bannon used the opportunity to climb up a few more rungs. This time there was no subterfuge. "Don't do anything foolish!" he shouted as he climbed and he sought to put a suggestive power into his voice. "I'll help you break through the wall. To be a prisoner of the Democrats is better than a corpse at the bottom of a 2,400-foot shaft!"

The man didn't move. He permitted O'Bannon to advance another 3 rungs. O'Bannon could hear his rapid breathing.

"Don't lose your head!" O'Bannon told him calmly. "If you have such a big itch to fire that thing, aim it at the wall!"

Something whizzed past O'Bannon. Instinctively he flattened himself against the wall to one side of the ladder. Blindingly a beam of energy flamed within a yard of him, over his head. O'Bannon tensed his body in order to change places instantly and avoid the next shot.

But then he noticed that the shot hadn't been aimed at him. A narrow blue beam of finely concentrated energy bored into the side of the shaft. The man above him had followed his advice and was now aiming

at the wall.

O'Bannon climbed the remaining rungs between him and the other man, until he joined him at the same level. "That's the ticket" he panted. "The 2 of us can do the job faster!"

Working alternately they brought the pencil-beams of their weapons to bear on the wall and the hole grew larger. The strategy O'Bannon had used to outwit the Nature Philosopher was not actually a deception: the transition was close at hand; they had to get through the wall.

They finally made it. O'Bannon's men brought up the rear and added the power of their own weapons to the task. They made the hole large enough so that they could jump through it without touching the glowing edges.

They entered into a giant storage hold where many large pieces of equipment were packed in barred cages and half-covered with charts and blueprints. O'Bannon discovered one apparatus that looked something like a cannon and since everything with such a shape gave promise of being useful to him he investigated the covering grating and began to loosen the bars.

He had the 3rd grating bar in his hands and had bent it outward, thus using the leverage to tear loose its fastening screws; but in that moment he suddenly felt himself in the mind-rending grip of, a searing pain.

The outlines of everything before him became blurred and he lost control over his hands.

Somebody cried out: "Transition!"

* * * *

After a quarter of an hour, Mullon inquired whether or not the repairs could be completed prior to the end of the stipulated period. Milligan and the technical officer had long since given up merely handing out instructions and instead had joined in directly with the workers. Stokes came crawling out of the wide cable shaft he'd been working in as he heard Mullon's question and he shook his head despairingly. "Impossible!" he answered. "One of the gunshots has bored a hole clear through the whole mess. To do things right we'd have to disassemble the entire converter; but I'd say we could make provisional repairs in something like one hour."

Mullon nodded as though he hadn't expected anything else. "Alright then," he said. "In that case we'll have to ask Hollander for a delay. Suttney!"

"Yes?"

"Stop what you're doing and come with me. We have to convince Hollander to postpone the transition."

Suttney wiped sweat from his face. "It's no use," he answered dourly. "He won't put it off!"

"It doesn't make any difference," Mullon retorted sharply. "We're going to try just the same—now come along with me!"

At the same time he ordered one of the men to go up to E-deck and report to the Democrats that he, Mullon, would be on the bridge trying to bring Hollander around to the deal. The messenger he chose was one of the Nature Philosophers who had been disarmed. It was questionable whether or not the man would actually fulfil the assignment given to him but Mullon had no other choice.

Immediately thereafter he departed together with Suttney. His plan remained firm: he would use Stokes as a pawn in his game with Hollander. Like anyone else on board, Hollander was cognizant of the fact that at least one man had to be kept alive who knew something about the complicated subject of astronomical technology.

Apparently Hollander had not been alerted to Mullon's visit. He stood in front of the main control console together with his men and a prisoner. When the hatch door opened, he glanced at it. His eyes widened when he discovered Mullon standing there. He pushed through the group of his men and came toward him with a wide grin on his face, stretching out his hands dramatically.

"Well, Mullon, old friend, have you finally found it in your conscience to place yourself at the disposal of the Council of the Free Settlers Anti-Socialist Party? I can assure you that this voluntary decision on your part will be taken highly into consideration. They will—"

"Oh, knock it off!" Mullon interrupted him angrily. "They will do what? They'll not do another thing at all—unless you postpone the transition!"

Hollander stood rooted to the spot. He dropped his hands and glared darkly at Mullon. "Why?" he asked curtly.

"Because in the short time left the converter cannot be put into shape—at least not good enough!"

"So in this case what's good enough? I'm only going to make just one transition; it ought to be able to hold up under that. I'm convinced that Stokes exaggerates to an extreme."

"He hasn't exaggerated in the slightest detail!" shouted Mullon. "If you try a hyperjump, this ship is going to blow to pieces!"

Hollander appeared to consider this. Then he turned suddenly and went across to the control section of the tracking station. "Come over here, Mullon!" he said. "I want to show you something."

Mullon followed him. Hollander indicated a greenish glimmering radar screen which revealed a row of tiny, brightly coloured points of light.

"Do you see that?" asked Hollander.

Mullon nodded. "Naturally. What are they?"

"We don't know for sure yet. In any case, they have to be spaceships. They may be signalling us but we can't unscramble it because the receiver is on the fritz. But the most probable answer is that they're search ships from the Solar Fleet. Ever since we took over the Control Central, communications between the *Adventurous* and the Earth have been cut off. They got suspicious in Terrania and probably sent a couple of patrol cruisers after us. We've been watching them for several hours. There's no doubt they must have recognized us by now; but they're being cautious—maybe we're *retoo* quiet for them.

"But if we hang around here much longer they're going to be on top of us. They've closed the distance

fast in just the past few minutes. Do you think I want to be captured again and have to stand before another court just because Stokes can't get that converter fixed fast enough?"

"No, my friend. We're going to jump—and right now! I'd rather be dead than a prisoner a 2nd time!"

Mullon remained calm. "That may be the way you feel about it!" he retorted. "Apparently you couldn't care less about the other 8000 people on board, is that right?"

Hollander grinned brutally. "That's right!" Then he turned away without paying further attention to Mullon. "Throw in that switch!" he ordered one of the men at the main console. "We're transiting now!"

"No!" yelled Mullon. "Don't listen to him! You close that switch and we're dead men!"

Hollander didn't even look back at him. Mullon retreated slowly toward the wall in the direction of a small control panel that governed the hyper-transmitter. The man at the main console hesitated.

"Do you want to do what I tell you or do you want to be replaced?" asked Hollander sharply.

Nobody paid any more attention to Mullon. Mullon backed up and only came to a halt when he felt the keys and control buttons of the hyper-transmitter behind him.

In the meantime the man at the main console had made, up his mind. With a quick shove, he threw the switch home.

Mullon sensed that a sort of mist swam before him. The contours of the room melted away as a searing pain shot through his body.

* * * *

O'Bannon didn't know how long a transition normally should last but this one seemed to him unbearably long. But he didn't know of the complications that had occurred in the engine room nor of all the dangers the *Adventurous* had been exposed to during the last few seconds.

When the pain of the after-effects passed and the room around him became visible again, he continued labouring with the grating that enclosed the cannon-like piece of equipment, while his men finished securing the prisoner.

Within a few minutes O'Bannon had uncovered the strange machine completely. From the lettering under the small switch panel he made out that this was some kind of an 'automatic router'. For the time being O'Bannon didn't have any idea what was supposed to be routed or how the equipment carried out its purpose but he took it upon himself to find out as soon as possible. With this in mind he began to experiment cautiously with the control buttons. He took the precaution to see that none of his companions was in the line of the 'cannon barrel's' fire.

For some time O'Bannon's efforts were without results. None of the small coloured panel lamps lit up though they were undoubtedly some kind of controls. He finally figured that a certain button bearing the caption 'Energization' was the one he should press first.

He depressed the button and in the same instant a green control lamp lit up. Encouraged by this, O'Bannon depressed a 2nd knob labelled Minimum Intensity and at that moment something strange occurred: ahead in front of the cannon's barrel the air began to shimmer. The shimmering path in the air extended itself swiftly to the opposite wall and a wave of oppressive heat enveloped O'Bannon so that sweat broke out of all his pores.

He left the control panel on its present setting and went around the cannon. Cautiously he put his left hand in the path of the highly heated air, then drew it back with a cry of pain. Blisters began to swell up on the back of his hand.

Too excited to pay any attention to this pain, O'Bannon went back to the small button panel and depressed the button labelled Maximum Intensity. And what he expected to happen did: the shimmering in the air intensified, the temperature in the great storage hold soared up suddenly and the wall suffering the impact of the energy beam began to emit bubbles.

O'Bannon grabbed one of the metal staves he had taken from the machine's grating and held it in the beam. The bar sagged immediately and then began to hiss, finally melting down in great, grey droplets that fell to the floor and crystallized again.

O'Bannon shut off the machine and was no longer able to contain his sense of triumph. "Men, with this thing we can conquer the whole ship!" he cried out enthusiastically. "And a couple of other ships besides, if there happen to be any! The main thing is to get it out of here and set up outside the Control Central!"

His men were elated. They rolled the cannon to the hatch door of the hold. O'Bannon tried to open it but didn't succeed. The hatch resisted every combination he tried. So he finally lost his patience and shot the opening mechanism to pieces with his beamer. After that, the hatch rolled easily to one side and the 5 men passed through with their cannon.

Outside they saw that the hatch bore the label Sealed, which was obviously why he hadn't been able to open it. O'Bannon assumed that this particular storage hold contained a lot of equipment that was not to be distributed among the settlers until after they had landed on the planet of their destination.

Everything else followed without difficulty. With their combined strength the men brought the cannon to the nearest main lift shaft and, conscious of being in possession of such a superior weapon, they pushed onward without further ado.

They went down to E-deck.

There they found out that Mullon had gone to see Hollander shortly before the transition in order to make an appeal to him. Mullon's doubtful messenger had actually carried out his orders.

O'Bannon did not hesitate for long. He gathered a fighting force of 100 men and struck out with them and his newly scrounged cannon in the direction of C-deck and the Control Central.

* * * *

Mullon felt the transition after-effects fade away. He saw the objects in the Control Central regain their shapes and then attempted once more to grasp the switches he had gotten hold of before.

He was the first one in the room to regain his senses.

He took a good look at the control panel he was standing in front of. The lettered captions were simple and understandable. There was a switch-button labelled Power On and a throw-switch labelled Ready to Transmit. There were many buttons and switches for various kinds of antenna arrays and beam transmission of hyperspace messages. Unseen by the others, Mullon pressed a button for general transmission into all areas of space and then threw in the switch for maximum output of broadcast energy. He noted with satisfaction that the 2 corresponding signal lamps flamed into life. The only remaining action he had to take was either to pick up a microphone and speak into it or hit the key that would send out an automatic code signal.

Then he turned around. He was just in time to see Hollander straighten up with a groan and turn to the uniformed prisoner.

"What happened?"

Not wholly collected yet himself, the prisoner shook his head. "I don't know," he shrugged. "Anyway that's the longest transition I've ever experienced. Look there!" He pointed toward the single viewscreen that was functioning. "See where we've come out at!"

"Where is that?" asked Hollander naively as he stared at the screen.

"That's just the question: I don't know. I don't see a single familiar constellation. I'm pretty sure that the most experienced astronaut on board won't be able to figure out our location."

For a few moments Hollander was at a loss. Then he turned away and went over to the tracking console. When he saw the green-lit radar screen, his face beamed. "At least we accomplished one thing!" he cried out. "Those ships have disappeared!"

He turned back again into the room and chanced to notice Mullon. It seemed as if he just now remembered that Mullon was in the Control Central. "Ah-h-h, Mullon!" he drawled out for emphasis. "You see now that we lived through the transition! It's true we don't know where we are but we're all in good health. You will now surrender yourself. The Council of the Free Settlers Anti-Socialists will process your case."

Mullon remained unusually calm. Both hands were behind his back and no one could see that he had hold of 2 vital controls. "You're mistaken, Hollander," he answered with a smile. "I am not surrendering. Through your own thick-headedness you've brought us into a situation that can easily mean death for all of us. You have made a hypertransition with a damaged converter, which has ended us up in the Unknown. How do you know whether or not there are any inhabitable worlds in this region? And if there actually are any... do you have the means to locate them among the unnumbered stars?"

"You, Hollander, are a fool, and a dangerous one. You're only afraid that the Earth patrol cruisers will catch up to you and your bunch of gangsters a 2nd time but I am afraid that 8000 people may have to die because of your stupidity!"

"You said before that the receiver had been destroyed. All right, but nothing's wrong with the transmitter. I've fired everything up, Hollander. I only have to press one key here and the transmitter will

broadcast some kind of coded message to all sectors of space and at least one Earth ship will have to intercept it. Then the Earth will know where we've come out at and they will send help. I'm sorry, Hollander, but your personal concerns will have to bow to the interests of the majority!"

Hollander had become pale. He was about to say something. He took a step forward as though to attack Mullon. But he neither said anything more nor took another step.

Mullon's hands tensed as, he depressed both keys behind him with a sweeping stroke of his palms. A soft humming sound emerged from the hypercom equipment, which became very audible in the sudden stillness of the Control Central. The humming noise was the only indication that the transmitter was operating.

Mullon's arms relaxed at his side. "So!" he said. "Now why don't you bring me before your ridiculous Council—that is, if you can take me alive."

Since it was Suttney who had brought Mullon to the bridge, no one had thought to search Mullon for weapons. He carried a micro-beamer in his pocket.

By the time Hollander regained his wits, Mullon already held the weapon in his hand. He knew that in spite of this the odds were against him. There were too many men in the Control Central and all of them with the exception of the prisoner were Nature Philosophers. He only had one pair of eyes in his head. He could not see what went on behind him.

But he could hold Hollander at bay. Hollander stood only 7 or 8 paces away from him. And as long as he saw the barrel of a micro-raygun aimed at him he would take care not to order an attack on Mullon.

"You won't get far with that, Mullon!" he shouted. "Lay down your weapon and surrender!"

Mullon shook his head. "No, Hollander. I've got you right in my sights. Even if I get hit by 10 shots all at once I'll have enough strength to bend my trigger finger. If you value your life..."

"No!" screamed Hollander in a paroxysm of alarm. "Don't shoot, you fools!" He was not shouting at Mullon but at some of his men who had drawn their weapons and were aiming at Mullon's back.

Mullon felt gooseflesh creep over him.

There was just one small remaining hope: that the messenger he had sent from the engine room had managed to get to Wolley and O'Bannon and that those 2 would be undertaking something that might free him. Meanwhile the game was a draw. No one dared move. For the time being, Hollander's men controlled themselves and replaced their weapons in their pockets or belts.

Hollander and Mullon stood facing each other eye to eye.

Minutes passed, each a small eternity.

Mullon lost all sense of time. When he found out later that he had stood there motionlessly for three-quarters of an hour by the hypercom without letting Hollander out of his sight for a moment, he was very amazed.

But it was of no use because Hollander won by a ruse.

Somebody behind Mullon emitted a sharp, bloodcurdling scream. After the long, irritating stillness in the Control Central this sound was so unexpected and startling that it caused Mullon to duck reflexively and whirl around. Somewhere, something rattled. The tension that had held everyone prisoner now broke loose in a hysterical, crazy bedlam.

Mullon realized that he had been taken in. He jumped free of the hypercom where he'd been standing and it was just in time to avoid 10 blinding energy beams that hissed close past him simultaneously. They struck the hypercom installation and converted it into a boiling mass of metal, glass and plastic.

Mullon struck his shoulder against a control desk. Swiftly he threw himself around and tried to use it for cover. In the first place, its protection was hypothetical since it stood out in the centre of the room and Hollander's men were on every side.

He wounded 2 men who were closest to him and hurried to one side. For a 2nd time the whistling energy beams struck but a moment too late. The control desk burst into flames. It began to glow and then caved in.

Mullon aimed shots at a group of men who in their confusion and fear of hitting each other had not brought their weapons into play. His small beamer spit out sharply focussed energy in all directions. He didn't intend to kill anyone; his weapon was operating at minimum intensity and unless such shots made a direct hit in the heart or head areas they did not result in death.

He managed to out-manoeuvre them for awhile. He came to the side of the room where the main control console was installed and there fought off the opposition with his back to the control counter. Then he made a long dive forward and slid a number of yards on his stomach across the smooth deck. Something scorching hot bit into his shoulder but the pain disappeared quickly; it had only been a glancing shot.

He realized that his only salvation was in movement. He ran, shot, jumped, rolled across the deck, shot again, took another dive and finally felt that his breath had left him. Things began to go black before his eyes.

Through the roaring in his ears he heard an excited shout: "They're coming! Scram out of here, men!"

He didn't know who was coming, who was disappearing and what he should save himself from. He shuddered feebly for the last time and then lay motionless under the astronomical instrument console.

Vaguely he heard shouts, scuffling and angry commands. He heard a sound that was like the mighty hissing of a blowtorch. And then he heard a voice that knocked all the debility and pain out of him at one blow. It was O'Bannon's bellowing set of pipes which would have been recognized in the midst of a thousand voices by anyone who had ever heard him bellow before.

Mullon sat up. As though through a fog he saw that the Control Central was empty except for the wounded who lay on the deck. He got up and came forward to the main hatchway. It stood wide open and beyond it men could be seen racing by toward the right.

Directly opposite him where one of the main passages opened into the circular corridor he saw O'Bannon standing, husky, broad-shouldered and huge. In front of him stood something that looked like a cannon out of the Civil War.

Mullon couldn't sense that the air in the circular hall was heated to the boiling point or that he couldn't draw a breath. He saw O'Bannon, saw him recognize, him and wave to him.

He saw O'Bannon and his men push into the curving passageway with their ancient-looking cannon. Now that he knew that he was safe, that O'Bannon stood before the Control Central and there was nobody to keep him from taking possession of the bridge, Mullon succumbed to his weakness.

He slipped down the frame of the open hatchway onto the deck and in the same moment he lost consciousness.

9/ REBIRTH

"For heaven's sake," said a booming voice, "Isn't he ever going to wake up?"

Mullon recognized the voice but he had trouble in getting his eyes to open. He finally succeeded, however, and saw O'Bannon's face close before him. Beside him was Freddy, her eyes glistening with joy.

"Thank God!" roared O'Bannon. "For awhile there we thought—"

Mullon tensed suddenly as a piercing pain shot through his shoulder. His vision darkened momentarily but he fought his weakness. "What's the matter?" he asked. "Is the Control Central...?"

"Yes, yes, we've taken it," interrupted O'Bannon. "2 days ago; that's how long you've been unconscious. Here's the situation: the Nature Philosophers have been completely beaten. Hollander and his most important men are in our hands. Hollander is badly wounded but he'll come out of it alive.

"Actually we should be pretty happy about it all but the drive engines are as good as kaput. When Hollander made the transition there was an explosion in the engine room. Fortunately Stokes told the men to take cover just in the nick of time. The converter has been completely destroyed; it just barely went through this one hyperjump and that's it. Due to the collapse of the converter the *Adventurous* only has about 10% manoeuvrability. We can't go to the right or the left but just straight-ahead. A landing will be somewhat of a problem. We can't even search out or make any choice of landing places; we just have to wait till a planet shows up and go down right there where gravity can grab hold of us.

"So much for the bad news. After all, there is also some good news: the Nature Philosophers are basically prepared to work together with us. Of course Hollander wasn't asked about it; he's still out cold. The captured crewmembers have been set free.

"Secondly: the *Adventurous* isn't more than a few light-years away from a giant blue-white star. The observation station has been able to make out that it has a whole flock of planets. So in that part we've been lucky; we don't have far to look. Naturally this sun is completely unknown but that isn't so tragic as long as we can just find a place to set ourselves down.

"Further: the fight with Hollander and his men didn't cause any complete casualties. There's a heck of a lot of blisters in the crowd but no corpses. But above all I have to tell you about my cannon. I ran across it up in one of the main holds and... hey! Aren't you listening to me any more?"

In his enthusiasm O'Bannon had prattled on without noticing that after Mullon had heard the most important part of the story he had turned to Freddy. By the time O'Bannon noticed this, the 2 were already in each other's arms.

"Oh well," muttered O'Bannon and he went to the door. "I'll look in on you sometime later

* * * *

On the single viewscreen that still functioned, the bright grey mass of a mighty planet was to be seen. The borderline of day and night stood out sharply on an impenetrable layer of clouds.

Analyses were made and Mullon learned that the atmosphere of this world had a mixture of oxygen and nitrogen comparable to that of Earth.

The giant blue-white sun was at a distance of 3.6 billion miles, which was the distance from Earth's sun to Pluto. But the radiation strength of the huge star was powerful enough when at its zenith to heat the planet's surface to 120 Fahrenheit, according to the indications of sensitive instruments on board.

"We're going to be fairly warm," sighed Mullon. "At least I don't think we're going to have to worry about finding fuel to burn."

More results of the analyses came through. The planet—so far nobody had given it a name—moved on a slightly eccentric orbit: its variance from the plane of its central sun didn't change much in the course of a planetary year. Moreover the planetary year had a duration of 170 Earth years. The planet's axis was only 10 off the plane of its orbit so that the seasons of the year would not be exceptionally marked down on the surface.

Then came the final announcement: surface gravity was 1.2G. Anyone who weighed 155 pounds on Earth would weight about 186 pounds here.

Mullon was satisfied. Judging from a diameter of 24,000 miles, which the planet seemed to measure, the fact that the gravity wasn't any heavier must have been due to an abnormally low density.

Aside from Mullon and a few other men he was using for messengers, the Control Central contained all members of the former crew who had knowledge of astrogation. The highest ranking among them was a first lieutenant. He admitted that he had never navigated a major-sized ship by himself but he promised to do everything that was in his power.

The settlers were duly informed of the facts of the matter and that under certain circumstances a crash landing was not unlikely. A deep silence reigned through the ship. The people had assembled in the community mess halls and stared at the few viewscreens that were functioning.

The first lieutenant issued navigation instructions and technical man Stokes carried them out. As though he were afraid of breaking the control lever, Stokes took hold of it carefully and gingerly pressed the release button.

The *Adventurous* moved sluggishly into a curve and turned its jet rings toward the surface of the

planet—at least that section of them that functioned the best. The ship's altitude began to drop. Somebody read off the altimeter numbers in a monotonous voice.

The alien planet had long since grown in apparent size to where it filled the viewscreens. The ship lowered itself over a broad, green-coloured region. The upper part of the viewscreens showed the green shading giving way to a blinding bright grey which presented contours of cliffs. The lower part of the screens changed abruptly to a dark greenish brown which no doubt indicated the presence of forests.

Mullon was fascinated by the strange view. Involuntarily he kept on the lookout for any signs of intelligent life but he couldn't discover any. Instead he found a river that wound its way tortuously through the green plain below. "It would be a good thing," he half whispered aloud, "if we could land near that river."

Stokes overheard him. "Slim chance!"

Mullon felt a shudder travel through the ship and for a moment he lost his balance.

Stokes looked up. "The antigravs are cutting in!" he said dryly. "Let's hope the generators hold out till we're down there."

Mullon knew that only a fraction of the ship's mass, drawn by the mighty planet's attraction, could be supported by the impulses from the chemical jets. The rest of it was supported by a synthetic gravity field that opposed the planet's natural gravitation and permitted the ship to descend gradually.

8 minutes later the antigrav generator stopped working completely. The descent velocity of the ship, now left to the mercy of its overdriven engines, jumped suddenly to 300 feet per second and continued to increase.

Stokes got up from his seat and wiped sweat off his brow. Since the generator had gone out the present condition of weightlessness caused him to rise from the deck and float to the ceiling but it didn't seem to make any difference to Stokes.

On the other hand, Mullon had a hard time to keep from screaming in his anxiety. Weightlessness produced an alarming sense of being in free fall. Also, the ship's distance from the surface of the planet had narrowed meanwhile so that the contours of the ground could be seen approaching with wild velocity in the screen.

"60,000 feet!" shouted someone in despair.

Mullon moved vigorously and the impulse thus generated sent him flying off his feet and drove him straight through the room.

But a second later a mighty force grasped him and slammed him to the deck. Almost knocked out, Mullon heard shouting:

"The generator's running again! Watch out—we're landing!"

From his angle of observation, Mullon saw the rest as though in a delirious dream. While lying on the deck he could see only an upper quadrant of the viewscreen. He was able to determine that the velocity of the approaching terrain had slowed considerably. Then everything began to turn in circles. With his head craning back on his neck he became dizzy. He heard Stokes cry out. It could have been in fright or

triumph.

At any rate, in the next moment there was a terrific sharp jolt, followed by a thunderous sound. Mullon ducked his head down because he feared the ceiling might crash in on him.

But nothing happened. The thunder and roaring subsided and the only sound remaining was a gentle crackling in the walls as they sought to adjust themselves to the pressure of weight that now bore down upon them.

Finally, someone quietly announced: "Gentlemen, we've arrived!"

* * * *

And so it was a crash landing after all.

The *Adventurous* would remain a derelict forever; but the auxiliary ship was intact. This was a spherical vessel, 180 feet in diameter, equipped only with an interplanetary type space-drive. Even the launching lock for this ship was still functioning.

Half of the cargo of the *Adventurous* had been destroyed. Valuable machinery had been totally shattered; other equipment would have to be repaired before it could be used.

The crash had caused a large number of people to be injured but fortunately no one had been killed.

After the Democrats and the Nature Philosophers had united, Mullon's leading position had become recognized even by the former crewmembers. He attended to having the ship unloaded as quickly as possible. Most of the automatic loading cranes were still intact. Men, machinery and supplies moved out of the ship on wide conveyor ramps.

The river that Mullon had discovered was less than a mile away. Mullon directed that the unloaded goods be brought halfway to the river and there houses started to be constructed out of the undamaged pieces of prefab materials that had been shipped along. Not quite half of the construction materials had been damaged by the crash. Temporarily the people were going to be living in close quarters with each other—more or less 10 per dwelling instead of 5. But that was inconsequential. Nobody felt uncomfortable.

Around the swiftly rising village, Mullon posted a ring of guards Nobody knew what kind of dangers lurked on this world. It was necessary to be on the alert.

The joint working effort of the True Democrats and the Nature Philosophers proved to be excellent. Both sides had come to understand that only by sticking together could the situation be mastered.

Hollander, who was conscious again but in the intensive care of physicians, maintained his silence. Mullon was sure, however, that his pathological ambition had survived the recent catastrophe.

As soon as Hollander could stand on his feet, he would start to make trouble again.

* * * *

The plain in which the *Adventurous* had made a crash-landing had an extensive grass coverage. It sloped gently upward from east to west. Mountain peaks towered into the blue-white sky at a distance of about 60 miles. Still farther away in the East began the darker mass of the jungle.

The river flowed down from the mountains and into the jungle country. In spite of its many meanderings, its waters rushed along swiftly due to the slope of the plain. It was a young and vigorous stream.

4 of the almost 40-hour days had passed. The little town had established itself. And Mullon had jumped his most difficult hurdle: to incorporate the former ship's crew into the community of the settlers. Altogether it had been easier than he had imagined it would be. Only a few of the former officers thought that the settlers should continue to be treated as convicts. Mullon pointed out the fact that crewmembers and exiles, alike were all in the same situation and he managed to break the resistance of even the most hardheaded amongst them without causing any bad blood between both sides.

The village had received a name: Greenwich. The thought association was obvious, green of course being related to the grass of the softly sloping plain. In all, Greenwich was a significant name rich with tradition. In fact, in honour of tradition the zero degree of the meridian was defined as running right through Mullon's house.

The sentinels that Mullon had posted in a wide circle around Greenwich observed a herd of giant animals toward the South. They never came close enough so that they could be more clearly observed; but by all appearances they were larger than elephants.

Early one morning when the pre-dawn darkness still lay over the land, there was sudden excitement. The ground thundered and the guards came running to proclaim that a herd of the giant animals was marching on the village.

Mullon placed his men south of the town. With a kind of gangling trot, the animals came thundering onward, as Mullon observed them through a telescope. Their pillar-like legs towered more than 6 or 7 feet above the ground, at which point the mighty but comparatively graceful and almost slender torso began, which was in itself about 30 feet long. Forward from the torso was an almost endlessly long neck supporting a comparatively small head so that the level of the creatures' eyes was about 40 feet off the ground.

Fortunately there was no actual encounter. The herd made a detour around the village and gradually disappeared toward the North. The guards went back to their positions and Greenwich had a new subject of conversation: the elephantogiraffes or the giraffants—nobody had as yet come to an agreement as to a name for them.

* * * *

Mullon had had an inventory taken of everything that was either still usable or that could be rendered useful with minor repairs. The results were not as frightening as one might have expected right after the crash-landing of the *Adventurous* .

Aside from the small auxiliary spaceship, for which Mullon of course could find no use at the present, there was a large selection of both tractor-tread and wheeled ground vehicles, all of them equipped with powerful, long-lasting fusion-engines. There was more than enough agricultural machinery and tons of seed corn. On the scientific side of things the *Adventurous* seemed to fulfil every need including an extensive library. There were also many kinds of instruments, such as devices for long-range measurement of temperatures, alien time-zone chronometers capable of showing the exact length of day for any planet, navigational gear for determining position. The magnetic field of the planet could be measured with magnetometers so that the North-South line of direction could be precisely determined. There were also medicines and enough medical equipment for furnishing 2 complete hospitals ready for operation, according to the doctors and physicians who were among the settlers.

There was also a helicopter. Originally there had been 10 of them but only this one had withstood the shake-up of the landing. It was actually an all-purpose vehicle. The helicopter blades could be detached and stowed away, in which case it could be converted into a straight airplane, a boat or an automobile—in accordance with the transportation requirement.

Mullon felt sure that with all these technical and scientific supplies the survival of the colony of settlers was fairly well secured. The imperative thing to look out for now was to provide for a continuance of human progress, for the preservation of the spirit and intelligence of their kind, so that in spite of all this technology they would not slip back into barbarism in the course of generations to come. Because Mullon had given up hope that his hypercom broadcast had been heard or that the position of the *Adventurous* had been observed.

"We are alone," he told a mass assembly of settlers 7 days after their landing. "Probably most of you don't see any particular disadvantage to that, at least not yet. We are men and women in more or less equal numbers; on the average we are young, so most of you will ask—why shouldn't we be able to populate a great world like this?"

"But don't overlook one thing: we are missing the tremendous backup that is represented on Earth by billions of fellow humans. We must not neglect the quality of mind and spirit. Ours isn't the same situation as it was for the pioneers who settled the American West a few hundred years or so ago. They only had to retrace a thousand miles or maybe less before they were back in civilization again. In our case we are completely cut off. Instead of having to traverse a distance of a mere thousand miles or so, we are faced with thousands of light-years and we have no means of travelling that far.

"Therefore we're going to have to stick together! We have to realize that the only way we're going to be able to survive is to avoid splitting up again into a lot of independent groups with different objectives and different ways of looking at the world. Don't just go blindly and stupidly to your tasks merely to put out a lot of labour. Consider what labour should be accomplished and why it should be done. Have discussions, read the books we've brought with us. Keep mentally awake, remain industrious and avoid lethargy at all costs!"

* * * *

The first life forms indigenous to the new world that the colonists had seen were the astonishing giraffants, as they had decided to call them, and already the great grey beasts had become part of the pioneers' heraldic symbolism. Called upon to name the planet, philologist Herbert Haeussler suggested the adoption from his native language, German, of the translation *grau tier*, which to non-Germanic ears had a sufficiently exotic and interesting sound to be acceptable by the majority as the designation for their new home. Grautier.

Mullon had sent out patrols, sometimes with tractor reconnaissance vehicles and sometimes with the helicopter, in order to make a search for any signs of intelligent life.

But Grautier did not appear to harbour intelligent life. No trace of such development was found. The only intelligent beings on Grander were the inhabitants of the village called Greenwich. And for the time being they were entirely satisfied with that.

Mullon did not know that there had been present at his meeting a certain individual who stole secretly away as soon as darkness had come. He had left the village and walked southward for about a mile. At a certain marker point, he began to dig up something that was buried in the ground. He pulled out a plastic case from which he extracted a spacesuit. In the place of pockets, the suit carried on its left breastplate a small panel of control buttons. The secret visitor donned the suit, pressed buttons and rose into the air. In a swift flight he shot away at a low altitude over the grass. 2 hours later he arrived at an elliptically shaped structure that seemed to be disc-shaped. An entrance lock opened and the man flew inside.

A few minutes later the disc took off. In another few minutes it was several million miles distant from Grautier where it went into hypertransition and with hardly any loss of time it arrived in the solar system of the Earth.

Mullon's hypercom broadcast had been heard. Having pressed the code signal button, he had released an automatic transmission that said: "Being attacked by alien ships. Help requested." Immediately an Earth patrolship had been hurried to the spot and, unnoticed by the passengers of the *Adventurous*, it had determined that this could not be a case of attack by alien ships.

The commander of the patrolship had come to a correct conclusion: somebody on board the colony rocket had simply pressed a button at random, hoping to attract the attention of a ship from Earth.

The *Adventurous* was followed. Its hypersensor readings left no doubt that something unusual had happened aboard for they recorded that rather than emerging from transition in the region of Rigel the ship had made reentry thousands of light-years distant.

When the *Adventurous* attempted a landing the patrol cruiser had been standing by for potential emergencies. The emergency materialized with the sudden collapse of the antigrav generator and the patrolship was preparing to protect the colony ship from crashing, by means of a tractor beam, when the antigrav generator began to function again.

The near crash and potential rescue had gone unnoticed because the most vital of all instructions the patrol commander had received was: under no circumstances, let the Anti-Socialist Free Settlers know Earth had not lost their trail.

The commander had sent 5 men down to the planet surreptitiously in a Gazelle class auxiliary vessel. One of these men had unobtrusively infiltrated the mass meeting in the village at which Mullon had made such a worthy speech. His historic words had been recorded on a 2-carat memocrystal...

* * * *

Shortly after Mullon's memorable words were impregnated in the memocrystal, Perry heard them played back. After which he confessed to Bell in amazement, "I wouldn't have credited that fellow with so much leadership potential! In every sense of the word he's developing into a regular statesman!"

Rhodan's 'ear man' at the Greenwich meeting had picked up information about events during the flight of the *Adventurous* and Rhodan and Bell were now informed of the roles Hollander and Mullon had played. Perry was pleased. "It's worked out more favourably than I had at first imagined. Now we can observe how a human community conducts itself, isolated somewhat in the void with only minimal resources. A unique sociological experiment!"

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SOLAR ASSASSINS

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