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DEEPFREEZE

By

Robert Donald Locke

Life and the future belong to the strong—so Dollard laughed as he fled Earth and Mankind's death agony. But the last laugh was yet to come....

Edwin Dollard's nervous stubby fingers spilled three precious drops of his fifth Scotch highball, as he veered his head away from the horrors on the telescreen. He was in time to observe Garth enter by the paneled tunnel door.

"Two more hours—and the ship will be ready," Garth announced. "The men still know nothing." His thin lips cracked into a forced smile. "I slipped them the poison at noon mess. There'll be no tales out of those greaseballs."

Dollard's pudgy features relaxed. "Just you and I, Garth ... to survive. The others—stupid sheep—let them die!" Lust spread his heavy cheeks into a wide grin. "As for women, there'll be time enough for them ... on Venus."

"I know," said Garth slowly. "Plague-untouched women. It'll be like being reborn again." His pained somber eyes lit up. "It's right good we understand each other...."



"Just see that we continue understanding one another," Edwin Dollard snapped. "I'm still the boss."

The last of America's industrial tycoons refocused his attention on the world telecasts. Since breakfast, he had sat glued to the news while a battery of video announcers reported from central strongholds on the progress of the bacterial epidemic that already had swept the Atlantic seaboard.

"Any late news?" Garth asked, over Dollard's shoulder.

"For your information, I picked up a flash from Denver. Just before you came in—"

"Bad, eh?"

"You said it, Garth. A thousand new cases. Some think the Asiatics got another two or three missiles through the Canadian radar barrier. More likely, the germs hitch-hiked westward on human carriers, gangs of them streaming out of the eastern states. The mobs are like vermin; you can't hold 'em back. They sneak through the quarantine at a hundred points."

"They're people, aren't they?" said Garth, quietly.

"People? They're no more people than the loutish mechs you just did away with today."

"Under your orders," Garth pointed out.

"But it had to be done. Let's not be squeamish children—"

"Yes, so it did. You're safe enough."

"You and I both," Dollard completed. "As long as we're together, we're both safe...."

Dollard gripped his hands together and glanced nervously about the timbered walls of his High Sierra lodge, as if to assure himself that this carefully guarded retreat would protect him from the grisly crawling death that was demolishing his invincible country. Even in the presence of his most trusted hireling, Garth, who had been executive officer of Dollard's vast combine, the millionaire was ashamed to admit how the report from Colorado—which claimed the enemy-seeded plague had already crossed the broad prairie states—had been enough to send him into a cowering state of panic. And now, even after assurance that he could soon take off in his private vessel, bound for bacteria-free space and the antiseptic sanctuary of Venus, he was still suffering a paroxysm of fear so great that not even a double slug of his costly hoarded alcohol could banish it completely.

Outside, hired thugs, outfitted with hydroflame rifles, patrolled the two roads entering the narrow valley—armed with orders to shoot to kill all unauthorized intruders. Already, the guards' task was proving more difficult as refugees from the Los Angeles area poured into the mountains by way of Bishop and Highway 395. Ragged foodless marauders, they swarmed through the resort villages in vicious bands, plundering and murdering in futile efforts to stave off starvation and death.

Dollard got up from his position before the teleset, squinting sidewise at Garth while he poured himself three fingers of additional courage. "You're not sorry at leaving your wife?" he inquired. "Ellen meant a lot to you, didn't she, Garth?"

Garth shrugged. "She's safe enough where she is. That's all that matters."

Dollard poked him in the ribs. "All that matters ... is survival. You know that, Garth." He chuckled. "Why bother to save anybody else?"

"That's right, sir," said Garth. The muscles of his face continued to compress his features into an unbending mask.

"And one thing's certain, there's no hope for humanity. Not on this planet, at any rate—or not for a long while, I'm positive. You know what they're saying now?"

"No."

"The bigdomes are asserting that only a complete mutation among the unborn can save the higher forms of organic life. Get this, Garth. They say that all the vertebrates, and particularly all mammals, will have to develop new germ-resistant species—or the plague will eventually kill off even the strongest. What's more, those damned Asiatics are in the same boat with us, *at last*."

Garth mulled over the news. He said, "Then, any survivors on earth will have to mutate into something other than mankind?"

"That sums it up..." Edwin Dollard raised his highball. "Here's to *homo the sap*," he said in mock salute to the vanishing human race. "The chump had a short life but a merry one—on Terra, anyhow. The poor sucker spent his days in a dream world of fraternity and equality. And all along, we, his superiors, enjoyed the liberty to work him to death for our own benefit. It's a shame there won't be any earthly historians to record man's final irony ... how we who made full use of the hordes for our convenience should be virtually the only ones to escape the hordes' destruction."

"I see," mused Garth. "That means there's not really much hope for the ones we're leaving behind? I guess I'd always thought..." His words trailed off.

"... that there'd be a few survivors?" Dollard supplied. "Perhaps there will, more probably there won't. What does it matter? There's only one chance in a thousand of licking the plague ... from the way the bacteriologists are wailing. And even if the race does survive, what sort of existence would it have—battling who knows what kind of monsters some of the other forms of life are bound to change into? No, I'm here to tell you, Garth, the remainder of the race is better off—exterminated. The few plague-free people we'll find on Venus will be enough to launch a greater, prouder race—provided, of course, that I'm their leader."

The industrialist waddled back to the telescreen, flicked a metal knob that brought into view a transmission on one of the few ultra-high frequency channels still in operation. Electronically-produced colors provided high visual acuity to a scene that depicted Cleveland in flames. Decontamination squads with fire bombs were shown as they sought to

cleanse Euclid Avenue of its infected dead.

"Scenes like this have been duplicated in a dozen cities already this afternoon," Edwin Dollard said. "It'd be enough to turn the stomach of a lesser man. Frankly, I'd hoped the health squads could contain the epidemic—but I guess at heart I never entertained any real prospect that they would. As long as we've got a little time to expend, we might as well sit here and enjoy the sight."

"Sit and wallow in it, if you like," replied Garth. "I think I better check the road guards once more. If those plug-uglies smell out your plan to desert them our lives won't be worth a punctured isotope."

"You know I'd go with you," Dollard sighed, "but I fear my presence antagonizes the lower classes somehow. Considering the pay they're drawing down, I'll never understand why, either."

Garth strode to the lodge's steel-plated front entrance, a formidable barrier designed to match the strength of a space cruiser's main airlock. Standing opposite the heavy circular plates, he gestured before the five heat-sensitive electronic tumblers and the heavy door swung open on oiled hinges. When he stepped outside, the barrier closed behind him.

Alone inside the timbered hide-away, Edwin Dollard immediately shed the affected air of corpulent lassitude he generally displayed in the presence of others. Now that the deadline for his attempt to sneak off the planet approached, it was essential that he attend to the completion of his personal preparations. Above the mantel of the lodge's thermionic fireplace was hung a brilliant cascading stereo of Yosemite Falls in misty motion. Dollard pressed a hidden button. The mantel sank to ground level and the stereo swung outward, bringing into view a shining cubical locker of beryllium steel.

From this hiding place, Dollard withdrew two loaded hydroflame pistols. These he strapped under each armpit. Next, he brought out a palm-sized stunner which he concealed in his hand by aid of a wrist-strap. The fourth object to emerge was a small chunky bag from which dangled tightly-drawn leather thongs. Dollard opened the pouch and poured the contents on to his sweaty palm; a thousand carats of glistening "Syrtis diamonds" from his own private mines. The rarity and value of these jewels, he knew, would be increased by the collapse of the terrestrial civilization that had refined them and cut and polished their rainbow facets.

These gleaming objects of unfixd price were the guardians that would stand by him during the months it would take to reestablish himself among the colonies on Venus. Not only would they purchase luxuries, but also new servants, fabrication plants, ore boats; possibly, even governments. Above all, they would serve to bribe Dollard's way through the tight network of Venusian immigration officials who might seek—in accord with the laws of their sparsely-settled but independent world—to forbid his landing as a refugee from a diseased planet.

A full hour passed before Garth returned, an hour that Edwin Dollard spent pacing the narrow confines of the lodge's central room. His eyes constantly consulted the slow march of minutes on the luminescent dial of his platinum chronometer ... for while it was not imperative that the space yacht he had refurbished should soar starward at the precise hour agreed upon, there did reign a crucial period of four or five hours immediately at hand, during which the most advantageous passage to Venus should be commenced.

When Garth finally reappeared through the steel doorway, his thin long face reflected the strain he also felt as departure time neared.

"I checked the roadway two miles up the valley," he reported. "No activity in sight. There was a riot at Leevining, or so one of your guards told me—and a big pitched battle in Bishop between lowlanders and highlanders."

"Another day or two and they'd be swarming all over this region," Dollard said.

"You can bet their first reaction would be to dismantle the ship at sight," Garth informed him. "Lucky we're getting out in time. If the mobs couldn't pilot the vessel themselves, it'd be human nature to see to it that nobody else got to do so, either. Misery loves company—even in the face of death."

"The scum," said Dollard. He donned a jaunty space cap he had often worn on pleasure flights to his outlying holdings. Hooking his thumbs in his belt, he grinned: "Well, Garth, shall we go?"

Garth nodded. He detached a torch that was clasped to his waist, then opened the tunnel door that was carved out of a braced section of the rear wall where the lodge had been built to shore into the mountainside. Entering, the two men threaded a winding route through a narrow dripping passageway, guided by the thin yellow beam of Garth's light. They emerged several hundred feet farther on in a valley of long shadows, cut off from the world on three sides by abrupt cliffs. No ravines opened on this valley. Only by a desperate climb over the surrounding peaks could it be reached—and hence it had been immune to spying eyes. Here, amounting to a feat of superb pilotage in itself, Dollard's vessel had been landed weeks earlier in anticipation of just such a need as it now served.

Sturdy shrubbery screened the tunnel exit, although concealment had not proved to be

necessary. As they broke into the light, Dollard and Garth pushed aside stunted conifers and half-stumbled, half-ran down a shale-strewn incline which led them to the valley's floor.

A short northward walk brought them in view of the refitted space craft. Based on stubby fins, it pointed vertically at the sky.

The high sharp ridges surrounding the valley blotted out the late afternoon sun, casting gloom upon the sheer rock walls and overhanging escarpments, and, despite his previous acclimatization to Sierra altitudes, the thin sharp air made breathing difficult for Dollard.

A short distance from where the vessel was cradled, the bodies of five coveralled workmen lay in stiff huddled forms. At the sight, Dollard grunted. "Efficient toxin," he commented. "Good work."

Walking contemptuously past the bodies, the tycoon approached a work shack which had housed the space ship mechanics. He picked up an aluminum platform-ladder which rested on the trampled grass. Swinging it above his head, he brought it back to the vessel and hooked it against the rear fin so that the tubular platform lodged itself against the ship's lowest loading hatch.

He turned to Garth. "Too bad we can't run an engine-to-mech check, before taking off. But no mechanics."

Garth said, "Knocking off the men was your idea."

"My conscience'll rest easy with it," Dollard returned. "I was making a joke."

"Very funny joke," said Garth.

"Very funny for you, too," said Dollard.

His fingers squeezed the rubber-mounted grips of the stunner concealed in the palm of his left hand. A slight eye-stinging flash burst in the fading light. As the wave moved outward from the tiny device, Garth stiffened and pitched forward, bouncing perceptibly before his body finally succumbed to the compulsion of gravity.

Dollard aimed the hard toe of his metallic shoe and kicked him viciously in the temple. Garth's body did not stir.

"I would have liked an engine-to-mechanic check very much," Dollard said thoughtfully. "But these things can't always be planned neat enough to meet every detail. There has to be leeway for diversive action—should the situation merit it. In this case, the situation seems to have merited it rather fully."

He began to climb the narrow aluminum rungs of the propped-up ladder. After reaching the platform, he stood on the grilled support, his fat panting bulk braced against the upper chord of the stabilizer fin. He looked back briefly at Garth's unconscious form on the ground.

"You were a fool, Garth! A fool to believe that I would take you along with me—to share a new empire. Know when I lost complete respect for your intelligence? It was when you banked that past services for me would assure you of future salvation. Very stupid. Didn't you know your usefulness would end for me the moment I left Terra? Why should I have dragged you along to drink up my oxygen, eat my food ... and undermine me later on? No, friend Garth, you were—all along—just as much a tool as those uniformed carcasses you poisoned on my behalf. May you join them in the sad reflection they must now be experiencing...."

Garth's paralyzed body lay still.

Dollard pressed against the outer panel of the hatch and stepped into the opening that was made by the sliding section. He disappeared into the bowels of the ship, and the hatch closed after him.

A few seconds later, a rumbling inside announced the vessel's engines had come to life. Stubby atmospheric wings unfolded into place on the shining metal sides. Rocket vents below the scorched tail surface began to glow a cherry red as fused gases bit into the pitted ground. The ship's entire length trembled slightly as it left the surface. Climbing into the blue with an ever-increasing *whoosh*, it described an arc over the jagged peaks and vanished.

Another half hour passed, before the cataleptic effect of the stunner eased sufficiently for Garth to sit up and rest his chest and arms upon his knees. He rubbed his forehead, felt the bruise at his temple and gazed speculatively at the sky. Then, he studied the bubbling earth only a few feet away from him and realized how close he had been to death from the space vessel's back-blasts. He shuddered a moment.

After his head cleared, he struggled to his feet and walked over the damp grass to the work shack. Entering, he searched through a chemical cabinet until he found the vials he wanted. From them, he compounded a liquid mixture which he forced into the ampoule of a hypodermic needle.

When he stepped outside again, he saw the sky had darkened quickly with evening. He walked over to the stricken mechanics and administered an injection into the neck muscles of each man. The counter-toxin took hold, speedily erasing the depressant effect of the drug Garth had originally fed the men—a non-fatal dosage of an irritant similar to the one Dollard had ordered be used to slay them.

He'd supervised a lot of Dollard's underhanded work for him, Garth told himself as he waited for the hypo stimulant to react. But murdering helpless men had been something he had rebelled at. And now that Dollard had deserted him, at least he would have company on Terra during his last days of life. It was an outcome Garth had anticipated, although he had been unable to predict just when Dollard would launch his surprise attack.

The men came to sluggishly, their reactions pathetic and confused. The first thing they appeared to notice when their conscious minds took hold of their environment was the empty circle of terrain where the space yacht had formerly stood.

"Dollard took off," Garth explained. "He drugged us all, after we'd gotten the vessel in shape for him."

"The dirty swine—he promised he'd take us!" the men protested.

"Like so many other promises he never intended to keep," said Garth. "He told you men—for instance—the ship was headed for Luna. Me, he told, he was bound for Venus. I think his destination is Venus, but he'll never get there."

"Not get there—why?"

"Because of a little secret I never let him know," Garth replied, rubbing his nose and grinning wryly. "My wife is on Venus, where the plague can't reach her. And I promised myself days ago that Dollard should never be given the opportunity to infect that planet. That's one promise that has been kept. At least, I know now that Ellen will be safe—for a while longer."

"But, sir, the big boss has gone! What can you do—with him flown the coop?"

"Do now? I've already done it. Dollard thought of me as a fool, but instead—I've shown him up as the real fool. A simpleton, tricked by carelessness. There's a damned big surprise waiting for him in space."

Garth looked up into the twilight sky where a few brilliant stars were now shining. His face bore an expression of exultant triumph. "Yes," he said softly, "a real surprise is just around the next curve for you, Edwin Dollard. I hope you enjoy it as well as you've enjoyed buying and selling men's souls...."

Five hundred miles above the sun-mirroring Pacific Ocean, Dollard wiped great beads of perspiration from his shiny jowls. His thick hands tugged and wrestled with stubborn knobs that finally yielded, enabling him to apply greater thrust to his stern rockets.

From the moment of take-off, it had seemed to him that the grim bowl of Terra below him was taking a bigger bite out of his acceleration than it should. Naturally, he hadn't expected his craft to operate with one hundred per cent efficiency, considering the caliber of the technical help employed on its refitting; but still, his *tau* curve should have brought him to his first coasting point four or five minutes earlier.

By virtue of being his own pilot, he was obliged to astrogate by rule-of-thumb and occasional directive spurts from the course-calculator. If mechanical troubles piled on top of him now, he'd have to surrender control to his gyromatic pilot, while he moved aft to track down the power-robbing malfunction. No mean task, armed in this case only with a slide rule and what engineering knowledge remained to him after thirty years of high finance.

Whatever the gremlin was, it wasn't exactly an auspicious start for a fifty million-mile hop. He grunted and pressed his secondary firing buttons, boosting space velocity by a percentage that should shake the kinks out.

At the four thousand-mile mark, the earth had retreated to a green ball that floated atop a stream of unbearably bright stars. From this height above the planet's surface, not even the most powerful telescope would have revealed the scenes of rampant disease and flaming destruction being enacted on the broad continents below.

The entire vessel shook in a kind of bone-cracking vibration, lurching and lumbering as if some malign influence had tampered with every rivet and seam-weld in her plates.

More apprehensive than ever, Dollard finally yielded to his fears and surrendered his controls to the robot pilot. His huge body rendered almost weightless, he pulled himself along the rail guards of a catwalk that led to the unmanned engine room. Here he inspected every instrument dial to be found although the readings on many of them were repeated on duplicates in the bow.

It was then, while the ship was still a thousand miles from the no-pull point where free-wheeling alone had been known to carry vessels out of Terra's gravitational range and into Venus' orbit,

that disaster struck. The fuel being fed to exactly half of the rocket tubes choked out, and the blast from the remaining tubes increased proportionately.

Under this new impetus, the vessel's frame shuddered. Its nose suddenly described a wild arc among the gyrating stars. The diversion of inertia was a more severe blow than a meteor collision would have been. Thrust was an exceedingly difficult thing to plot in free space. Dollard, screaming in panic, was flung against a network of metal braces; despite his weightlessness, his mass was great as ever and a sharp steel corner gouged a deep bleeding slash in his puffy cheek. Sickened, he crawled forward through the spinning ship until he was once more able to pull himself up into the pilot's chair.

There, he discovered the second battery of tubes had ceased firing about a minute after the first. But the changed vectors had already done their damage to both ship and heading.

A quick run-through on the course-calculator soon revealed to Dollard how desperate his position was. Mathematically, Venus was now a goal impossible to attain. To re-correct his altered heading would require more fuel than his tanks had carried at take-off, thanks to sabotage. He also had the vast gravitational field of the sun to battle—a powerful sucking force, which if left to work its will could grow insidiously from a gentle tug of a few millimeters per second to a powerful acceleration eighty times terrestrial escape velocity—and this, without ever once relinquishing its hold on the slightest particle of mass in its grip.

Cursing and fuming, Dollard plotted and re-plotted, some of the rustiness of his brain wearing off as he matched his wits against the prospect of death by holocaust. But, all the resources of higher mathematics failed to point toward a solution. An artery commenced to throb painfully above his ear.

It was Garth who had engineered this hideous accident, he told himself. The faithful unsuspecting Garth had turned out to be a traitor. He was the one who had rigged the fuel lines so that at a certain predicted point along the course the flow along one set of conduits would be shunted to the other.

He should have killed Garth instead of merely stunning him, Dollard thought angrily.

For the twentieth time, he fed three-body calculations into the astro-computer. Somehow, somewhere, in the maze of the Newtonian science there had to be an answer. The complexities of force and heading analysis weren't so great but what machinery could eventually solve all the variables involved. That is, if only Sol's overwhelming gravitational attraction didn't provide a free-sliding path to hell with no choice of alternates in the meanwhile....

The *click-click* of the tape as it emerged from the electronic calculator seemed to present a different rhythm to Dollard's ears on the twenty-first try. Picking up the ribbon, he let his reddened eyes run over the printed symbols, translating them into finished equations. Elation suddenly sent his blood pressure soaring, as the meaning of what he read became apparent. There was a solution ... a course he could follow! One, which while it would not guide him to Venus, would prevent him from plunging into the sun.

Eagerly, he punched the figures for the heading onto a magnetized wire that would be fed into the gyropilot. After the heading was set, he crawled toward the ship's stern, dragging with him a hydrojet welding torch, a tool that could sear metal apart or join it by causing regulation of the molten rod protruding from its spring barrel. In the abdomen of the vessel, he found the wrecked fuel lines and removed the obstruction Garth had set up, repairing the channels.

Returning to the pilot chamber, he pressed the firing button and acceleration returned a form of gravity to the ship's interior, giving him weight for the first time since the freakish accident.

Sighing with relief as the heavens slowly rotated in his screen, Dollard slumped back in his chair. He punched new figures into the computer, thinking ... now once safely back into a no-pull zone, a man with a little luck should be able to make—

His chunky fingers froze to the keys. There was another flaw to be dealt with. The discrepancy was one the course-calculator had clearly pointed out, but he had overlooked it in his haste to get underway. The solution he had followed was the only possible one—that was still quite true. But, use of it only plunged him into a second predicament.

This new course, said the equations, a course which would require all the remaining fuel to maintain, would steer the ship into a permanent orbit around the earth—an ellipse with the point of apogee far beyond Luna. He now had the certainty of continued life—for a few more days, until his provisions gave out....

Again he cursed the name of Garth. But for the man's treachery he would be well on his way to Venus. Now, he was a helpless trapped mass of protoplasm, protected from his bitter airless environment only by the same steel walls of the cage that held him....

Throughout the next twenty-four hours, as the nature of the elliptical orbit he had entered became more and more apparent, Dollard fought off sleep while his frightened brain racked and racked again its scattered fund of knowledge for an answer to the new problem.

But at last, the narcosis of cellular exhaustion completely overcame him and he slept.

When he awoke, he was chilled and hungry. The ship had passed into the shadow of Luna and its bulkheads no longer conducted heat to the convecting air envelope inside from the outer plates, generally warmed by solar radiations. It took him sometime to get warm again.

He pondered anew his predicament. It would be useless to plead for help to the Terran space authorities. All interplanetary flights had been grounded since the Asiatics had scattered the epidemic over the western world only to have it re-invade their own borders; all the national governments were fighting rebellion and plague simultaneously, and most important of all as far as Dollard was concerned, he had effectively outlawed himself from the jurisdiction of all governments by his acts of murder and his treason in fleeing Terra. No, there could be no help from the officials of earth.

Not in present years anyhow, he thought. But, wait! Suppose this plague should ultimately die out or be conquered. Then, wouldn't space travel be resumed? If not by the human race, by its successor—whichever race or species, if such could happen, that mutated successfully enough to produce a plague resistant strain and then evolved a rational brain.

Civilizations rose and toppled in cycles, he knew. Sometime in the near future or even the far future, another civilization would emerge on Terra and another race would conquer the stars.

But what value was that to him, if he would die in a few days from lack of oxygen?

No, if he were to be rescued, it had to be soon. By the Venusian colonists? No hope lay there, either. The second planet was an infant world, and its people—even if they succeeded in making space travel common—would be apt to avoid the Earth-Luna system like the—

He choked: There was no other word for it:—like the plague....

Again, he was conscious of his brief chill. It aroused some elusive connection in his brain with a piece of information he had nearly forgotten. What was it? Cerebration set in, as he sought to pin down the clue he wanted.... He felt his body chilling....

Chilling, he thought. That was it, *deep freezing*.

What cold was colder than the eternal absolute zero of outer space? Where could a person find temperatures lower than those in the celestial icebox that extended everywhere around him? Just outside his port window lurked enough chill to keep his body intact for a million years!

And in a million years, who knew what cultures would learn to pilot vessels through space and come his way to revive him? Possibly alien cultures whom his superior genius for organizing would enable him to dominate. Already, the contemplation of such a possibility rendered the prospect so alluring he wondered why he was holding back. Why not step out of the airlock immediately?

It was calm reasoning that deterred him, the realization that if his scheme for survival were to meet success, he would have to lay his plans deep enough to meet every contingent possibility.

Two things became immediately apparent as essential: (1) He would have to adopt a method of self-freezing that would assure instantaneous cessation of his life activities without injuring his body cells by converting the water to ice. (2) He would have to leave behind him an explanation of what he had done and sufficient directions concerning his revivification that he would not be restored so slowly as to alter his molecular structure, a turn of affairs which would in fact make him unalterably dead long before he approached normal body warmth.

Now, thoroughly aroused by the possibility of escaping total death, Edwin Dollard fought his way back through the damaged compartments to the tuberoom. Here were vats of liquid helium, used in Collins engines to refrigerate the volatile rocket fuel. The helium, Dollard knew, was in turn kept super-cool by contact with magnetic salts, mostly iron ammonium sulphate, the magnetic field being generated by the ship's auxiliary dynamos when in operation, the ship's batteries at other times.

But if one were to open all ports or hatches, allowing the atmosphere to escape, the absolute zero space would infiltrate the ship's interior making it unnecessary for either the helium to cool the fuel, or the salts to cool the helium. All would probably approach a state of absolute heat death. And the body of a man, immersed in the helium vat, would be preserved for eternity!

Dollard laughed. He would defy Garth yet!

He spent the following day in the most efficient of preparations. Moving about the ship, he posted complete directions for his recovery in as many languages as he knew. Then, he drew with painstaking care a series of diagrams that repeated the information in pictograph form. Finally

he recorded directions on sound tape and hooked the reproducer to an electron eye so it would commence to play the moment the vessel was entered.

This task completed, he set about to prepare his own body. It was imperative that the suspension take place so speedily that none of the animal heat was retained. For this purpose, he imbibed a heavy amount of alcohol which served to flush his capillaries and distribute calories more equally through his system.

Next, he gathered wiring and rigged up a remote-control board that would enable him to open the ship's hatches from sanctuary inside the tuberoom. When finally ready, he stood by the helium vats, opened a switch on the jerry-built board and listened to the vessel's atmospheric envelope swoosh out in the passages just beyond the sealed tuberoom hatch.

Now, the only air remaining inside the craft was that in the tuberoom itself.

At that moment, the ship circling the mother planet entered the shadow of Terra and chilled perceptibly in the absence of radiated sunlight.

Dollard stripped to his skin. His lips were blue and his limbs were trembling, despite their cushion of fat. He pressed the last button and the pressure inside the room commenced to drop. He stood by the largest vat until all the oxygen was gone, except that remaining in his lungs. The outer hatch swung open, admitting the penetrating cold of complete vacuum.

The trapped industrialist exhaled his breath, counted three and dived into the tank.

His body sank and the atoms of helium temporarily left their random state with the influx of heat, but returned quickly as the magnetic field took up the slack, vaporizing the ammonium salts. All was quiet again—

The human brain and the secondary laws of thermodynamics had combined to thwart the will of a relentless universe.

Edwin Dollard, financial genius and murderer in his time, had entered into a state of suspended animation from which only an equal intelligence could ever awaken him.

The planets and their satellites revolved in their orbits for uncounted centuries, until even the fixed stars shifted and formed new constellations. During this long almost interminable period, no man-made vessels disturbed the equilibrium between the worlds; no man-made radiations penetrated the empty spaces of the solar system. A wanderer from Procyon or Sirius, entering the neighborhood of Sol, might well have suspected he had found nine lifeless spheres pursuing a futile and purposeless course about their flaming parent.

So immutable however are the laws of celestial mechanics, once set into operation, that Dollard's ship varied not a centimeter in its elliptical path during those endless dragging years.

But organic life, by its very definition, is highly viable, highly persistent; it is capable of protracted existence in such diverse environments as the imbedded hearts of meteors or the currents of briny polar seas. It is likewise capable of infinite modifications under stress, such as glacial flow, cessation of moisture, loss of sunlight ... or, the rampant onslaught of bacterial disease.

Hardest of all forms of life, as proved in the last days of the reptilian age, are the carnivorous mammalian orders; these members are generally the most adaptable, intelligent and ubiquitous of living types. And by their conquest of their stubborn environment, they have proven themselves equally the fiercest.

Thus, it was not surprising that eventually the derelict spaces between the inner planet of Sol were once again the scene of traffic; not bristling traffic perhaps, but sufficient to present concrete proof a new intelligent race had developed on Terra.

Nor was it anymore surprising to Edwin Dollard, when Dollard awoke, aroused from his long sleep—and conscious in the passage of time of no more than a second's absence from the world of sense and light—that this life should have found him.

He awoke, aware of stinging pain in his eyelids and the jabbing of a thousand needles below the surface of his skin. A glaring white bulb, suspended in an ice-blue ceiling, dug into his pupils with relentless intensity.

A voice, couched in a low-throated growl, spoke just above his ear in an unintelligible language. A second voice, farther away, answered with a guttural purring.

Dollard slowly revolved his field of vision until it rested upon the first creature who had spoken. His eyes made out a man-like apparition in a white smock buttoned to a metal harness, a tall lithe figure whose curiously pointed face regarded him with unblinking interest.

"You are come to, I notice," the creature said, employing a rasping blurred form of English. "I am Shir K'han, of the people of Tegur, detailed to interpret your meager tongue, oh frozen primate."

"You're not human ... but at least you're intelligent," Dollard snorted. "Where am I?"

"On board a vessel of the Tegurian fleet, bound for the home planet."

"Which one do you call 'home'?"

For reply, Shir K'han gestured towards a bulkhead paneling at the far end of the room. Dollard's eyes focussed on a trimensional photo-mural of Terra. In the representation, the continental outlines of the planet were the same; but if the colors were reproduced accurately, then the earth had lost the bulk of its polar cap and become a tropical world. The Sahara was a verdant green, while a great portion of the Amazon valley was inundated by bluish seas.

Dollard attempted to sit up; the struggle was what first caused him to notice his nude body was strapped by polished steel clamps to a long flat porcelain table. Rolling his head to one side, he discovered that the table's rim contained a long shallow trough which had not been scoured too clean. Deepening stains remained of whosever blood it was that had been contributed from the last autopsy performed on the surface of the table.

"Why'm I tied up?" Dollard demanded.

"A temporary precaution," Shir K'han replied, soothingly. The growl of his voice had now reduced itself to a monotonous purr, which reminded Dollard of nothing so much as a ... but then, he shook his head: No! that couldn't be. Mankind replaced by a thinking species of biped felines—descended from a race of giant jungle cats. The development was fantastic.

"Precaution?" Dollard repeated.

"You might have become violent, primate. Only a few anthropoids are extant, now. And They are scraggly skulkers, hiding out in the brush of the second planet—the world you knew as Venus. But even so, many of them have been known to react quite viciously when captured."

"Then, there are humans left?"

"I see you recognize the difference between our race and yours at once." Shir K'han stiffened with pride. "The gap is quite great."

Dollard noticed a very faint striped pattern could be traced in the fuzzy growth on Shir K'han's bared arms.

"Yes, some members of the previous culture do survive," the feline continued. "Puny specimens. We have been forced to hunt them down. Unfortunately, they breed slowly."

"I claim no kinship with them," said Dollard. "If you're sniffing around in an effort to find out my sentiments about that, you can stop right now. As a man from the past, I'm strictly for myself." He winked. "What's more, I never did believe that monkey business. You know, about the human race being the only kind of life having souls or intelligence."

"Strange words ... from a primate."

"That's what I say. You look good enough to me. You have an adequate IQ—that's the only test you need to pass with me. Now, how about getting these clamps off of me?"

Dollard's renewed request incited no action. The feline interpreter's pointed features were impassive; only the pricked attitude of his tufted ears indicated he was listening.

"Let's go," Dollard cajoled. "You've revived me—and I think I've proved I'm not dangerous."

"You still do not seem to understand. Your animation from the frozen sleep was undertaken solely because it was a challenge to our science that we could not over-look."

"And a bang-up job you did of it. Followed my directions perfectly."

"We used our own methods," Shir K'han corrected.

"The idea was mine."

"True, but had you known it, there did exist a mathematical solution to your problem of escaping from the fixed orbit your ship adopted. Apparently, to your misfortune, your training failed to include a knowledge of five-body equations ... so you never arrived at the proper heading you needed to take."

"Naturally, not," the revived industrialist snapped in answer. "But that couldn't be helped. I never professed to be a super-competent astrogator. In my world, in my time, I was a leader of my race—a builder of factories and machines."

"Our archeologists have dug into the ruins of your civilization—without, however, a great deal of curiosity," said Shir K'han coldly. "We found little in it to interest us. We have translated your language—but even so, we uncovered nothing to equal even the barest rudiments of our own science. Our zoologists dismiss you as extra-clever primates—possessed of some knacks, but nowhere on a reasoning, perspicuous level."

"But that's absurd—"

"From our point of view, no. In fact, we still debate whether you primates could have been intelligent enough to have founded your culture without the aid of some early Tegurians. We Tegurians have been superior to the anthropoids as far back as our own history goes, which is to the days of the Great Impetus—the epoch when our race was gifted with great powers and the primates degenerated."

"Nonsense," scoffed Edwin Dollard. "Get me off this sadistic table—and I'll demonstrate how smart I am." He squinted, studying the feline's high-domed head and furry chin.

"Now, I've got you pegged," he went on. "You're just a specimen of what a jacked-up tiger would turn out to be, burned under a few million volts of hard radiation. You may be civilized, you and your people—but I bet it took you a million years of high-speed evolution to do it. If it hadn't been for mankind's work with mutable bacteria, you'd still be chasing your tails under the palm trees —"

Shir K'han interrupted him, remarking: "The art of vituperation and scolding always was a characteristic of the various simian species. We have an apt axiom among the people of Tegur. It might be translated: 'Chattering man, empty brain pan'."

At that moment, it occurred to Dollard he was pressing his initial luck too far. No use antagonizing present company.

"All right. I know when I'm bucking the system too hard," he replied cagily. "What *do* you intend to do with me?"

For answer, the interpreter turned to the second Tegurian in the room, a creature who had stood motionless near the only exit, and uttered a flow of guttural syllables, climaxed by a high-pitched questioning note. The reply was forthcoming almost immediately, spoken in weightier, more deliberate tones.

"The commander says you are to be presented to the leaders of our civilization," Shir K'han reported. "That'll take place when we dock at the home planet in a few hours. In the meanwhile, you may have the run of the ship."

The feline pushed down a knobbed lever and the steel clamps slid from Dollard's trussed form. His relief matched only by his quickened awareness of the need for caution in dealing further with his rescuers, Dollard took advantage of his release to stretch his aching muscles.

Standing erect caused him a moment's dizziness, which he could not account for until he recalled that the alcohol he had drunk thousands (or was it millions?) of years previously still remained in his bloodstream.

Although the interior of the Tegurian ship was suffocatingly warm, yet Dollard felt the lack of clothing with what amounted to discomfort. He described his feeling to Shir K'han who told him his apparel had also been found in the circling space yacht. Equally well-preserved by the cold of interplanetary space, the clothes would be brought to him immediately.

After garbing himself, Dollard strolled about the Tegurian vessel. Its alien constructure seemed to defy all the architectural principles familiar to a human's primate mind. Catwalks, especially, lived up fully to their name, appearing as mere unsupported ribbons that stretched across banks of throbbing molecular engines. Mechanics traversed these walks over fuel pits with graceful skill, despite the lack of handholds. Everywhere, Dollard noticed that members of the crew, when relieved of their tasks, immediately dropped off to slumber without need of intervening recreation.

Slightly less than six hours after he was awakened, Edwin Dollard heard whistles scream through the length of the vessel announcing planetfall would take place in only a few minutes.

Shir K'han padded up to his side and informed him that he would have to rest in a padded cell while the landing took place. The muscles of his human body would not be up to the shock of deceleration—a magnified strain to which feline muscles had long been accustomed.

Dollard obeyed. By now he was weary of his confinement aboard. He was anxious to get aground where he should meet the true leaders of Tegur. He could impress *them* with his superior abilities. Of course, it would seem strange to find Terra ruled by another species, but after all that was a contingency he had fully considered when he voluntarily undertook the deepfreeze. Little by little, the first shock of encountering an alien culture seemed to be wearing off—yet he knew there were still many mind-twisting problems to face.

Shortly after he had braced himself against the sponge-lined bulkheads, a great shock travelled transversely through the ship, followed by a dozen or more lesser shudders. Metal groaned and creaked all about him, and the room temperature noticeably increased.

eft to himself, Dollard immediately began to formulate new plans. Searching his garments, he was relieved to find a pocket still contained the bag of glittering Syrtis diamonds with which he

L had hoped long ago to bribe Venusian officials. The gems might prove equally useful now in cementing his position with the Tegurians. He was angered however to find his flame pistols and stunner had been taken away from him.

He decided that immediately after his presentation to the leaders, he would ask for the privilege of inspecting their factories and other technological facilities. There had never been erected an industrial plant yet, whose efficiency couldn't in some way be improved, Dollard knew.

By making himself practicably useful, Dollard knew that in time he could build up a personal organization that eventually would result in the acquisition of a new financial empire.

All of course hinged upon the very vital conference with the upper echelon of Tegurian rulers.

But, at least it could be said that Edwin Dollard had proved himself capable of dealing with fortune on its toughest terms. Now, he was in the home stretch of his new career.

Seconds after, the Tegurian ship landed with a thunderous jolt. The engine throb died away and silence reigned along the corridors. Dollard found his breath painfully short as renewed anxiety gripped him. This was the crucial moment.

A panel slid open and Shir K'han appeared. "Come," he said. "The leaders have been notified and are waiting at the banquet hall."

"Splendid," said Dollard, rubbing his hands together. "If things work out to advantage for me, I'll remember you, Shir K'han."

The Tegurian's yellow eyes blinked as if he had not heard.

Outside, Dollard's lungs expanded to draw in deep gulps of the luxuriant tropical air that characterized a warmer Terra. At a considerable distance from the nearly deserted spaceport, he saw that a brilliant city of high towers capped by narrow glass spires raised its shining structures to the sky. The sharp-pointed buildings could be seen to be interlaced with countless spidery cables and glistening bridges.

For Dollard's observing eyes, the vista of the metropolis evoked—by some indefinable ancient suggestiveness—a buried Terran memory of a giant banyan tree pierced by lean striped bamboos.

"Bengul, our capital," Shir K'han told him. "This way, now." He pointed to a waiting air vehicle on the lonely drome. "In there—and you'll only have five more minutes." The feline nostrils wrinkled.

"Five more minutes?" said Dollard. "Aren't you going?"

"No, I wasn't invited."

"I'm to go alone?"

"Yes," Shir K'han replied. The prolonged effort of speaking in a strange tongue was reflected in his increasingly roughened tones. "I've been ordered to put you in the cage-flier. Then, my job is done. The cage will transfer you to the leaders' quarters—where all else will be done. Farewell, primate. It has been interesting. I could almost swear that...."

He paused.

"Something troubling you?" said Dollard, who didn't usually concern himself with other persons' inner disturbances. He wondered now what instinct prompted this particular inquiry of solicitude on his part.

"You trouble me," replied Shir K'han. "I would almost swear you had ... a high intelligence ... and a soul worthy of a Tegurian. But, of course, I know that isn't so."

"That's not what I meant," Dollard said, fretfully. "There's something else—" For a moment, he felt like screaming, "—something you haven't told me."

"Would you really like to know?" said Shir K'han. "I had thought it was better you didn't. But, then I have often been accused of strange sympathies for a Tegurian—"

"I demand to know."

"Then, I must hurry. Only a few minutes remain. Let me try to draw you a mental picture, primate. Your race, like ours, was carnivorous. You feasted on many delicacies—on species extinct like the steer, the pheasant, the squirrel. It was your very nature, your undeniable primal instincts, that made you enjoy the rending and devouring of flesh—"

"True," admitted Dollard. His body was now trembling.

"I remember," continued Shir K'han, "one of our archeologists translated an account of how the primates of your time unearthed the body of a mastodon, buried in the glacial ice. The mastodon flesh, a delicacy, was so well-preserved that it was still edible. And so, it was eaten."

"I—I don't think I understand what you're getting at," declared Dollard.

He looked anxiously about him, but the flat plain bore no shelter—or for that matter, no other objects save the waiting air vehicle and the recently-landed space ship on the drome. Lights began to glow in the far-off city.

"The point is," said the feline interpreter, "that it would have made no difference to the primates had the mastodon been intelligent. They would have eaten him anyway. In your epoch, primates ate many domestic animals who differed less in intelligence quotient from them than differ civilized Tegurians from human primates like yourself ... the gap today is much greater...."

"Then, you—"

"Not me. Only the leaders of my world, shall I say. By virtue of their exalted rank, they have the right to the choicest of foods. Since the dawn of our history, the flesh of primates has been our greatest delicacy—but it has grown scarcer and scarcer, until now it is virtually non-existent. And such specimens, as are trapped, are stringy and barely edible."

Dollard looked down guiltily at his own plump body. His face bore the flushed expression of one suddenly conscious of sin.

"But you," continued Shir K'han, "your body is fat and well-preserved. When we found you on your derelict ship, our commander communicated with the rulers of Tegur immediately. He was ordered to change course and bring you to Bengul—"

The feline's speech broke off. Edwin Dollard had suddenly commenced to run from the horror of this alien world, recognition of his fate having burst like a rocket in his panic-stricken mind. His heart was pounding.

But loping easily along as his ancestors might have pursued a baboon or antelope, Shir K'han overtook the screaming human. He seized his obese bulk by the waist and lifted him high above his head. While Dollard kicked and moaned, the feline bore him back to the air vehicle and deposited him in a wire mesh cage in the flying craft's cockpit. A tangle of the sticky ropes descended from the cage's roof, further entangling the trapped industrialist and serving to reduce him to helplessness.

Shir K'han adjusted knobs and switches on the vehicle's control board, until he had produced the desired setting. Then, he stepped back.

"As I said before," he declared "this vehicle will automatically transport you to the leaders' banquet hall—to arrive in five minutes. There, you will be prepared and presented to our rulers. I hope you please them. The reward for our commander and his crew will be great."

"Then, all along, what you've been trying to tell me is ... is that ... I'm to be—"

The remainder of Dollard's words melted into a jumble of gibberish.

"Exactly," confirmed the Tegurian, walking away from the vehicle. If the creature's feline countenance showed a trace of conscience, Dollard from his position within the rising cage could not discern it—not that it particularly mattered in his last moment of sanity on earth.

And it would puzzle Shir K'han for many years just why the last shrill scream of the primate was: "Garth—*Garth, you did this to me!*"

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