

RUDE AWAKENING?

HIBERNATE NOW, resuscitate later.

This is the plum promised people with plenty of money who dream (dream is the word) of laying down their dissatisfied bodies in the present (of the 21st century) and reawakening in the 22nd, 23rd or 24th.

But things are not what they seem and behind this hibernation lure is a scheme to conquer the world. No less!

The promise: a happy future. The plot: treason to all mankind!

The resolution of the plot: to discover it you must read—

THE SLEEPERS

1/ EVIL SECRET OF THE ISC

The incessant gurgling of the cell-plasma utterly enervated Dunbee. The container was close enough to touch if he raised his hand. Instead he dug his fingers into the sandy soil in silent despair, then groped trembling over the cracks in the ground and shrank away from a clammy rock.

Maurice Dunbee groaned in pain as he tried in vain to push his aching and tired body out from under the tank. His determination to escape grew stronger and, breathing heavily he managed to crawl a few meters, haunted by the gurgling and bubbling of the liquid in the huge vats all around him.

They had turned off the lights and the cave was completely dark. It was only a question of time when they would catch up with him and take him back. He hung his head in awareness of his physical weakness that frustrated his will to fight on. Then he continued to crawl forward despite his fear that his efforts were futile. A sharp acid odour pervaded the musty air of the cave; perhaps they had injected a narcotic gas so that he could be seized without the risk of resistance.

With a wan smile he thought that this was merely one more incident in the series of failures which had been typical of his life to date. Here he cowered again: Maurice Dunbee, the weakling!

He pushed himself up on his arms and listened. Were they already coming with their paralyzers? Was the end near?

Dunbee heard a noise coming from the impenetrable darkness. A shrill hard voice made his blood

freeze. "Dunbee! Resistance is useless. You must give yourself up! Two of our attendants will come to assist you, Dunbee!"

Dunbee jumped up. His shoulder struck the corner of the container and he staggered back. Blind with fear he started to run away. The cave was full of terrifying noises. He could hear the footsteps of running men, the panting of their lungs and the loud voices which urged him to stand still.

He bumped against a rock protruding from the wall and came to his senses. Exhausted he leaned against the stony wall. He had shaken off his pursuers for a moment but his frail body shook as in fever.

"Be reasonable, Dunbee! We only want to help you!"

Yes, Dunbee thought bitterly that's it. All my life I've let other people help me without ever taking things into my own hands!

He closed his eyes in resignation and his thoughts drifted back to the day when he had decided to ask the Intertime Sleeping Corporation for help.

* * * *

"Please, come in Mr. Dunbee," Curteen asked the slight man waiting for him outside his office. "Now I've got time to talk to you."

Dunbee rose from his chair with an uneasy feeling and put down the 3-D magazine he had perused. Curteen motioned him into his office with an inviting gesture of his hand.

Lester Curteen was the vice-president of the Stardust Soap Co. in Dubose. He was tall and slender and his old-fashioned contact lenses made him look like something akin to a reptile. "Please sit down," he said while he rummaged through some papers on his desk. "Ah, here it is!" he finally remarked with satisfaction. "You've been 10 years with us," Curteen continued in a friendly tone. "Your standard of work has always been very satisfactory and your cooperation has been harmonious at all times."

Dunbee gulped and nodded. He silently admired the facility of words with which Curteen expressed himself.

"We're extremely gratified by your exemplary contributions to our enterprise," Curteen claimed, "and naturally we hope that you'll continue with your duties for a long time to come."

Dunbee nervously rubbed his hands and remarked hesitantly: "Mr. Vadelange left our company last week, Mr. Curteen. He was the manager of the Advertising Department. I... it's always been the practice that the senior employee of the department was appointed to the leading position if the boss resigns."

Curteen looked at him across the table. There was a strange light in his eyes which quickly disappeared again. He answered in the same calm and obliging tone: "You're quite right, Mr. Dunbee. This would entitle you to be appointed as Mr. Vadelange's successor." Curteen hesitated for a moment. "Believe me, it's utterly impossible for me to find a replacement for you in your present task. We must request you,

therefore, to remain on your job for the time being. Mr. Priest will take over Vadelange's job until we can find a suitable man to do your work."

"I understand," Dunbee replied grimly. "You've chosen Priest."

Curteen rose and walked around the desk to pat Dunbee on the shoulder. "Of course you'll immediately classify for the salary of a department supervisor," he announced.

"Of course," Dunbee repeated mechanically.

"I knew that we could count on your understanding of the situation in our Advertising Department," Curteen said smilingly.

Dunbee slowly rose from his chair and exclaimed in a quivering voice: "I quit!"

And the very same day he penned a letter to the Intertime Sleeping Corporation to make his application. He desired to be put to sleep for the duration of 300 years.

The Intertime Sleeping Corporation was founded a year earlier by a businessman named Cavanaugh. It was commonly known as ISC. Cavanaugh, who promoted himself as the 'saviour of people disenchanted with life', had invented a new deepsleep method with the aid of several scientists. With a permit granted by the Interior Department, Cavanaugh had acquired an area in Wyoming in the vicinity of Yellowstone National Park which contained numerous large caves created by the volcanic activity of thousands of years. Nothing seemed to be better suited for an undisturbed bio-sleep than this place. It didn't take Cavanaugh long to equip the natural caves for his purposes. He installed big containers and filled them with cell plasma in which his clients were to be placed in order to sleep away the time until they entered a better future. With a heretofore-unequaled advertising campaign Cavanaugh gained quite a few disciples for his idea. Why shouldn't a frustrated person who had never known success skip a few years in a deep sleep to wake up in a more beautiful future where he could accomplish remarkable deeds? The government saw no reason to intervene since Cavanaugh strictly complied with all medical precautions. The ISC passed all inspections by officials of the Interior Department. The mass media contributed to make the idea of the businessman popular and the first day the corporation was opened to the public there were hundreds of interested people who crowded its admission office.

Dunbee remembered an interview which Cavanaugh had given to a television reporter. Asked for his response to the criticism that had been raised in many quarters, Cavanaugh replied calmly: "I don't know why anyone should find fault with my idea. I offer distraught people a happier future. What could be wrong with that?"

Dunbee was an unhappy person. The marriage with his wife had remained childless. At 48 years of age he had found little success in his occupation. He felt misunderstood by his wife and the world seemed but cold and cruel to him.

Two weeks after Dunbee had sent in his application he was requested by the ISC to come to Wyoming for a preliminary investigation.

Thus Maurice Dunbee disappeared from Dubose as quietly and inconspicuously as he had lived there.

* * * *

His name was M'Artois. His dark wavy hair was streaked with strands of silver. When he laughed numerous tiny wrinkles formed around the corners of his eyes. His voice had a sonorous ring and he had a nonchalant way of hooking his right thumb in the waistband of his trousers. He wore a white, carefully tailored jacket and a colourful shirt. "We already know why you came to us," he addressed Dunbee. "You wrote in your letter that you wish to be put into deepsleep for the next 300 years, which is the maximum time we're willing to allow anyone. Our sleeping times being with a period of 50 years. Are you able to pay the sum of 3,000 Solars?"

Although this was a fairly low figure it represented the greater part of Dunbee's savings. He had withdrawn that sum from his account although not without a guilty conscience. The trip to Wyoming didn't do much to raise his confidence. He felt as if he had betrayed Jeanne. Or was she glad that he had walked out of her life? He had asked her understanding and forgiveness in a farewell letter to her. "I've got the money with me," he said.

M'Artois, who sat in a ridiculous contraption of plastic which threatened to collapse under his weight at any moment, nodded. "I'm a psychologist, Mr. Dunbee," he said. "The conversation I have with you is one of my duties. The corporation has no intention of embarrassing you with unnecessary questions and precautions. However we must be sure to get certain facts straight."

Dunbee replied a little impatiently: "I'm ready. Go ahead!"

M'Artois smiled sympathetically. "You've described your situation at some length. You consider yourself an insecure person who has failed to cope adequately with his life. You have expressed certain difficulties in your occupation and your marriage which have shattered your nerves and otherwise affected your health. Your employer didn't appreciate your work and your wife neglected to show patience with you. You have no children. There was nothing positive in your report." His tone became more urgent. "Nevertheless, Mr. Dunbee, I believe you should try once more."

"I've always tried to do something with my life but I am too weak," Dunbee replied, discouraged. "I'm at the end of my wits."

The ISC counsellor reflected for a moment. "Maybe you're oversensitive," he ventured. "Can't you begin to appreciate the pleasant things in your life? Your standard of living wasn't so bad. Make up with your wife. Discover what your common interests are and take a trip together."

"This was my last trip," Dunbee declared stubbornly.

"Well then," M'Artois said distressed, "your decision seems to be irreversible. In that case I'll take you to Dr. Waterhome who is going to conduct the medical examination. You're no doubt aware that we can accept you only if your organism is basically healthy."

He left his office with Dunbee. They passed through a large room and entered the main corridor of the administration building in Cheyenne. Several employees carrying files, and one robot, walked by. Dunbee tried to look out a window but it was a gloomy day and he saw nothing but fog and rain through the glass.

Without any apparent connection M'Artois suddenly asked: "Are you an amputee, Mr. Dunbee?"

Dunbee was taken aback. "No, why?"

M'Artois' smile, which had disappeared for a second, returned. "It's one of the rules of the Corporation not to accept amputated people. I forgot to acquaint you with this information," the psychologist explained.

Dunbee wondered why a person who missed a part of his body couldn't be put to sleep as well as a normal person but he was too shy to express his concern.

"It's got something to do with the functioning of the organs," the counsellor said. "Dr. Waterhome can explain it better to you if you're interested."

He opened a door and led Dunbee into a tiny room. A young blond woman greeted them. She sat at a desk but seemed to have little work to do. Dunbee fidgeted as she scrutinized him intently.

"This is Mr. Dunbee," M'Artois introduced him. "Will you please take him to see Dr. Waterhome, Laura!" He squeezed Dunbee's arm. "I wish you good luck."

He was gone before Dunbee could answer him.

"There's somebody in the office ahead of you," the blond girl said.

"I can wait," Dunbee assured her.

He thought of Jeanne, which made him choke up. If the ISC let him sleep for 300 years, his wife would be dead when he returned to Dubose. Dubose, that miserable hole in the boondocks with the pompous building of the Stardust Soap Co., how would it have developed after 300 years?

He heard a buzzer from the desk of the girl. When he looked up she pointed to a well-padded door and said: "Dr. Waterhome will see you now."

He stumbled as he got up and felt embarrassed when he noticed that her eyes followed him till he opened the door.

* * * *

The examination lasted two hours. Dr. Waterhome told Dunbee to come back the next day. By that time the results of the examination would have been evaluated and he would be advised whether his request would be approved by the ISC.

Dunbee returned to his hotel and tried to calm his jangling nerves. He toyed with the idea of writing a letter to Jeanne but was unable to pull himself together. Finally he fell asleep with his clothes on.

He woke up very early. His body felt stiff and he had a stale taste in his mouth. He thought he was sick and the waterjet massage didn't help to make him feel better.

However his feeble condition changed a few hours later when M'Artois informed him that the ISC had

agreed to place him in one of its caves for 300 years. Now he felt as though dead.

* * * *

All the painters in the world seemed to have come to the northeast corner of Wyoming to give the magnificent landscape a colourful appearance. The Yellowstone River twisted and turned like a mighty snake through the deep gorges far below Dunbee.

The pilot of the helicopter descended from the high altitude. "We'll soon be in the outskirts of the National Park," he pointed out to Dunbee. "That's where the crypts of the ISC are."

Dunbee shuddered when the man used the word 'crypts'. But to make conversation he merely asked: "Were you born in Wyoming?"

The pilot laughed. "You won't believe it but I was born on the Moon. Does that surprise you?"

Dunbee agreed politely. He would have liked to talk to the man about his own problems but he was afraid that the pilot might object to it.

"I wouldn't want to let them put me to sleep," the other man mused. "Why do you want to do it?"

Now that Dunbee had a chance to talk about his fateful step, he was at a loss for words to discuss it.

"You don't have to say anything if you don't feel like it," his tall companion said. "But I always get a weird feeling when I bring people here."

"What kind of a feeling?" Dunbee inquired.

The pilot of the little helicopter glanced at him sideways. "I can't get rid of the impression that there's something wrong with this whole business," he explained. "Don't think I want to scare you. After all, the ISC pays me very well. But have you ever stopped to think how cheap their price for such a transaction is?"

"What are you trying to imply? Obviously the Corporation is very efficient and it must be able to keep its expenses down to a minimum. Why shouldn't it use low prices to attract customers?"

"Because," the pilot replied, "Cavanaugh is a slick businessman who knows how to make everything pay off. Just imagine, I get almost 40 Solars for each flight. Add the costs of the examinations, the administrative expenses and the outlay for the maintenance of the vaults. I can't figure out where he can make a profit. Sometimes I suspect that Cavanaugh is financed by somebody who's staying in the background and uses him for his experiments."

"Experiments?" Dunbee repeated, shocked.

"Perhaps the whole affair is only conducted on a trial basis and is slated to be enlarged if it's successful and promises to make money."

Dunbee retorted indignantly: "I've got a signed contract which has been approved by the Interior Department. The caves are being inspected at regular intervals by officials of the government. Of course I have to assume responsibility for such medical errors which are not caused by negligence but this is only customary."

The pilot didn't insist on continuing the discussion. He seemed to consider the subject closed and Dunbee had to be content with looking at the scenery although he felt the need to air the controversy further.

A few minutes later the pilot pointed to one of the mountains and said: "There it is."

"I don't recognize it. I can't see any buildings." Dunbee craned his neck in disappointment.

"Virtually everything is underground except the landing field," the pilot explained. "You'll be amazed how much room there is."

The helicopter slowly lost height. To the left a landing field hewn out of the forest came into view. The man from Dubose detected a road which led from the airport to the mountain where the sleeping chambers must have been located. He was seized by a vague anxiety. His heart beat faster and he rubbed his hands against the window. A red flag fluttered in the wind behind the trees. The name of the Corporation was imprinted on the cloth with yellow letters.

Dunbee had a notion that the sunny world bid him a last farewell before he would emerge on its surface again 300 years later. Now he was assailed by doubts. Was there really no other way out of his dilemma? Suddenly he remembered the summer days when he used to sit with Jeanne on the flat roof of their house. A gentle breeze from the mountains had waved Jeanne's hair and brought the smell of moist earth. Once in awhile they would sing a song together.

Why didn't I realize before, he thought, how much these little pleasures of our daily life meant to me?

Dunbee made an effort to quell his languid mood and to shake off his nostalgic thoughts. Now it was too late and he had reached the point of no return.

He was jolted by the landing of the helicopter and beset by a queasy feeling. The pilot climbed out. Two men in blue smocks came running across the field. The three letters ISC were embroidered at their chests.

"Here comes your reception committee," the flier said.

Dunbee was greeted very friendly. He presented the yellow card which M'Artois had given him. It entitled him to a sleeping place in the caves after he complied with the mandatory procedures. The two ISC employees assured him that they would do everything to speed his transfer to the caves. Dunbee said goodbye to the pilot and followed the two men.

There were three separate entrances leading down into the ground as Dunbee soon found out. They had solid doors of unequal sizes built into the rock which had a smooth and firm floor inside. The smallest of the entrances was just big enough to let four men pass at one time but this didn't let him draw any conclusions as to the actual dimensions of the caves behind.

"The door in the middle is the entrance to the sleeping chambers," one of the men explained. "The others

lead to the preparation rooms and the administrative offices. We live near the offices since we have nothing to do with the examinations. The repositories are attended only by physicians."

Dunbee would have liked to learn more but they had reached the entrance to the offices which the guide had pointed out. An automatic sliding door pulled sideways into the rock and opened the way to a brightly illuminated corridor whose walls and ceiling were lined with smooth sheets.

"The sleeping chambers are far less luxurious," the other escort commented. He could hear a hint of irony in his voice, as if the man wanted to taunt him for some reason.

The corridor sloped slightly downward and ended in a vast room whose ceiling was supported by round columns. About 30 clerks worked at desks, typewriters, calculators and file cabinets. The working areas were partitioned by glass so that everyone could do his job without being disturbed. The temperature was very pleasant; fresh air flowed from invisible vents and circulated through the room.

His observations were interrupted by a man who was the only one who didn't wear a blue smock. He was tall and burly. Dunbee was struck by the appearance of his face. Somehow his skin seemed to have prematurely withered. It reminded him of the result of a botched make-up cover-mask of his wife. The man moved slowly as if he contemplated each step. His small eyes almost disappeared behind his heavy lashless eyelids. Dunbee was instinctively repulsed by his sight.

"Hello, Mr. Dunbee," he greeted him. "My name is Dunc Clinkskate. They call me Boss around this office."

Dunbee had trouble looking at his grinning face.

"Before I hand you over to the doctors we'll have to attend to some minor matters. Please follow me."

He pushed Dunbee through a glass door and closed it behind them. Dunbee felt relieved when he was able to sit down again. He had the impression that everybody had stopped working to stare into his cubicle, which made him cough in embarrassment.

Clinkskate began by saying: "I must remind you that you've signed a contract which is binding for both sides. I hope that you've read it carefully. We're not responsible for medical accidents unless they're caused by malpractice. On the other hand we guarantee your well being for the duration of your sleep. Your contract calls for 300 years. During that time the functions of your organs will be reduced to an insignificant minimum. Your body will be placed in a liquid which we call cell plasma. Its effect is twofold: it provides you with safety from undesirable side effects and in addition it is also a nutrient which rejuvenates your cells. Your lungs will be completely inactivated. We'll affix numerous electrodes which will serve to stimulate your organs at regular intervals to prevent them from total paralysis or atrophy. I also feel obliged at this time to warn you of the unpleasant readjustment which will occur during the first few weeks after your re-awakening. Your body will slowly get used to its original tasks. Although I will have departed from this world by then, you'll remember my prediction. Of course you'll be under the permanent care of our physicians for the 300 years until your life is completely restored."

Dunbee couldn't find much comfort in his words. Now that he had almost reached his desired goal, his former life seemed extraordinarily precious to him.

Clinkskate, who took no notice of Dunbee's vacillating frame of mind, spread out his arms as if he wanted to invite his client into a fairyland. "The act of putting you to sleep involves certain procedures which might seem incongruous to you, Mr. Dunbee. Naturally your body has to be prepared for the

preservation. You'll be subjected to a series of preliminary tests which might be a little uncomfortable. Don't be frightened when your head is shaved. Of course you'll be given an anaesthetic whenever the treatment is painful. Furthermore you'll be put under narcosis before you begin the actual period of sleep."

Clinkskate had a shrewd way of implying that he granted Dunbee special favours which nobody else received and that he was given a unique chance. An inner voice had begun to warn Dunbee ever since his conversation with the pilot and it grew more urgent although he was unable to come to grips with his disturbing premonition. The ISC and its officials left a worrisome impression on Dunbee which could eventually turn into overt suspicion. He sought reassurance by reminding himself that the Interior Department exercised close supervision and there was no reason to doubt that these inspections were conducted correctly and all was above board.

"Now you can change your clothes, Mr. Dunbee," Clinkskate interrupted his glum thoughts. "You'll be issued a special suit."

I wish I were back in Dubose, Dunbee thought.

* * * *

A sudden noise jolted Dunbee back to reality. He held his breath and listened. Without doubt a door had been slammed somewhere in the cave. He hugged the stonewall and tried to pierce the darkness with burning eyes. The monotone gurgling in the containers obtruded on his ears. Somebody had entered the cave to capture him. The thought that he could be seized by a rude hand in the darkness brought him to the verge of panic.

Was there a thump? Did the shadow of a man lurch toward him? A whiff of air blew into his face. His tortured scream echoed in the countless nooks and crannies of the cave. His hands lashed out but there was nobody.

Perhaps it was only a rolling stone which had frightened him. He moved on, feeling his way with outstretched hands. After they had turned off the light he could guide himself only by the bubbling noise from the containers. Somewhere water dropped from the ceiling. The rock was rough and cold. He tried his utmost not to think about the sight he had fleetingly glimpsed a few hours earlier which had made him recoil in horror and run away.

"Plop! One! Plop! Two! Plop! Three!" Dunbee caught himself counting the falling drops. His chin collided with a protruding rock and he ripped the shapeless suit which they had made him put on.

How much fear could a man stand before he became insane? Dunbee felt sure that he would soon reach the limit of his endurance. The whim struck him to take a big stone and knock a hole in one of the containers but he couldn't gather enough strength to carry out the thought.

A burst of light streaked at him like a burning arrow. Dunbee staggered back, pinching his smarting eyes. *Somebody has pointed a flashlight at me*, he thought painfully.

He sank to his knees and whimpered in disappointment. Now they had found him. The beam of light

wandered over his body, that thin helpless wreck of a man.

"Hey, Dunbee" said an impassive voice behind the lamp.

A silhouette loomed in the darkness. A guard! The beam swung around, lit up grey rocks and boulders, quivered over the sandy ground and returned to Dunbee.

"Let's go!" the guard said gruffly and pointed to the way he wanted him to go; back to the preparation room. Suddenly he felt a new urge to resist. When Dunbee got up he picked up a stone in his clenched fist. He had to try! He knew that his situation was hopeless. They were sure to get him in the end. However when and how was something else again.

As he walked with stiff legs beside the guard he thought about the first time Clinkskate had accompanied him to the physicians in the preparation room...

* * * *

He was dressed in the white garment Clinkskate had talked about. It was a loose two-piece suit which was held to his body by a wide belt. He had hoped, to see daylight again on his way to the next station but the caves were connected with each other by subterranean corridors.

"Maybe I made a mistake when I decided to hibernate for so many years," he said to Clinkskate, who walked one step ahead of him.

The stout man looked back over his shoulder and stopped. "All our clients go through the same phase sooner or later," he said. "It's more a fear of the unknown than missing your home or the desire to return to your old life. You shouldn't take it too seriously, Mr. Dunbee."

Dunbee suddenly formed a picture of Jeanne in his mind as she laughed and ran across a flowering meadow in the summer toward him. Of course she had never done it but he felt certain that she would do so when he returned and talked things over with her. He should have related his feelings better to her.

"No," Dunbee decided, "I'm flying back to Dubose."

"Nonsense!" Clinkskate exclaimed, annoyed. He seized Dunbee by the arm with a hard grip and dragged him forward. "You must get over this. When you go back to Dubose your old troubles will start all over again."

Half reluctantly, Dunbee let him pull his body. Clinkskate didn't seem inclined to tolerate his moods. Maybe he was right. Dunbee gave up his resistance.

"That's better," Clinkskate purred, cheerfully rubbing Dunbee's head. "Now Dr. Le Boeuf will take care of you. I'm sure he'll buck you up a little. You'll also meet Dr. Piotrowski and the other assistants with their nurses." Dunbee couldn't figure out what amused Clinkskate so much that he had to smile. But then everybody else smiled at the ISC if there was any occasion or not. *Very friendly people*, Dunbee thought, *almost too friendly!*

Before he knew it they came to the end of the corridor. Clinkskate opened a sliding door and revealed a vaulted room which was remarkable in every respect. It expanded in all directions at several levels which were connected by elevators. Anything that could have shown that they were in the depth of the Earth was carefully disguised.

"This is the hall where the sleepers will be prepared for the repositories," Clinkskate explained. "Looks impressive, doesn't it?"

As far as Dunbee could judge, the equipment was modern and clean. The hall was furnished with a multitude of machines and devices whose purposes Dunbee was unable to make out.

"We've got our own power station," Clinkskate explained proudly. "You'll see that we're as self-sufficient as a big city. We generate our own power for the technical installations in here. We control the sleeping chambers from here too because we considered it advisable to keep all disturbing machinery away from the sleepers. The generators are over there. This level provides energy for the whole complex. Dr. Le Boeuf's department is at the lower level. You're going to meet him in a minute. Please come to the elevator!"

The elevator took them down where Dunbee recognized preponderantly medical equipment.

"Here comes Dr. Le Boeuf," Clinkskate pointed out. Dunbee saw a little man with a freckled face walking toward them with small hasty steps.

"This is Dr. Le Boeuf," Clinkskate introduced.

Dunbee was fascinated to watch the physician raise his bushy eyebrows.

"You don't look very sleepy to me," Le Boeuf wisecracked.

Dunbee wondered if Clinkskate believed that this was the type of humour to cheer him up but Clinkskate had already silently retreated and left him to his fate which so far was rather kind unless Dr. Le Boeuf's macabre sense of humour took a turn for the worse.

* * * *

The guard kept swinging his flashlight and kicked a stone out of the way. Dunbee dismissed the memories from his mind. Time was running out. His primitive weapon weighed heavily in his hand.

"Look out! Up front!" Dunbee yelled.

The guard stopped abruptly and directed the beam of his flashlight away from him. Dunbee jumped him with his arm raised and dealt a fierce blow. He felt the resistance as his fist struck and for a moment thought with despair that his attack had failed. Then the guard slumped and let his flashlight drop to the ground, breaking to pieces. It was dark and quiet again. Dunbee bent down and felt the limp body of his adversary. He didn't expect the guard to remain unconscious for very long and he realized that he had to rap his head again sharply. However his hand refused to obey him. Dunbee had never acted brutally in his life and he remained a prisoner of his conscience even in his hopeless situation. There was this

unknown pale face in the darkness a vile and cruel face—but he couldn't bring himself to beat him into lasting submission. He tried to imagine that it was Clinkskate who had collapsed at his feet but even this attempt to identify the face with one of his known enemies couldn't solve his problem.

Suddenly the guard took the decision out of his hands. He groaned and tried to get up. Without thinking Dunbee savagely knocked him down again.

This action didn't help to make him feel better. His mouth was dry and his tongue felt swollen. His head droned. He dropped the stone and fumbled to get away from the stunned man. Soon he touched the wall of the cave again and the cold rough surface calmed his nerves a little.

*Plop! One! Plop! Two! Plop! Three! Four! Five! Six!*The waterdrops!

If he could find the spot where the water dripped, he would be able to cool his burning face. There wasn't much else he could do.

He was doomed to wait. Soon they were bound to become impatient and wonder what had happened. The loudspeakers would call the guard and if he failed to answer it would be enough to make them draw their conclusions. Inevitably they would deal much more harshly with him the second time.

He stumbled along the wall, a pitiful figure in dirty clothes, the torn pants hanging around his puny bony legs.

What would they do to him after they had got him into their clutches again? Was it possible that his overwrought nerves had played tricks on him? Was there a shred of evidence that the ISC conducted a reputable business?

He remembered the nauseating sight he had witnessed and it made him sick to his stomach again. No and a thousand times no! Whatever was going on here, it was an abominable evil. At that moment during his examination when he experienced a flash of insight, he had felt instinctively that the ISC was something other than it pretended to be...

* * * *

They had measured and weighed him, taken his blood pressure, checked his heart, his brainwaves, lungs, liver and kidneys. They pumped him full of drugs as he lay semi-conscious on the table with the face of the physician hovering above him. Sometimes it was Dr. Le Boeuf who treated him and sometimes Dr. Piotrowski or their assistants and nurses. They turned him inside out. Electrodes and wires were attached to his body and tubes were inserted.

He heard Dr. Piotrowski's shrill voice, high as that of a child. "What do you think of that, Doctor?"

There was laughter, other voices and the clinking of glass, the sound of instruments and the mysterious buzzing of unfamiliar medical devices.

Dr. Le Boeuf: "Serum K-46, now!"

A female voice: "Can he take it?"

Piotrowski's childish laugh. A cart buzzing across the floor. Then the voice of a man: "The poor fool!"

Dunbee became frightened and rolled his eyes. With a heavy tongue he tried to ask what happened to him, when they stuck another needle into his thigh. The voices blurred and quickly faded away. Dunbee drowned in a milky fog.

Suddenly it was light again. Dr. Le Boeuf bent over him with a smile. "So," he promised in a soothing voice, "we'll soon be through..."

Dunbee caught himself as he displayed a happy grin like a monkey who had been given a banana.

"You're still a little weak," Dr. Piotrowski chimed in at the foot of his bed. "But you'll soon get over it. In four more hours you'll sleep for 300 years."

Four hours! And then? Somewhere in the background nurses were busy with their chores. He wouldn't hear any noise in his sleeping chamber. It was like death—albeit death on time. Three centuries in a coffin spent in a coma. He would see nothing, hear nothing, smell nothing, taste nothing and feel nothing. Nothing at all! Nevertheless his life would be preserved as he floated in that oily liquid, so he had been told.

Four hours to go!

Dunbee began to nurture a certain disgust for the time limit. Perhaps there were only three hours left. Why not seven or ten, or three days?

Cautiously he sat up in his bed. The two physicians had left the room and two nurses stood at a cabinet polishing instruments.

All of a sudden he heard Dr. Le Boeuf coming back. He notices his short hasty steps pattering the floor. It seemed that his hearing had grown many times keener than before. The pattering noise swelled immensely and thumped through his skull. His nerves became taut and he was thrown into a panic.

He pulled the blanket from his body. One of the nurses let out a scream and hurled the instruments to the floor.

Dr. Le Boeuf yelled from the distance: "Dunbee! Have you gone mad? Stop at once!"

The nurses rushed toward him, their open coats fluttering behind them like huge wings.

"Dunbee!" Le Boeuf shouted once more.

Dunbee stormed out of the room in headlong flight. He knocked over a cabinet, spilling its contents to the floor with a clattering din. He bolted toward a door but the women tried to block his way. He felt their hands grabbing him as they were breathing down his neck while Le Boeuf kept sputtering in frustration: "Dunbee! Dunbee! Dunbee!"

Dunbee stopped and pushed the nurses back. There must have been a gleam of madness in his eyes and since they instantly desisted with horrified expressions on their faces. He reached the door without being further molested and entered a narrow corridor resembling a tube. His lungs were throbbing with pain but

he hurried on.

For a time his legs had moved automatically as he ran in blind haste. But now his mind started to function again and he began to watch his surroundings. Apparently he penetrated deeper and deeper into the Earth because the floor and the walls were no longer smoothly finished but showed a rough natural state. The illumination maintained a constant brightness. Wherever the passageway led, freedom was not likely to be at the end of the tunnel.

The ceiling was shored up at several places. The corridor must have been blasted out of the rock. Dunbee kept running. He climbed over a cement base and squeezed through a couple of support pillars watching the rough edges at his sides.

He had neglected to look at the ground and the shaft suddenly gaped at him like the voracious maw of a monster. He desperately tried to pull back but his feet had already lost their hold and he slid down the hole. His hands flailed through the air but failed to get a grip. Rubble and stones were loosened by his fall and the dust filled his mouth. He lost his sense of time as he tumbled down the depth of the hole, unable to stop his plunge.

An eternity seemed to have elapsed when he finally hit the ground. He thought for a moment that he had perhaps fallen into the airshaft of a big hall when he opened his eyes which had been covered by sand and dirt. His bruised body ached all over.

He found himself in an enormous dimly lit cave. The opening from which he had emerged was in the wall just above the ground. It led upwards at an angle of about 45°.

Now Dunbee saw the repositories for the first time. They resembled oversized coffins and were lined up against the wall. He picked himself up and dragged himself closer to the containers which had a trapezoid shape and rested on conical supports. They were filled with an oily yellowish liquid. Small metallic ladders were fastened to their sides. A mass of cables and contacts were plugged in at the smaller end. Haunting noises emanated from inside.

Dunbee was now close enough to peek into one of the containers. He pressed his hands against the plastic material and recoiled in a convulsion. An icy hand seemed to reach for him as he stared with gaping mouth at the slimy mass.

The container was empty! There was no sleeper inside.

Where were all those people who had joined the ISC? Dunbee ignored his pains and leaped to the next 'coffin' where he could detect nobody either. He didn't take the trouble to inspect a third one.

There probably were more containers in another cave. There had to be! Dunbee's throat choked up as he looked around dubiously. He noticed that the underground vault could be reached normally by a door which had been hewn into the rock at the far end.

His thoughts spun around in inconsistent patterns but they gradually became calmer. He sat down on a boulder to rest a little. He couldn't remain here forever. It probably would be best if he came out of hiding again.

He didn't know how long he had crouched on the rock, mulling his future, when he heard a sharp and vicious hissing and looked up. He saw it merely for a fraction of a second but it was enough to rouse a ghastly fear in him. He was unable to utter a scream and he trembled in unspeakable terror. At the same

moment everything went dark and Dunbee clung desperately to the boulder on which he sat.

So this was the evil secret of the ISC!

Dazed by dreadful fear Dunbee silently crawled under one of the containers.

* * * *

"Dunbee! You've assaulted our guard," an accusing voice called out.

"Yes, I did!" Dunbee answered defiantly.

"This is Clinkskate speaking," the other man said. "Be sensible, Dunbee! We won't hold it against you if you've suffered a nervous breakdown. I'll see to it that you'll be treated with the same consideration and not be subjected to any disadvantage."

Dunbee laughed wildly. "Do you know what I thought when I slugged that fellow? I imagined he had your damn face, Clinkskate! You miserable miscreant!"

"You're crazy," Clinkskate shouted angrily.

"Oh no!" Dunbee stood up with clenched fists. "I got wise to your criminal corporation. Where are the sleepers that are supposed to be in your vats, Clinkskate? Where are they?"

"You're a menace to the ISC," Clinkskate retorted. "Your mind is too hazy. Can't you see that the chambers have a cover that keeps you from looking at the sleepers?"

Dunbee shook his fist and challenged him. "Come and get me, Clinkskate. I'm ready to fight for my life!"

There was no answer but the dim light was turned on again. Dunbee moved as far away from the containers as possible. When they came in he stood in the middle of the cave, holding a stone in each hand.

There were six of them. They wore the blue smocks of the ISC. Their eyes looked cruel and determined.

Deep below the surface of the Earth the hour of death had come to the weakling Dunbee. In this hour of defeat a new man was born

Maurice Dunbee, the fighter!

The stairs which led to the office were carpeted with thick rugs that absorbed all sounds. It was a cool, clear day in April. The noise of the traffic in the street was muted inside the house.

Jeanne Dunbee paused in front of the door with the sign:

RICHARD KENNOF

Private Detective

The name represented all her hopes at the moment.

The decor of the agency could be called—to use a mild expression—snobbish. An antique wrought-copper doorknocker was mounted under the sign. Stained glass with grotesque figures concealed the view behind the door. The letter box was a head carved of wood whose open mouth was the slot for the mail. A viewer could only guess that the occupant was either eccentric or a showoff.

But such conjectures didn't enter the mind of Mrs. Dunbee. At the moment she was too busy with other problems.

Her dainty figure looked almost fragile. Her dark eyes were circled by shadows which her make-up failed to conceal. Her hair was swept up and held together by a simple mother-of-pearl clasp. Her age appeared to be about 40 years.

She tapped the door with the knocker and was startled by the noise. A slim brunet with a fashionable wig opened the door. She peered with animosity at Mrs. Dunbee.

"I have an appointment," Jeanne Dunbee announced.

"You must be Mrs. Dunbee," the slim girl stated. "Please come in. Mr. Kennof will see you right away. He's very interested in your case."

As far as Jeanne recalled, she had told Kennof nothing about her troubles. She had merely asked him if he could spare some time for her although he was such a busy man. It was probably only one of the customary polite phrases the brunet used.

The inside of the office exceeded the bad taste of the staircase by far. Three men and two women sat at kidney-shaped tables. Red tapestries with garish patterns hung at the walls. The ceiling was painted with ornaments. Jeanne Dunbee gained the impression that she had entered a weird exhibition. It took her some time to make out the paintings which defaced the background of this collection of kitsch and velvet plush.

However the ultimate of deplorable taste was an enormous ugly vase. The flowers it held seemed to be affected by the same depressing feeling as they were on the verge of wilting. At least the flowers were genuine, not artificial.

Jeanne, who would have considered such an agglomeration of monstrosities to be unsurpassable, was

compelled to revise her opinion when she entered Kennof's private office.

To begin with there was Kennof himself, dressed in a yellow robe and enthroned on an ornate chair. After all that Jeanne had heard about him she was deeply disappointed by his appearance.

He was corpulent and looked almost bloated. His eyes nearly disappeared behind their heavy lids. They had the colour of grey dust. His hair was meticulously parted. He was tall but gave the impression of an awkward crank.

The man, so it was rumoured, was supposed to be a former official of the government service but right now Jeanne was ready to swear to the contrary.

On the floor next to Kennof a decrepit cat with battle-scarred ears lay on a flowered cushion. The animal was curled up and purred contentedly.

The whole room was a nightmare of gaudy colours, flamboyant furnishings and atrocious knickknacks. A special attraction was a bronze elephant with eyes that were lit up from inside and a trunk which was out of proportion to the rest of the body. The thing that provoked a snigger from everybody else seemed to be indispensable to Kennof since he had planted it on his table directly in front of him.

"Good morning, Mrs. Dunbee," Richard Kennof greeted her with a pleasant sonorous voice and got up to offer her a chair which was distinguished by its comparatively normal form. Then he pointed his thumb at the cat. "This is Buster, a most unusual animal," he said lovingly.

Buster stretched himself, curved his back, yawned and turned away ostentatiously. Jeanne wondered what was so unusual about the creature other than the gilded collar he wore around his neck.

Jeanne had planned exactly what she was going to say but now all she could do was to blurt out: "My husband has disappeared!"

Kennof looked at her sympathetically and cracked his knuckles. "And you wish me to find out if there's reason for divorce, I take it," he inquired matter-of-factly.

"It's got nothing to do with another woman," Jeanne pointed out in a soft voice. "He went to the ISC in Wyoming because he wants to sleep away the next 300 years."

Kennof uttered a low whistle. "The Sleeping Corporation, the friend of tormented people."

Jeanne handed him a letter across the desk. "This is his farewell note. I didn't want to show it to anybody but you must know his reasons."

Kennof silently and carefully perused the letter. "A very unhappy man," he commented with feeling. "Dissatisfaction with his work, fear that you don't love him and acute inferiority complexes."

Jeanne touched her brow. "He always believed that he has to achieve something special to deserve my admiration. If he was unable to accomplish it he would withdraw within himself for days. He thought I would resent his failures. I suppose I should have known better how to help him get over his setbacks."

"Do you love your husband?" Kennof inquired earnestly.

"Yes I do," she answered simply.

The famous detective nodded and bent down to scratch Buster's battered ears. "What would you like me to do for you, Mrs. Dunbee?" he asked.

"Find him," Jeanne pleaded in a tremulous voice. "Could you go to Wyoming to look for him? Please get him out of the ISC because I'm sure he's already sorry that he got mixed up with them."

"I'm anxious to help all persons who come to me, Mrs. Dunbee, but I must have legal grounds to back me up. We have a true democracy on Earth which is part and parcel of the Solar Imperium. Every citizen has the inalienable right to decide his fate in accordance with his own conscience. If he chooses to take advantage of new biochemical methods to go into an extended state of deep sleep, nobody else is allowed to prevent him. Your husband has signed a contract, Mrs. Dunbee. If I do what you ask me I would presumably be acting against his expressed will. He has paid for the services of the ISC and has accepted their conditions. What do you expect me to do in such a case? There is only one question as I see it, which, however, you can put to the ISC yourself: has Mr. Dunbee been put to sleep? I sympathize with you but there's nothing I can do for you."

Jeanne Dunbee took out a bundle of bills from her purse. "I've overdrawn our account," she said, putting the notes on Kennof's desk. "Here are more than a thousand Solars. Could you do something extracurricular in exchange?"

The grey eyes looked pensively under the half-closed lids at the money. "I would have thrown you out if you were a man," he assured her without raising his voice, pushing the notes back to her.

Jeanne replied with a tear-choked voice: "I thought you could use the money to make an application to the ISC for a hibernation. That way you could gain admittance to their caves without attracting suspicion and still remain within the bounds of the law. It would enable you to get in touch with my husband."

Kennof stopped stroking his cat. He gazed at Jeanne as if he had just now really seen her for the first time. Then he pounded his fist on the desk. "That's it!" he cried enthusiastically. "That's an excellent idea!"

Buster squealed indignantly. Jeanne was puzzled by Kennof's unexpected behaviour.

"Three months ago one of my clients wanted to join the ISC," the detective explained in a calmer tone. "The corporation denied his request because he had lost both legs in an accident. You see, Mrs. Dunbee, he was an amputee. Subsequently I consulted a well-known physician who is a specialist in the field of prolongation of life and sleep into the future. The man maintained unequivocally that it was entirely irrelevant for the purpose of the temporary suspension of the vital functions whether the patient in question was amputated or not. Why does the ISC reject such people who are most in need of their services? Isn't it significant that Cavanaugh charges exceptionally low prices in his business? They're unbelievably out of line. Perhaps they want to lure as many people as possible for some sinister purpose. Cavanaugh is no benefactor, that's for sure!" He leaned back in his chair and added: "The case of Maurice Dunbee has top priority with Detective Kennof. Put your money away, Mrs. Dunbee. Old Dick," he pointed to himself, "takes a personal interest in this affair."

"Oh, I don't know how to thank you," Jeanne exclaimed with new hope in her heart.

'Old Dick' coughed slightly and Jeanne finally discovered the empathy inside the man that was clothed in an eccentric manner. She realized intuitively that she couldn't have found a better man for the task.

Kennof lifted his hand to admonish her. "One condition, Mrs. Dunbee!"

"Anything you say," Jeanne answered.

"Nobody must learn anything about this. We've got to keep this a strict secret. I can't take on this job unless I can depend on you not to talk about me. You'll have to behave in public in such a way that everybody is convinced that you're resigned to your fate."

"I'll do that," the dainty woman promised.

Kennof got up and Buster hissed, annoyed by the new disturbance.

"There's something else that you probably should know," Jeanne recalled. "Shortly after my husband left for Wyoming two men from the ISC appeared in Dubose. They apparently conducted an investigation of Maurice. I guess they wanted to check all his statements. You'll have to do a good job to mislead them."

"That's interesting," Kennof replied thoughtfully. "I'll keep it in mind when the game begins."

"It isn't only for my own sake," Jeanne said sincerely, "if I wish you luck and success."

"I can use both," the detective admitted. "I'll get in touch with you as soon as I've found out anything at all."

Jeanne very gratefully said goodbye. The faint hope she had retained had received new nourishment. She felt confident that there still was a chance for Maurice—and for her—to remedy the old mistakes.

She had barely closed the door behind her when Kennof embarked on his new assignment with remarkable zeal. He turned to the small mike on his desk and said: "Benny, switch off the tape! I want to make a private call."

He waited for the confirmation and picked up the phone.

The game was on! But Kennof didn't know that the Earth was at stake in his gamble.

3/ TOO HOT TO HANDLE

It took a little while before Kennof's call got through. In contrast to other people whose telephones were equipped with video-screens, Kennof preferred the antiquated system. He didn't particularly care to look at the party to whom he was talking. "This is your old friend Dick speaking!" he finally announced.

"I must be going donk!" a voice at the phone exclaimed. "Don't tell me you're tired of sneaking up on unfaithful husbands and are ready to return ruefully to the bosom of your family. The boss is still gloating over you and your stunts. I'm sure he'll be delighted to take you back,"

Kennof pulled his robe together. Buster licked his paws, bored and paying no attention to his master.

"I don't have the slightest intention of subjecting myself again to your iron discipline, my dear Shane," Kennof declared. "Furthermore, you ought to realize that I have other interests to pursue besides family affairs."

Shane said frostily: "About which you're going to enlighten me forthwith!"

"Precisely," Kennof confirmed. "The object of my latest investigation is the Intertime Sleeping Corporation. So far my suspicions are based on the vaguest of feelings. In order to substantiate them I have several requests..."

"Wait a minute!" the invisible partner interrupted him. "Since when do you mix feelings with criminal work?"

"It's a symptom of my soft civilian life," Kennof countered.

"Besides," Shane continued, "the ISC is too hot to handle and I don't want you to burn your fingers. Do you remember that skinny Snyder from the Interior Department who rapped our knuckles because of that deal with narcotic drugs?"

"It rings a bell," the detective said dourly.

"No less a personage than Snyder has conducted the last inspection in the caves of the ISC. Do you think he would overlook any infraction of the rules?"

"I'll be the one to make a donk of myself," Kennof assured him. "All I ask is for you to back up my story so that I can apply to the ISC for the long sleep!"

The man at the other end of the line uttered a cry of surprise. "You want the ISC to take you in as a sleeper?"

"Right. This is the best way to infiltrate them and get to the bottom of this business."

The man whom Kennof called Shane was sceptical. "They won't accept you, Dick," he prophesied. "You've got neither melancholy nor financial troubles. You're happy as a lark, not to mention that you're a detective."

Kennof dangled the telephone cord in front of Buster. "You're way off the beam, Shane," Kennof chuckled. "I'm going to see Gaston Hartz today. He's the smartest accountant in town and he'll tell my creditors that I've been wiped out financially so that I've got to declare bankruptcy. He'll have some fun stashing away my money. I'll be in so much trouble that I would be relieved if I can sleep a few years to forget it all."

Buster jabbed at the cord swinging before his eyes.

"I hardly believe that that would be enough," Shane expressed his reservations.

"I know it isn't" Kennof said in a serious tone. "That's why I have to ask you to give me Celia's address."

"No!" Shane's voice sounded sharp.

"I must have Celia's address," Kennof insisted.

Kennof was afraid that Shane might hang up on him but after a long pause he resumed the conversation again. "Celia has quit the profession. We should let it go at that. You can find somebody else."

"Nobody but Celia will do. She's sore at me because of the Fainer affair; she believes I informed on her. Nobody regrets more than I that she was fired, Shane."

"She was never dismissed," Shane said with emphasis.

"You don't say!" Kennof called out.

"She was completely rehabilitated and then quit voluntarily."

"What's her address?" Kennof repeated.

"I don't want you to bother her with your snooping, so I better give it to you," Shane relented and looked up Celia's present whereabouts.

"Thank you," Kennof said with a sigh of relief. "I promise you I'll use the utmost tact. Please tell this to your leader."

An interference in the line made Shane's voice sound weak. "What else do you want of me?"

"Not much," the detective said modestly. "However, I could use, most of all, a micro-deflector so that I can move around the caves without being seen. Furthermore you could get me a miniature detector camouflaged as a ring or something that is equally inconspicuous."

"Is that all?" Shane exclaimed flabbergasted. "How do you think I could do that?"

"Perhaps you can send it over to me together with a little radio-transceiver," Kennof suggested without inhibitions.

"Why do you need a transceiver? Do you expect to get into trouble?"

"I'm afraid I will. In that case I'd like to notify you of my difficulties so that you can perhaps persuade your noble leader to intervene on my behalf." Kennof was silent for a few seconds. "Of course we need a code word."

"What shall it be?" Shane asked curiously.

"Pellucidar," Kennof suggested off the top of his head. "It was my favourite movie when I was a kid..."

* * * *

During the next four days Kennof was busy with preparations. After his meeting with Gaston Hartz the financial expert spread the word that Kennof had ruined himself by ill-advised purchases of stocks. Hartz

insisted on buying the worthless papers in order to make the deception look more real. The owners of the securities which had lost their value were glad to get rid of them and agreed to hush up the deal. Thus Kennof became a big stockholder although the value of his stock was virtually nil. Hartz manipulated his arrangements so well he very nearly convinced Kennof himself that he had bought these securities for horrendous prices and now was unable to find buyers for them. After a personal 'audit' of Kennof's books he also determined that the detective had squandered enormous sums on antiques. Hartz produced bills, receipts and other documents that almost brought tears to the eyes of Kennof when he read the figures.

"Hartz," he said to the accountant, "you're a very likable man but I wouldn't like to trade horses with you. You're shrewder than I am."

Hartz chuckled and 'proved' to Kennof that his debt amounted to 26,000 Solars.

* * * *

The spring sun began to warm the roofs of the city. Kennof walked from the shadow of the tall building to the other side of the street where Tommy's Tavern was squeezed in between the high-rise buildings.

Although it was still early in the morning the owner had already turned on his illuminated sign which competed in vain with the bright sunlight.

Kennof glanced back at his car parked at the curb. He would have liked to look into the tavern before he entered but the curtains were drawn.

He passed through the swinging doors. At one of the five tables a man had cradled his head in his arms. A woman was busy making sandwiches. She had obviously failed to notice that Kennof came in.

Kennof sat down on a stool and took off his hat. "Hi, Celia!" he said.

The girl put down her knife. She was still young, perhaps a little over 25, but her face already reflected a certain tiredness. She looked at Kennof and said in an impassive tone that betrayed no anger: "What can I do for you?" Her hair was pinned up. Although she was not especially beautiful she looked very attractive. "Shane told me you'd come to see me but he refused to tell me why."

Kennof peered at the customer at the table. "How about him?"

"He's asleep," Celia replied.

The detective looked at her in silence and said after awhile in a casual tone: "I'd like you to work for me."

Celia's dark eyes studied him for a moment. "As you can see, I've already got a job."

"This isn't your line of work, Celia," Kennof stated with emphasis. "You might talk yourself into believing for a time that you like this sort of thing but it'll get you down sooner or later."

The girl answered sarcastically: "And you want to save me from this fate, Dick?"

Kennof raised both hands. "Celia, I don't want to hurt your pride. I don't offer you charity, I'm asking your assistance."

She seemed to wait for further explanations before she answered. Kennof said with a twinkle in his eyes: "How would it strike your fancy to become my fiancée, Celia?"

"Like an invitation to suicide!" Celia retorted.

Kennof chortled. "Very flattering, I must say, but you ought to like the idea much better when I tell you a little more about it. You'll be a very naughty girlfriend. Besides being unfaithful you'll splurge my money and ruin my good reputation. Then I'll try to kill you but I'll bungle the job despite my frantic efforts."

"What's this all about?" Celia inquired without professing particular interest.

"I want to demonstrate to the Intertime Sleeping Corporation in Wyoming that my mental equilibrium is jeopardized unless they grant me permission to sleep in their arms," Kennof said dryly. "Not only do I have a sullied bride but I'm drowning in debts to boot. This should suffice for my purpose."

Celia was noticeably intrigued. "If you have all those debts they're likely to reject you," she warned.

"You underestimate good old Hartz, Celia. He'll swear that I directed him to sell all my earthly possessions as soon as I've gone to sleep. This is sure to cover my debts and the ISC won't have to assume any risks. But before Hartz has to go through with all this, I'll have dug up all the information I need about the company. I'll return dolefully and cancel my instructions to Hartz. He'll act indignant but the ISC will be fooled. If, on the other hand, my suspicion that there's something unkosher about that company turns out to be correct, they'll confer medals on Hartz and me. Hartz is going to pawn his and I..."

Celia shut him up with a gesture. "Dick, do you have any legal authority for your action?"

Kennof looked at her with mournful eyes.

"You never learn, do you?" she questioned him.

"That's right," he admitted.

"And your mind is made up to go ahead whether I'll help you or not?"

"Definitely," he assured her.

Celia said simply with a smile: "OK, Svengali, I guess you've hypnotized me."

Kennof leaned forward and said with ardour: "It'll be like old times when we both..."

"Forget it," she said acidly.

Kennof realized that she would never get over the loss of her former interesting job. He had found satisfaction in the work at his detective agency but sometimes he felt the desire to experience the thrill of a great adventure again. It probably was due to the incomparable training he had received. The

knowledge he had acquired lay fallow most of the time. But it was much more difficult for Celia to become reconciled to her new life.

Kennof was a staunch individualist and had never been able to adjust to the rigorous discipline expected of him. He was not a man who could take orders very readily. Consequently he quit the government service, though with reluctance, and applied for a license as a private detective.

Now Richard Kennof, the veteran agent of the Special Solar Defence Corps, had joined hands again with his erstwhile colleague.

* * * *

Three weeks later he thought the time was opportune to approach the ISC. He applied for a preservation to last 150 years. As reasons he stated the misfortunes of his business and the uncontrollable urge to kill his cheating girlfriend.

Gaston Hartz assured him that he had made all the necessary arrangements without mistake and that the most thorough investigation by the ISC would raise no suspicions. Celia played her role brilliantly.

Kennof sent a preliminary report to Jeanne Dunbee in Dubose. Buster was put in Celia's care despite his violent resistance as Kennof waited daily for the invitation from the ISC to come to Cheyenne and take the examination.

When he paid a last visit to the Department of Interior he was already a marked man—except to a few in whom he confided—who had nothing but creditors and a slut as a fiancée.

* * * *

Snyder regarded Kennof with some admiration. "The fact that you've succeeded in getting as far as my office deserves a certain respect," he said in his convoluted manner. "Notwithstanding the opprobrium which your memory stirs in me, I'm ready to lend you my ear for a few minutes."

Kennof restrained from informing Snyder about the true facts of the battle he had fought together with Shane against the despicable dealers who had brought narcotic drugs from the Vega Sector to Terra. Instead he confined himself to inquiring "Sir, you've led the last inspection team on the premises of the ISC. May I ask you a few questions about it?"

"I'm restricted to supplying official information," Snyder made his reservations. "You can't expect me to pass on to you information of a confidential nature."

Kennof suppressed a remark that he had certain rights as a taxpayer. Officials of the Interior Department exhibited little sense of humour and Snyder was a case in point. "I understand, sir," the detective replied politely. "However I'd like to know whether you've personally viewed some of the people who are

sleeping in the cell-plasma."

Snyder raised his eyebrows in a studied move to show concern. "We've thoroughly inspected the containers, Mr. Kennof. The people inside are clearly visible since the walls of the sleeping chambers are transparent," he said after coughing slightly. "We've checked the inmates against a complete list of names which have been filed in our Department. The ISC is obligated to file a copy of each contract with us so that we're in a position to determine if any criminal elements are trying to escape apprehension by the state and foil justice."

"Did you notice anything at all which in your opinion was irregular or inexplicable?" Kennof continued his query.

"The entire project of the ISC is, to say the least, unusual," Snyder countered gravely. "I don't claim to be an expert in this area and it is therefore only natural that some of their procedures are quite puzzling to me. However I've been assured by our specialists that the SC is run in an exemplary fashion and that there exists no cause for us to intervene in their operations. Do you happen to be in possession of information to the contrary, Mr. Kennof?"

"Not at all," the former agent stressed. "I'm interested in the ISC for private reasons."

Snyder engaged in the official version of a snorting laugh. "Are you trying to tell me that you intend to make a reservation at the ISC for yourself?"

"You need only examine your copies of the contracts to find this out without trouble," Kennof replied calmly.

He left the Interior Department with a bad feeling in his guts. Maybe he had drawn a dud with this assignment. Everybody seemed to give the ISC a clean bill of health, including Snyder. Kennof had no inclination to waste his time. He had not yet received an answer from Cheyenne and he could still withdraw his application.

If Edmond Cascane, one of Kennof's assistants whom he had directed to investigate the past history of the ISC, failed to come up with something tangible, he would drop his plan.

Kennof went back to his car and chased away a few boys who were fascinated by the abstract paint job of the vehicle. He started the engine and looked thoughtfully at the imposing government office building of glass and steel. When he drove off he didn't know that Cascane already held a surprise in store for him.

Edmond Cascane was an elderly, almost baldheaded man with darting eyes. He piled a mountain of papers on Kennof's desk. Cascane breathed audibly and wiped some imaginary sweat from his forehead. Kennof looked at him solicitously and began to scan the stack of papers.

"Most of this stuff is rather uninteresting," Cascane commented with the studied calm of a man about to drop a bombshell. He watched attentively as Kennof pushed the files away.

"Don't keep me on tenterhooks, Ed! Shoot!" the ex-agent said.

Cascane fished out a single sheet from his coat pocket and waved it in front of his boss' nose. Kennof managed to snatch the secret away from him.

"All this says is that a certain Fedor Piotrowski has miserably failed his exam as a doctor of medicine,"

Kennof muttered disappointedly after he read it.

"That very same man is now taking care of the ISC customers in the caves as Dr. Piotrowski," Cascane ominously announced. "How do you like that?"

Kennof rubbed his jutting chin pensively. "He could have passed his exam later," he surmised.

The assistant shook his homely head. "But he didn't, Dick. I've checked everywhere. Piotrowski must have presented faked credentials to the ISC to get the position."

"Or the ISC has finagled it for him," Kennof suggested.

"Our phony doctor came from Canada," Cascane continued his report. "He burned all bridges behind him and nobody at home knows where he vanished."

Kennof banged his fist on the table. "This decides it for me," he declared, "I'm going to Cheyenne."

"Here are a bunch of newspaper clippings," Cascane said in a weak attempt to draw the attention of his boss to some more papers. "And these are my reports about interviews with people who've had some dealings with the ISC."

But Kennof already tried to figure out how he could hide his essential instruments in the caves as soon as he arrived.

The problem became acute two days later when the ISC advised him to come to Cheyenne for his appointment.

4/ USELESS KNOWLEDGE

M'Artois stood at the window, turning his back to Richard Kennof and giving the detective a creepy feeling. The psychologist knew all the tricks of his trade. His benign attitude concealed a penetrating faculty of perception combined with an unusually sharp mind. M'Artois tried to trap him with seemingly innocent questions whose significance Kennof sometimes realized only at the last moment. Only the fact that he had been trained in such psychological tactics in the Solar Defence Corps saved him from getting caught with his answers.

Kennof became more and more convinced that the Sleeping Corporation made no attempt to rekindle his interest in life but conducted a regular interrogation. M'Artois bored his way through all aspects of his imaginary life and didn't shy away from questions about his most intimate relations. Kennof broke out in a sweat and several times feared that he had been unmasked. However so far all had gone well.

M'Artois gave Kennof another one of his probing looks. "You've mentioned Mr. Hartz. How was it possible that such a highly skilled financial adviser permitted you to invest your money in such speculative stocks?"

"It was simply a matter of being fed up with the tutelage of Mr. Hartz," Kennof explained. "I wanted to

show that smartzy that I can get along without him. Unfortunately everything went down the drain."

"Such behaviour is commensurate with your individualistic character," M'Artois agreed and Kennof breathed a little easier. "However, you could remedy your situation by taking the advice of Mr. Hartz to improve your financial predicament."

Kennof saw his hopes punctured again. "It's not only a matter of money. You know the trouble I have with my girlfriend. Once I came close to killing her. I seem to lose my mind when I think about her frivolous escapades."

"But you love her in spite of everything?"

Kennof hung his head in shame. *I should have become an actor*, he thought.

The psychologist gave him a beautiful lecture which was apparently aimed at persuading him that it was worthwhile to continue his life but it was clear to Kennof that his words were designed to arouse the defiance of those people whom the ISC considered harmless. As M'Artois praised the world, he created an unconscious rejection in the mind of his depressed listeners. However there was nothing illegal in his treatment and Kennof could not draw any incriminating conclusions about the total operations of the corporation.

"Are you still willing to sign a contract with the Sleeping Corporation?" M'Artois finally asked.

"But certainly," the new candidate confirmed.

"You'll have to pass a medical examination by which we must determine whether you meet our physical standards. By the way, are you amputated?"

Kennof denied his question. By now he was firmly convinced that the ISC was involved in some kind of a fraud but he didn't have the faintest idea what it could be. Was it a scheme which was pursued by some greedy and corrupt employees of the corporation or did it include the whole outfit and Cavanaugh himself? What was the real purpose of the enterprise? Were they only in business to make money?

The man who could have enlightened Richard Kennof about some of the sinister designs of the ISC was now in the grip of a power which Kennof would never have suspected as being behind the Intertime Sleeping Corporation.

Maurice Dunbee had learned the lesson but his knowledge was useless because he was neither on Terra nor any other planet in this Galaxy.

5/ CAUGHT!

Small beads of sweat had formed on Kennof's forehead. Clinkskate couldn't suspect that his visitor had begun to perspire for fear of being detected, he took it as a sign of Kennof's jitters, which attacked everyone who entered the eaves of the ISC to be embalmed in the liquid of the large containers.

Kennof had been flown to the caves in a helicopter with two other men. One of them was a nervous, destitute type with fiery red hair and a deep scar on the right cheek. His name was Jubilee and he sat next to Kennof. He didn't tell his reasons why he wanted to undergo the treatment of the ISC.

The third man sat directly behind Kennof. He was a former politician whose life had foundered because of his false ideals. Nevertheless Lester Duncan had a dignified appearance and when he spoke he chose his words with great care. Kennof felt a certain sympathy for him but considered Jubilee with indifference.

At the moment Kennof had little time to pay attention to his travelling companions. He had to find a safe place for the radio-transceiver and the micro-deflector. He would also have to take off his ring with the miniature detector. However it was so inconspicuous that he would have no trouble discarding it somewhere. But he had to conceal the devices in a spot where he could easily retrieve them again when the need occurred without arousing suspicion.

"I'll have Dr. Le Boeuf attend to Mr. Duncan first," Clinkskate said. "Then it'll be your turn, gentlemen."

Kennof interrupted. "Could you show me the washroom, sir? I'd like to freshen up a little bit."

"Follow me!" Clinkskate responded.

Kennof felt calmer as soon as they had left the large office. He walked with the ISC-man and Jubilee till Clinkskate pointed to two doors. Kennof thanked him and he hoped that nobody else occupied the washroom at the moment.

He was lucky. The door could be locked from the inside. He pulled the micro-deflector out of his pocket and switched it on. By deflecting the rays of the light the device made its wearer invisible, since visibility meant the reflection of light by a body. Now that Kennof was not reached by any light, he couldn't reflect it either. However even a simple detector could register his presence and any physical contact with his body could be noticed as well. Moreover he had to be careful to avoid the slightest noise.

Good old Shane, Kennof thought and slipped out of the washroom. The corridor was empty of people. Kennof followed the direction in which Clinkskate had left with Jubilee. He soon reached an open door and entered an enormous vault which was partitioned on several levels. With the trained eyes of a sleuth, Kennof recognized the medical installations and their power sources as he looked cautiously around.

Suddenly Clinkskate stepped out of an elevator a few meters away. Kennof retreated hastily and Clinkskate passed him closely without noticing him. The detective figured that he had only a few minutes to find a hiding place for his transceiver.

It was too risky to use the elevator to go down to another floor. He had to pick a safe spot up here. He estimated that Clinkskate had already reached the washroom when he saw a shelf which was stocked with some spare parts. He carefully hid the radio-transceiver behind some roller bearings. Then he switched the deflector off and put it on the shelf as well. If somebody spied him now, he could claim that he had lost his way. He kept the ring with the tiny deflector on his finger. It was a marvel of micro-precision and must have been constructed by the Swoons whom Perry Rhodan had persuaded to come to Terra on one of his bold adventures that had him to their planet. Their contribution was invaluable.

Kennof peered into the corridor to see that it was clear. He gave a fleeting, nostalgic thought to the Solar

Defence Corps. This was the sort of work that inspired him and the Solar Defence Corps could have provided it for him but its militaristic hierarchy and blind discipline ran counter to his taste.

He ran back and reached the office almost at the same time as Clinkskate. *I'm still in pretty good shape*, he thought as he grinned at Clinkskate, *and I can make it very tough for these guys.*

He was oblivious to their terrible capacity to make things tough for him or he wouldn't have been so optimistic.

* * * *

Despite his chequered career as a busy sleuth, Kennof had never had occasion to learn what was required to prepare a human body for an extended deathlike hibernation and what Dr. Le Boeuf and his assistant Piotrowski had done to him during the past hours didn't do much to enlighten him about the biochemical secrets of deep artificial sleep.

If his sense of time had remained unaffected by the repeated application of narcosis it must have been late evening. Dr. Le Boeuf stood at the examination table and stroked his tired face. "That stupid Jubilee has cost us too much time," he said to Piotrowski. "I suggest that we measure Kennof's brain frequency now and do the rest tomorrow."

"Whatever you say," his assistant agreed.

Kennof sighed in relief. He had already given up hope of getting an opportunity to conduct a clandestine inspection of his own. Now the question was whether they would leave him alone. He sat up and watched the two physicians. Complying with Piotrowski's instructions the two nurses put an oval-shaped object on high legs close to Kennof.

"What's this, Doctor?" Kennof inquired, sensing a vague suspicion.

Le Boeuf nervously manipulated several cords. "An apparatus for measuring your brain frequencies," he explained. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

Kennof forced himself to smile. It was unfortunate for Dr. Le Boeuf that Kennof was familiar with the look of a Terranian brain-frequency meter. Kennof's smile faded and his heart beat faster as the physician prepared the examination.

A closer look convinced Kennof: the instrument was not of Terranian origin! The ex-agent couldn't suppress a shudder of cold fear. How did the ISC obtain such an instrument which, as far as he knew, was not even in the possession of the Solar Defence? Coincidence? Impossible!

"Lean a little forward," Dr. Le Boeuf demanded grouchily. He pulled a band tightly around Kennof's head. There were numerous thin wires attached to it.

Piotrowski, who stood behind the instrument and apparently noted the recorded values, said in amazement: "You seem to be tossing a lot of problems around in your head."

"Don't confuse the man!" Le Boeuf rebuked him sharply. "Just watch the results!"

Piotrowski gave his colleague a nasty look. The nurses stood waiting in the background. Kennof tried to control his turbulent thoughts. To fumble the ball now would have been asinine.

"It's finished," Piotrowski announced after awhile.

The band was released from Kennof's head and the nurses wheeled the mysterious instrument out of sight.

"You can lie down in the bed over there and sleep till tomorrow," Dr. Le Boeuf said. "As this is going to be your exclusive occupation during the coming years, you shouldn't have much trouble sleeping," he laughed raucously. Piotrowski chimed in with a shrill giggle.

"Nurse Marion will stay with you," Dr. Le Boeuf continued. "If you wish she can give you a sleeping pill."

A nurse! He should have known better than to think they would leave him all alone. Nevertheless he made a weak attempt to talk the physician out of it. "I won't need Marion, Doctor. Don't make her lose any sleep because of me."

"She'll take care of you," Le Boeuf said in a firm tone.

Kennof dummied up and went to bed. The physicians and one of the nurses left the room. The other nurse who was given the duty to watch over his sleep pulled up a chair and silently sat down next to his bed. She was tall and slender and her face had remarkably regular and beautiful features.

She can't sit here all night, Kennof thought in dismay. *She must leave sometime or fall asleep.*

Two hours elapsed without a change. The nurse sat next to him, unmoving. Finally Kennof had an idea. "Nurse," he asked, "may I have a drink?"

"Of course," she said in a friendly tone.

Kennof's hopes were instantly buoyed but he was quickly disappointed when she went to a cabinet, took out a bottle and filled a glass.

Tea! Kennof thought glumly. *Tea of all things!*

But he sipped it with feigned pleasure. She probably kept some food nearby as well. It would be useless to make a request for it. He would never get rid of her that way.

After two more hours had gone by Kennof was ready to play crazy. He began to observe the woman very intensely. Not once had she closed her eyes to indicate that she felt tired. The room was dimly lit. Was it possible that she wouldn't sleep at all? She didn't even blink her eyes.

An ice-cold shiver chased down Kennof's spine. *That's it!*

He stared at her with dubious eyes. Her pupils looked straight ahead and she didn't bat an eyelid.

Marion was not a nurse! She was not even a woman—*she was a robot!*

Kennof crawled instinctively deeper under his covers. As a former agent he had considerable experience with robots. With Terranian robots!

Was it a figment of his imagination that the nurse was the embodiment of a machine of extra-Terranian origin? Not if the brain-frequency meter came from another planet too.

Kennof knew full well that without a weapon he didn't stand a chance in a fight with a robot. There was only one possibility: he had to short-circuit the positronic brain of the robot. This was not too difficult for him if he was up against the logic of a Terranian automaton. However if the machine was constructed by an alien race it was quite possible that it acted according to a different logic system. There were so many variations that Kennof shuddered to think about it.

What are you waiting for, old buddy? Kennof asked himself.

Kennof had little doubt that he could handle the robot if it was built by Terranian standards. However if it behaved with a logic foreign to him, a great many totally unpredictable things could happen.

"Nurse!" Richard Kennof began softly. "I've just found out that you're a robot."

The 'nurse' gazed at him and Kennof winced a little.

"I will report it to Dr. Le Boeuf," the machine declared.

"Now wait a minute, my friend," Kennof exclaimed hastily. "Didn't Dr. Le Boeuf order you to watch me at all times?"

The robot was silent for a moment and then said: "Those were his orders."

Kennof wagged his finger. "Nevertheless it is absolutely imperative that you inform the physician at once of your discovery because it could have dire consequences."

"I must go to him at once," the machine agreed and started to move.

"Stop!" Kennof bellowed. "Are you going to disobey his orders and leave me here without being guarded?"

"Certainly not," the robot reversed itself.

Kennof said harshly: "Now go and get the doctor before something happens. And don't forget to watch me. You're not permitted to leave me. Are you listening? This was a strict order. But you must tell Le Boeuf that I know about you. What are you waiting for? Go ahead! Guard me! Stay here! Go away! Stay! Go Stay"

He kept talking until it was over. The electronic safety valve of the machine's brain was triggered and short-circuited its action. The robot had been unable to coordinate the contradictory instructions. The success of Kennof's tactic had depended on the accuracy of his assumption that Dr. Le Boeuf had indeed instructed 'Nurse Marion' to stick with the sleuth without fail.

No positronic memory-bank was able to cope with two conflicting demands of equal urgency. The only solution for such a machine was to retreat into an automatic 'schizophrenic' state.

Kennof jumped out of his bed. A quick examination confirmed that the robot had been manufactured on Earth and that it no longer presented a danger. Let the two physicians rack their brains next morning how he had put the nurse in such a helpless condition.

The next important step was to get his micro-deflector and transceiver back in order to search the caves. The devices were hidden on the floor above him. He was afraid to use the elevator since the noise might have attracted the employees of the ISC. However there were no stairs as far as he could see. The elevator was set in an open shaft and Kennof decided to climb up on the suspension cable. He got up on the roof of the little cabin. If somebody happened to use the elevator now it would have been the end of the line for him. Kennof pulled his heavy body up on the cable with the agility of a monkey but he tore the skin of his hands on the sharp ends of the wires where the cable was frayed.

When he reached the next floor he sneaked to the shelf where he had hidden his instruments. They were still in place. Kennof worked fast and precise so that it took him only a few seconds to go back.

He had only a vague idea how to proceed from there. Since he had been unable to obtain promising clues, he had to trust his luck from the start.

It was shortly before midnight when he passed through the same door where Dunbee had begun his flight a few weeks earlier. He activated the micro-deflector to guard himself against unexpected encounters. Kennof reached the shaft into which Dunbee had fallen, and paused. Although it was not the end of the corridor he decided to investigate the hole. He lowered himself into the hole and slid down cautiously, making sure that the irreplaceable equipment Shane had given him remained undamaged.

When he emerged at the bottom his eyes beheld a remarkable scenery. A soft light illuminated the spacious vault. Huge rocks threw their distorted shadows on the floor and bizarre figures of stone protruded from the ceiling high above Kennof. The three vats looked like sleeping monsters in their lair.

Kennof stepped closer and glimpsed—for the first time—the sleepers.

They floated like fish in each chamber. With closed eyes they slept naked in the yellowish liquid, their faces turned up or down; faces of men and women, workers and scientists. Their hands were folded, spread out or twisted into claws.

Kennof was consternated. All these people had fled from the misery of their lives to seek happiness in a distant future. They filled him with shame and revulsion. He considered these attempts by a frightful number of people to outwit their fate as doomed to failure. Whenever they would wake up, they would take the same personality which had handicapped them in the past into the future. Nothing would be changed.

Kennof forced himself to go closer to the containers. The sleepers rested on pneumatic supports and the chambers were separated from each other by a wire-grid. All sleeping cubicles were connected by contacts and numerous hoses. The cell-plasma was in continuous motion, a sign that it was replaced or treated in a permanent process. The individual sleepers could only be reached by an access at the top of the containers where Kennof saw more of the hoses, pipes and contact sockets.

The former agent of the Solar Defence felt relieved. Admittedly he had anticipated finding something highly irregular and had refused to believe that there was nothing around here but sleeping people. The ISC might have used some questionable methods and even violated the law but the people who had come here for help were safe and sound in their care.

He had no inkling that he would have to change his opinion in less than an hour.

* * * *

Richard Kennof wriggled out of the shaft with considerable puffing. He would have no other choice but to return to Dr. Le Beouf's custody and insist that he had changed his mind and was ready to face the world again.

As he was busy dusting off his clothes he got a signal from the mini-detector in his ring. He interrupted his work in surprise. According to the magnitude of the reaction by the device, a strong discharge of energy must have taken place in his immediate vicinity. Kennof checked the ring.

"It registers regular bursts of energy as well as those of five-dimensional nature," Shane had explained. "The tiny dial is divided in two sectors. The red sector indicates an occurrence of higher order, that is in the five-dimensional field."

Kennof became alert when he recalled these words. He scrutinized the dial again but he had made no mistake. Somewhere a five-dimensional discharge had occurred. He gnashed his teeth. His suspicions that had been lulled were awakened again. How was it possible that an ultra-dimensional energy source existed at the ISC station? It was so unheard of as to border on the incredible. Yet he was certain that his detector functioned properly. Shane had checked it conscientiously before he had delivered it to him.

There could be no further thought of rest this night for him. He ran along the corridor which continued beyond the shaft deeper inside the Earth. The ring showed no further discharges.

Kennof was clutched by an almost unbearable tension. Was there something awry with the Sleeping Corporation after all? As he was invisible he didn't have to be especially careful.

The corridor ended at a metallic platform in another cave and Kennof entered it without hesitating. Next to the entrance was another opening which led into the wall of rock. It was arranged in such a clever way that Kennof could easily picture in his mind how perfectly it could be concealed in case of an inspection. He was led to this assumption by several large boulders which were piled up near the opening. It was extremely unlikely that an inspector would have discovered the natural opening which was also camouflaged by the metal platform. But now the access was open since no inspection was in progress.

Kennof let out a low whistle. Whatever the Intertime Sleeping Corporation wanted to hide—it was to be found in that recess of the cave. The detective tiptoed into the secret passage. It was lit up and seemed to be in frequent use. He heard a few indistinct noises in the distance and he hurried to get closer until he made out the voices of several men. His heart began to beat faster but he tried to control his excitement.

The passage turned at a right angle behind which appeared to be a larger room. Without making a noise Kennof took the last steps before he approached the next cave. The room he entered was not as big as the other caverns.

First he saw six men in the blue outfits of the ISC. Then he noticed another man—a man he recognized: Jubilee.

Kennof stifled a cry. Jubilee lay, apparently unconscious, on the bare floor. Behind the poor unfortunate, who had come to Wyoming together with Kennof, metallic bars were mounted vertically in the ground. They were arranged in a semicircle with a diameter of about 10 meters. Somehow it reminded Kennof of a caged circus ring. High above the open bars, close to the ceiling of the cave, floated in defiance of all laws of gravity a metallic ball with a reddish shine.

Kennof almost forgot to breathe. It all looked so strange and menacing. He had never seen anything like it before and was unable to figure out what it could be.

Two of the men picked Jubilee up and dragged him roughly inside the semicircle. Then they retreated hastily, leaving Jubilee's lonely body lying 15 steps from Kennof. *There's nothing I can do for him*, Kennof tried to calm himself.

And then Jubilee vanished! His big red face dissolved in no time at all before Kennof's eyes and the space behind the metal rods looked as empty as if there had never been a person there.

Finally he became aware that his detector had responded to Jubilee's disappearance with another signal and he realized what the strange apparatus represented. He stood before a matter-transmitter although it was unlike any of those used in the Solar Imperium!

Kennof's thoughts whirred around madly. He didn't dare move as the six men turned to the exit and walked in a silent group as if the eerie feat had robbed them of their voices.

Suddenly Kennof was struck by horror, as he understood the meaning of the first signal he had received from the detector: Lester Duncan, the politician, was sent at that time through the transmitter to an unknown destination.

If the ISC did this to its clients, who were the sleepers in the chambers? Kennof was not a faint-hearted man but he was overcome by the most ghastly feelings.

The detective didn't have much time to think about the answers to the problems which disturbed him so profoundly. At the same moment as the last of the six men passed by him on his way out, his micro-deflector stopped functioning and Kennof was suddenly visible again. The transmitter must have affected the operation of the device.

Kennof didn't wait till he was discovered. He leaped instantly on the man and put him out of action with two well-aimed blows. Fortunately his training in the Solar Defence Corps had included the most effective methods of hand-to-hand fighting.

The other men were already out of sight in the passageway. Now Kennof had to leave the cave as quickly as possible. Since it had only one exit it was a dangerous trap. The other five were sure to come back in a few minutes to see what happened to their companion. Kennof searched the man crumpled on the floor for weapons but he was out of luck.

He ran out of the transmitter station. Now he was no longer primarily concerned with digging up evidence for crimes perpetrated by the ISC, now it was a simple matter of life or death for him. He could not imagine that the ISC would ever let him go with his newfound knowledge.

He reached the shaft leading to the sleeping cavern without being molested. Then he heard the voices of the men who presumably returned to look for their missing buddy. Without wasting a second he slipped once more into the hole and made his way to the big vault where he would be safe for the time being.

He could make a fair prediction of what was going to happen. As soon as they found the man he had knocked senseless, they would summon Clinkskate and the two physicians. A quick investigation would disclose that Kennof had left his bed and had put the robot out of commission. It didn't take much imagination to make the connection between the unconscious man near the transmitter and the disabled robot in the person of Richard Kennof who had disappeared without a trace. This would make him enemy #1 and the ISC would leave no stone unturned to apprehend him. Kennof expected no mercy from his hunters.

It would come to a bitter fight to the end. Once they had flushed him out it would be only a question of time before his demise. Nevertheless he hesitated to send an emergency call to Shane. He wanted to get unassailable proof that would cause Shane's armed men to take vigorous action once they arrived.

There were a few doors which Kennof checked and found to be locked. He cursed his bad luck and looked around for a place to hide.

"Richard Kennof!" a voice called.

The detective was startled and whirled around. *Take it easy*, he admonished himself, *it's probably only a loudspeaker somewhere in here.*

They had obviously noticed his absence and tried to make him betray his whereabouts, a favour he was not going to do them. He ran to the repository in the middle and climbed up the ladder to the top from where he could watch the entire cave. He slid to the outer edge and squeezed his body under one of the pipelines.

"Kennof!" The detective recognized Clinkskate's voice. "You're an intelligent man and you must know that we're going to catch you sooner or later. Give yourself up at once and save yourself some drastic measures you force us to take against you. We give you three minutes to tell us where you are. If you fail to show up within that time we'll come in to get you."

Kennof waited, keeping his mini-radio transmitter handy.

After awhile he heard Clinkskate speak again. "Kennof, your time is up!"

That's it, Dickie boy, Kennof thought, *they'll make it so hot for you that you'll wish you never heard of the ISC.*

The night had almost ended, he figured, although he had no way of verifying it deep inside the Earth. But he didn't feel tired as yet.

Suddenly two men came in through one of the doors. They both carried gas pistols. Kennof watched them quietly as they began to scour every corner.

"He can't be in here, St. Cloud," one of them said. "The doors were all locked.

The man called St. Cloud replied, annoyed: "Maybe he came through the shaft."

"Like Dunbee?"

St. Cloud nodded. Kennof listened anxiously. Apparently Dunbee had become suspicious and tried to

run away. However the next words of the ISC-man made it obvious that Dunbee had been captured again, as he said: "He fought like a madman when we finally found him. Come, let's take a look under the containers!"

Kennof heard them crawl around underneath. Then St. Cloud emerged again, followed by his companion.

"If he isn't under the containers, he might be atop one of them," St. Cloud suggested.

"Why would he do a crazy thing like that?" the other contradicted him. "Let's look someplace else."

As soon as they were gone Kennof wiggled his way out from under the pipelines and carefully descended the ladder. He jumped from the last two rungs and landed in front of Dr. Le Boeuf, who pointed a pistol at him.

"Hello, Kennof!" the little physician greeted him.

6/ THE ISC UNVEILED

"I can't stand all this waiting," Celia Mortimer said to Shane, who sat across from her. "Why don't we hear from Dick?"

Shane Hardiston was a tall muscular man with gentle blue eyes. At a superficial glance he could be easily mistaken as a kind and reticent person. But his enemies knew that his calm manners concealed his ability to act savagely.

"Maybe they already put him to sleep," Shane said teasingly.

"We've got to do something," Celia urged angrily.

"Yes," Hardiston agreed, "we've got to wait."

She gave him a furious look but refrained from answering. They sat in Kennof's private office, which had become a sort of headquarters for them.

Hartz came in and tossed a bundle of papers on the table. His face had a cunning expression. "I think we've thrown the snoopers from the ISC off the scent. Cascane has reported that they left town." He rubbed his hands in pleasure. "Everything works out just fine." Then his face darkened. "Poor Dick. A lot of debts and a hang-up like you, Celia," he said in a plaintive voice. "Oh well," he continued unabashed when nobody cracked a smile, "the mood around here seems to approach absolute zero. Never mind, you can't get a good man down. I've discovered that the president of the ISC, a certain Cavanaugh, has got more money in his bank account than he can possibly have earned in his business."

"He'll trump up some kind of an explanation for his fortune when we ask him about it," Shanke said.

"Of course," Hartz admitted. "It was just an idea. By the way, that Cascane is getting awfully impatient in

his office. I can hardly talk him out of going to Cheyenne to help Kennof."

"He seems to have more guts than some other men," Celia commented ironically.

"She's giving me the needle," Shane explained to the financial adviser. "The young lady is of the opinion that it's time to intervene."

"But Celia," Hartz said indignantly. "Just now when everything is colacoola? (hunky-dory) If Dick needs help, I'm sure he'll let us know. He's not a kid who doesn't know what to do in an emergency."

"I know him better," Celia declared. "If there ever was a man who stumbles from danger to danger, it's Dick. And in most cases he gets the biggest kick out of it."

"She's exaggerating, Gaston," Shane said with a smile.

* * * *

"Where did you come from?" Kennof exclaimed in surprise, raising his hands to let the physician know that he had no thought of fighting him.

Dr. Le Boeuf put the finger of his free hand on his lips. "I was already here when you came in," he said in a low voice. "Don't talk so loudly. There are several mikes around here."

To Kennof's infinite amazement the physician put his weapon into his pocket and the detective dropped his arms.

"I wish to help you," the little man stated. "The ISC is a swindle and it's time that the public learns the true facts. Unfortunately I got mixed up with Cavanaugh because I needed money. It was a bad mistake as I've found out belatedly. Almost all employees have been bribed with large sums. The guards are wanted criminals who were glad to find a place to hide out. Their papers are false. Clinkskate is the worst of the lot. I've seldom seen a more depraved man."

Kennof did his best to judge the new situation. He gained the impression that the man was very sincere. "What's the purpose of the ISC?" Kennof inquired anxiously.

"To gain control of Earth!" Dr. Le Boeuf answered tersely.

Kennof was so stunned that he almost conked out. Was he already sleeping in the liquid and having a bad dream?

No! The cold stone-floor and the grim face of his vis-a-vis were undeniable realities.

"Come with me to the top of the container," Dr. Le Boeuf proposed, "and I'll show you something you'll never forget as long as you live."

Whatever Dr. Le Boeuf had intended to demonstrate, he didn't get a chance to do it. Three men jumped out of the shaft and stormed toward them. Kennof spun around, ready to defend himself. The eyes of the

physician were filled with sadness. "Here, take this," he said in a tired voice to Kennof and handed him his pistol. The weapon lay cold and smooth in Kennof's hand.

"Doctor! What are you doing here?" one of the henchmen shouted.

Another attacker fired a shot from his gas pistol. Kennof held his breath as best he could and returned the fire.

"Out of the way, Doctor!" one of the guards yelled.

Le Boeuf threw himself to the ground but Kennof was afraid to shoot because he didn't want to hit the physician. However the goons of the ISC didn't know such scruples. Kennof took cover behind the container.

"He's here, Clinkskate," a voice shouted. "We've cornered him in the big cave."

"Get him!" came the reply from the loudspeaker.

The effect of the gas became unbearable and Kennof's eyes began to weep. He coughed painfully and retreated farther as more shots were aimed in his direction.

"Clinkskate!" Kennof roared desperately. "I've got a gun. Call your men off or I'll puncture the containers!"

"It's true," one of his assailants snapped. "He's got a gun, Clinkskate."

Dark shadows blurred Kennof's eyes and a terrible nausea spread from his stomach throughout his entire body. He had to grasp a pipe to keep from slumping to the ground.

Two of the men thought the time was ripe to creep up on him. Their shadowy silhouettes appeared in a milky haze before Kennof. He pulled the trigger of his gun but his aim was too fuzzy to score a hit. However he caused his pursuers to pull back again.

Kennof's groping hand found one of the ladders. He managed to scale it although he was barely able to breathe anymore and felt like he weighed a ton.

"Watch out that he doesn't damage the sleeping chambers," Clinkskate warned.

The guards wavered and held their fire. Kennof finally succeeded in reaching the surface of the container. He gasped for air and was afraid he would choke to death. With a stubborn effort he crawled to the opposite side and found that the air was less saturated with the numbing gas.

He took the risk of peering over the edge and saw about a dozen men, all wearing gasmasks. Dr. Le Boeuf lay at their feet. Kennof narrowed his eyes. The strangled feeling in his throat tapered off and he was able to see with his tearful eyes again.

Kennof took a fateful gamble. "I've smuggled an explosive charge into the cave," he shouted from his perch. "Look here!" He cautiously showed them the defective micro-deflector. "I can demolish the whole place with this," he claimed emphatically. "I'm an officer of the State Police and I guarantee a full pardon to all those who'll act on the side of the law." He counted on the peculiar appearance of the deflector to throw the men into confusion.

"He's bluffing you!" Clinkskate screamed with a cracking voice. "He can't have anything like that after we've examined him."

"Some of your men have seen that Dr. Le Boeuf helped me," Kennof reminded him. "He's made it possible for me to keep my weapons."

"He's not a police officer," Clinkskate shouted vehemently. "Don't let him make fools of you! I want you to arrest him!"

"If you're so sure that he can't blow us up why don't you come down yourself to nab him, Clinkskate?" one of the men sneered.

Kennof heard Clinkskate curse viciously. "I've jammed your robot," the detective told the group. "How could I have done that without police training?"

"Sounds reasonable," the man who had made himself the spokesman for the band of hoodlums admitted. "We promise you that you won't get hurt if you give yourself up."

Kennof heard Clinkskate growl contemptuously over the loudspeaker and replied with a grim laugh: "I'm not a child. It's clear to me that the ISC will never let me go. I know already too much about their felonious intrigues. But my situation is desperate and I've got nothing to lose. Now I will give you my conditions."

"Get him down!" Clinkskate demanded after he suddenly emerged from the door. His face was distorted in an ugly grimace and his eyes glowered with hate. "He can't set any conditions around here."

Kennof took careful aim and fired. The bullet hit Clinkskate in the shoulder and knocked him to the ground. It was not a lethal shot which was as Kennof had intended. The crowd was already too agitated. Two of them dragged the moaning Clinkskate outside again.

"What's your proposition?" the spokesman snapped furiously.

"Leave this cave with all your men for 12 hours. I promise to surrender all my weapons to you when you come back."

Kennof had underestimated the man. "It doesn't make sense to me. Your situation will be exactly the same in 12 hours as it is now. You won't gain anything by delaying us."

Of course Kennof couldn't very well tell him that Shane would come to his rescue before the time was up. "You can take Dr. Le Boeuf with you as hostage," he suggested. "If I fail to come forth and give up my arms after 12 hours you can use him to thermoderm (put the heat on) me."

The spokesman looked worried at Kennof. "You won't sabotage the containers?"

"I give you my solemn word of honour."

The man from the ISC accepted his assurance with the words "I'm willing to try it." He motioned the others and they all left the cave.

Kennof pulled the radio transmitter out of his pocket. All that mattered now was that Shane paid

attention.

The sleuth had gained a breather to investigate what the physician had intended to show him.

7/ DUEL OF WITS

Clinkskate pushed the pale Piotrowski away from him with a curse. The bandage dangled from his wound. "Get me a phone!" he demanded. "Get Cavanaugh on the phone as fast as you can!"

The physician operated the telephone with trembling fingers. "You've lost a lot of blood, sir," he said haltingly. "It would be better if you'd let me dress your injury first."

"Hurry up!" Clinkskate barked. "You can treat me while I talk."

He leaned back on the couch and pressed his hand against his aching shoulder as he impatiently watched the efforts of the physician.

"Yes," Piotrowski said. "Wait a moment, please."

He handed Clinkskate the phone. "It's Cavanaugh himself," he whispered.

Clinkskate made an angry gesture to him. "This is Clinkskate speaking," he blurted into the phone. "We've got a hell of a lot of trouble here, Mr. Cavanaugh. You'd better come here at once." After a pause he answered: "No. One of the mosky skons (21st century slang: pesky screwballs) escaped from the preparation room, apparently with the connivance of Le Boeuf. No, Piotrowski is with me. The fugitive took a shot at me. He's down there in the repository vault. His name is Richard Kennof, a former private detective. He claims to have a bomb with him and he told our men that he's a member of the State Police. He dunked the donks (bamboozled the chumps) in making a deal with them to leave him alone in the cave for the next 12 hours. Kennof has seen our transmitter. You know what that means."

He waited for the answer. Then he said: "I'll try to talk the men into capturing him without delay. I'll be waiting for you."

He hung up and informed Piotrowski: "Cavanaugh will be here as soon as possible. In the meantime we'll have to tackle the job ourselves. I'm convinced that Kennof has pulled a fast one."

"Be that as it may, he seems to have a lot of nerve," Piotrowski remarked cautiously. "I have a feeling he's got something else up his sleeve to surprise us."

"Nonsense! How much longer will it take you to finish that blasted bandage?"

"It'll be done in no time," the physician tried to calm him down.

Clinkskate stared quizzically at Piotrowski. "I've got an idea, Piotrowski. I know how we can outsmart that punk."

"Shoot!" the other one requested hopefully.

"I'll send you down to see him," Clinkskate informed him.

Piotrowski's face turned white. He tried to force a smile and raised both hands in refusal. "You must be joking," he said timidly. "How can I subdue Kennof?"

"Use your brains, man! You must look completely harmless when you approach him. Then you tell him that you were stricken by remorse just like Le Boeuf and you decided to make amends by joining him. As soon as he relaxes his suspicions you can overpower him."

"Oh, it's as simple as that," Piotrowski sneered sarcastically. "Find yourself another boy for your donk-brained scheme!"

Clinkskate groaned as he got up impetuously and walked up to Piotrowski. His face was flushed in anger. "Did you forget who put you back on your feet, my good friend? Remember Canada. I insist that you obey my orders!"

The physician cringed in fear. Beads of sweat appeared on his forehead and he croaked weakly: "You beast, Clinkskate!"

Clinkskate slapped him hard across the face with his uninjured hand. "You'll do as I say!" he screamed.

* * * *

Each sleeping chamber was covered with a lid that fastened by a lock. He could have blasted the lock open with a shot from his pistol but he was afraid it might cause the goon-squad to come running back.

Kennof examined the hinges and determined to his satisfaction that their construction would yield to his mechanical skill. He removed some parts from the deflector and used them to loosen the lid. When he pulled it to the side he was able to look inside the sleeping chamber and he saw an old man with a baldhead and a moustache who was a picture of serenity. Kennof wondered what the oldster would expect from the future which he had bought for hard cash.

As Kennof lowered himself into the chamber he expected the occupant to open his eyes at any moment and demand to know in a stern voice what the purpose of his visit was. The cell-plasma had a pleasant temperature. Kennof's feet touched bottom when the upper third of his body was above the surface. He waded toward the sleeper. The body of the old man rocked slightly. Kennof had experienced many weird situations in his life but now he suffered a queasy feeling. However he had started this unsavoury business and he was determined to go through with it.

He cautiously touched the chest of the sleeping man with his fingertips—and shrank back. The skin of the man was cold as ice. Kennof was filled with repugnance and a vague fear. His wet pants clung uncomfortably to his legs. He closed his eyes for a moment to collect his thoughts. Then he touched the ear of the sleeper and pulled it. It was a spontaneous act. The earlobe was strangely soft and elastic.

Suddenly the ear tore loose! Kennof uttered a terrified cry and reeled back. The gurgling liquid rushed

into the gap where he had stood. His brain, paralysed by horror, gradually began to function again. He still held the ear between his fingers. It didn't bleed! Nor did any blood flow from the wound in the man's head. Kennof forced himself in a superhuman effort to examine the thing in his hand closer.

The dim light made it difficult to recognize its consistency. The ear wasn't made of human flesh and it probably was not even fashioned by an organic substance but this fact didn't make Kennof feel easier. He wondered whether the whole body of the man consisted of bioplastic material or whether the masquerade served to conceal something else inside the figure.

Was something under that layer that waited to be freed by Kennof?

Even the bravest man has his moments of panic fear. Kennof was inwardly shaken and his mind was in danger of losing its balance although it was far above average. Mechanically he crawled out of the chamber and rested motionlessly near the opening to catch his breath. His body was almost totally wet and the cool air in the cave caused it to steam. Kennof trembled as he lay in a puddle of water.

When he gained control of himself his first reaction involved the sleeper. He slid to the opening, and looked down and almost at once regretted it.

The mustachioed man made peculiar swimming motions. Somehow the movements of his limbs didn't even appear to be human to Kennof who had never witnessed anything like it. He watched the eerie spectacle with great fascination.

Suddenly his eyes bulged when he noticed that the skin of the man's face began to flake off. Kennof didn't have the stamina to observe what emerged under the human skin. He grabbed the lid and pulled it over the opening. Completely exhausted he slumped on the cover. The gas, which had been discharged by the pistols, left a foul taste in his mouth.

He was unable to tell how long he had lain there, when he was jarred out of his stupor by the sensation that somebody tried to lift the cover under him.

* * * *

Fedor Piotrowski tried to let the idea sink in that he was forced to kill a man—with his own hands.

His life had left a wretched trail of vile deeds. The physician looked back in his mind on his nefarious past. He knew that he was evil but he considered this defective quality of his character to be inborn and thus beyond his control.

His wickedness was different from that of Clinkskate. Whereas Clinkskate's acts were motivated by selfishness and brutality, Piotrowski was able to take an objective view of his behaviour. Good and evil were clearly defined in his mind. His concepts were no different from those of decent people and each time he committed a transgression he told himself "You're doing wrong!"

It was more of a sober statement than any self-reproach or guilty conscience. Piotrowski had attained a certain distance from his own self which permitted him to observe himself as another person. This objectivity had almost taken on a separate status, a harmless strange form of split personality.

At this moment he decided with complete detachment: *Fedor Peotrowski is on the verge of killing a man named Richard Kennof. He will do it with a gun tucked away in his boot.*

Piotrowski realized that he could be the one who had to die in a duel of wits because the wily fugitive didn't seem to miss a trick. It would be a question of who was smarter and faster on the trigger.

The physician entered the sleeping cave in an inconspicuous manner. He made just as much noise as was necessary to keep Kennof from believing that he wanted to sneak up on him.

"Stay where you are!" Kennof called from his vantagepoint. "What do you want?"

"I came to help you," Piotrowski answered. "I'm Dr. Le Boeuf's assistant. The others don't know that I'm here."

"They do now!" Kennof said derisively. "You've talked more than loud enough for the microphones."

Damn it! Piotrowski swore silently. *How could I forget all about them?*

Kennof raised his gun. "I'm not stupid enough to fall for your clumsy tricks, Doctor," he said. "You better leave at once!"

Clinkskate's voice shrilled from the loudspeaker in helpless fury: "Piotrowski, you lousy amateur!"

Piotrowski noticed that Kennof remained rigidly on his spot. Then he recognized why: the detective pressed the weight of his body against the lid which covered the chamber.

The physician was terrified by the thought that Kennof had awakened one of those monsters. He threw himself to the ground and quickly pulled out his gun. Kennof remained glued to his position in full view. He was unable to leave his place because he would have to face an adversary far more terrible than Piotrowski with his pistol.

They both fired at the same instant. The rumbling echo made the sound of the whizzing bullets reverberate in the cave so that the rocky walls seemed to drone. When it was still again, Clinkskate's voice broke the silence. "Did you get him, Doctor?"

"No," Kennof replied in a firm tone, "I nailed *him!*"

8/ "I'LL RULE THE WORLD!"

Owen Cavanaugh rode up to the last stop of the elevator and got out. The landing pad of the helicopters was a few steps up and across from him. Cavanaugh opened the glass door and walked out on the roof. A fresh breeze blew in his face and stirred up some scraps of paper.

After climbing up the steps to the landing pad he saw the pilot coming out of the cabin and he stopped in surprise. "Who are you?" he asked in an imperious tone. "Where is Ben?"

"Ben suddenly became sick," the pilot explained. "I was called in to take his place."

Cavanaugh studied him suspiciously. "I've never seen you before. Who hired you?" he inquired gruffly.

Ben's replacement smiled and replied: "Mr. M'Artois."

"I hope you can fly as well as Ben," Cavanaugh said, apparently dismissing his doubts.

"You'll soon see for yourself, sir," the pilot reassured him.

"What's your name?" Cavanaugh asked lamely.

"Jacob," the new man introduced himself.

"Jacob?" Cavanaugh frowned as he boarded the helicopter. "I prefer to call you Ben for the sake of simplicity."

"As you wish, sir," the man replied respectfully and climbed into the pilot seat. He started the motor and the blades began to rotate with increasing speed.

"Do you know our destination?" Cavanaugh inquired. He had to shout because his voice was drowned out by the roaring engine of the climbing copter.

Jacob simply nodded.

"I want to get there as early as possible," Cavanaugh ordered.

They flew over the city and other machines came into view.

"You fly very well," Cavanaugh acknowledged. "However I have a feeling that we won't agree on the place and time of our landing."

"Quite possible," Jacob concurred.

Cavanaugh shoved a little object in Jacob's back. "Do you know what this is, Jacob?"

Without turning around the pilot replied: "A needle-beam gun, I suppose."

"You guessed it, friend. And now let's fly toward Yellowstone National Park, whoever you are."

Jacob asked calmly: "How did you find all this out so quickly?"

"M'Artois has no authority to hire anybody. All employees of the ISC are selected by me and Mr. Clinkskate."

"Your frankness can save us a lot of questioning," Jacob suggested. "It would be much better for you if you'd tell me all about your operations."

Cavanaugh smirked in amusement. "Your unmitigated gall is not going to save your hide," he said mildly. "It would interest me to know who you are and for whom you work."

"I'm the man who's going to arrest you. And then there's another man whom neither I nor you know at the moment, the man who'll have the duty of sentencing you." Jacob looked back with an affirmative gesture.

"Are you with the police?"

"Not directly," Jacob informed him. "I'm an agent of the Solar Defence."

The pressure from the gun increased and Cavanaugh's face looked ashen.

"And now," Jacob demanded, "confess what the Sleeping Corporation really represents!"

"You know nothing!" Cavanaugh thundered. "You're just trying to put the screws on me to get some information. Don't forget that you're the one who is in a bad fix."

"You might as well throw in the towel, Cavanaugh," Jacob said, changing the course of the machine. "At this moment four helicopters of the Solar Defence are on their way to Cheyenne. They're manned by a dozen specialists who can extract all the information from the ISC we want to have in no time. As a precautionary measure we have reported our investigation to the State Police of Wyoming and they've already dispatched a task force to the location in order to lend us a helping hand if it should be necessary."

The President of the ISC screamed hysterically: "All this won't do you any good! You can't prove anything on us. We operate under the supervision of the government and have passed every test. You know that you won't get out of this copter alive, Jacob! But I'll prevail. Some day I'll rule the world. You may not know it but I'm the future Administrator of the Solar Imperium. Rhodan will soon be finished. My friends and I will break his power together and they'll back me up when I take over the reins."

"You're sick," the agent declared soberly. "If you shoot me the copter will crash. There's nothing you can do to me."

"I can force you to take me to Wyoming," Cavanaugh countered.

"You can't force me to do anything," Jacob contradicted. "I'm flying to a station of the Solar Defence where they'll take care of you."

Even as he spoke he caused the helicopter to plunge down abruptly. Simultaneously he struck a hard blow against Cavanaugh's arm, which made him cry out in pain and fire a shot which hit Jacob's arm. He grabbed Cavanaugh's hand and turned back. Cavanaugh rammed his hard skull against Jacob's chest and the pain took his breath away. However, he managed to push Cavanaugh's weapon to the side.

The machine rapidly lost altitude and swayed like a huge dragonfly over the rooftops of the city.

Cavanaugh was unable to keep the weapon in his grip. Jacob pulled him forward with irresistible force although the ISC President defended himself like a maniac. The tight space didn't leave much room for fighting. The helicopter was left at the mercy of the wind and began to spin crazily. When the machine tipped over to the side Jacob glimpsed for a moment the dark shadows of the houses which approached with dangerous speed. Meanwhile the other pilots in the air traffic had noticed that the machine was out of control and the air police rushed in with screaming sirens.

Jacob could picture a crowd of people standing in the street and watching the show with anxiety. Cavanaugh struggled like a wild beast but the agent matched his greater strength with his superior skill and experience. Finally he managed to seize the control stick with one hand while he held Cavanaugh back with the other. "Stop fighting!" he warned, "we'll be smashed to pieces on a roof."

Cavanaugh groaned wildly and redoubled his efforts. In a surprising move Jacob let go of the controls and hit his opponent under the ear with the edge of his hand. Cavanaugh collapsed with a moan. Now his face looked drained and worn. He had dreamed a short but dangerous dream of power. Jacob was still unaware of the insidious extent of his treachery.

The police patrol caught up with him and the sirens simmered down. An officer barked through a megaphone: "Are you donk? Take control of your machine and land at once! Your reckless stunts are endangering traffic!"

A few seconds later Jacob succeeded in straightening up his machine. He opened the side window and stuck out his badge so that the police flying above him could see it.

The officer shook his head in disbelief and turned to his companion. "An agent of the Solar Defence!" he exclaimed. "And crazy people like that are entrusted with our global defence!"

"It's the same old story," the other one griped. "People like us who can carry a tune (have something on the ball) never get a chance. But you better pay attention to your control stick because we'll soon hit the ground. It's only 30 meters below."

* * * *

"Can't you fly a little faster?" Celia inquired impatiently.

"We could do a lot of things," Shane Hardiston replied, mistreating his earlobe by twisting it upward. "Normally the Solar Defence reacts with greater speed but we're not on an official mission. The colonel can't go to war when a private citizen issues an emergency call, especially if we don't even know the foe. The only reason he allowed us to take off on this errand was because he has a soft spot. I hate to think of the jam Kennof will get him in if he made a mistake. Just the arrest of Cavanaugh alone can cost him his job if it turns out to be a false alarm."

"If Dick sends an SOS the colonel can rest assured," Celia demurred pertly.

"Yes, yes," Shane said with a touch of irony. "This Dick is quite a fellow as he stumbles from danger to danger."

"You monstrous ogre!" Celia exploded.

Hardiston leaned forward and asked the pilot: "What do you say about it?"

"I don't know," he replied laconically. "I'm only the pilot."

They laughed, having no inkling that Kennof was about to be engaged in a battle of life and death.

9/ MANKIND BETRAYED

The pressure against the inside of the lid grew stronger and stronger. Perhaps it was only his diminishing strength, Kennof thought, but he would not much longer be able to hold back the invisible prisoner.

Once the unknown captive had succeeded in raising the lid a few centimetres and a hand had appeared in the crack. Kennof had slammed his pistol on it and squashed the same bioplastic material of which the ear had consisted, which the detective had held between his fingers a few hours earlier. The real hand was pulled back instantaneously—or was it a claw? A feeler or a tentacle?

Kennof was unable to recognize its shape. The glimpse he had caught was too brief to see more than a flitting extremity. Yet he was certain of one fact: it was not a human hand.

He felt as if scales had dropped from his eyes. Now he knew what purpose the extensive preparations served which the ISC performed on the innocent candidates who came to them for a long sleep. It was not meant to prepare the bodies of the poor victims for a prolonged hibernation. The reason was quite different. It was a method for obtaining the exact measurements and contours of their figures and facial features, enabling the criminals to duplicate a bioplastic skin in authentic details which was then used to conceal the bodies of those kept in the containers.

The dupes who had signed the contracts were instead transported to an unknown destination by the use of the strange transmitter.

There was not a single human being sleeping in the chambers!

But who were the creatures the ISC had secluded in its caves? Mutants? The result of a reprehensible experiment?

Where did they send the people through the transmitters? What goal did Cavanaugh and his accomplices pursue with their despicable machinations? How could he dare such a crime in the heart of the Solar Imperium?

The lonely man clinging to the metal cover of the tank could find no answers to his questions. However there was one thing he could discover easily: what really was inside the chamber! All he had to do was to relent his grip and move a little.

He wished that Snyder were present for his elucidation. Somewhere in Wyoming a number of men—and a girl—were on their way to rescue him but they would come too late.

Kennof felt tired and weak. His clothes dried on his body after he had suffered bad chills. But his mind functioned with remarkable perfection and his fear had given way to a certain resignation.

The thing underneath him struggled with undiminished tenacity for freedom. The cover was lifted again and Kennof braced his feet against a pipe socket to hold it down. There was only a thin metal plate

between him and his adversary, and it began to slant up irresistibly.

Then the hand appeared for the second time. With utter fascination and without doing anything to hinder it Kennof observed it groping for a hold a few centimetres before his face. He discerned the fingers of an alien being. The dark brown, almost black skin was laced with a net of fine lines.

A violent jolt hurled the detective back. He was abruptly diverted from the sight that had absorbed his interest. Losing his grip he had to relinquish the lid and the round disk was swept away. It rolled over the container and clanked to the ground.

Kennof hastily retreated from the open hole and clutched Dr. Le Boeuf's pistol. He heard gurgling and splashing sounds and the cell-plasma sloshed over the top. His feet were spattered with yellow squirts of the bloody mess.

Then the second hand appeared! It was still wet and it left a moist trail of fingerprints as it moved along the edge of the opening.

Kennof stood with widened eyes and drawn gun about three meters from the aperture. The unknown creature still seemed to hesitate and Kennof was sorely tempted to beat a retreat. Even Clinkskate's abhorrent voice would have been a relief for the agent, had he called him through the loudspeaker.

Kennof uttered an uncontrolled scream! The head of the alien being had emerged. Remnants of the bioplastic mask clung to its face. It was the most fearsome sight Kennof had seen in his life. The tattered remains of the parody of a human face. The moustache was almost completely intact; it was dripping wet and it stuck like a fat worm to the face of the creature.

The body of the monster began to rise from the hole on its stubborn quest for freedom.

The terrible truth struck Kennof like a bombshell. The sudden realization was so incredible and gruesome that it threatened to overpower him. Nevertheless he succeeded in rallying a new determination in himself. He emptied his gun and without waiting to observe the effect he scrambled down the ladder in such haste that he almost tumbled to the ground.

Now Clinkskate spoke up again but his voice sounded almost fearful: "Who were you shooting at, Kennof?"

Kennof ran toward the airshaft. "At a young, half-grown specimen of a race to whom you and the ISC have betrayed mankind," he yelled furiously.

"To a Druuf!"

10/ CIRCLE OF FIRE

"Now he's got the goods on us," Clinkskate reflected with consternation.

He cursed the dalliance of his men and decided to stamp out the menace personified in Kennof at once.

His injured shoulder hurt badly and he leaned his good arm against the back of the couch.

Was it possible that the plan Cavanaugh and his friends from another world had hatched was shot through with unforeseen pitfalls? Clinkskate feverishly recapitulated the short history of the conspiracy in his mind.

In a certain sense the plane of the Druufs was practically next door to Earth during the period of an overlap. At the time when Terra had begun to use the new transmitters to supply its spacefleet base on the Moon with hardware and raw materials the Druufs happened to determine an overlap zone which was characteristic for the permanent flux of their space-continuum. The descendants of insects contemplated the possibilities of turning the work of the transmitters to their own advantage. They regarded it as a good chance to learn the position of Terra and to encroach on the third planet of the Solar System.

However they were frustrated in their efforts until their chances were boosted by a lucky accident. One of the Druufs came unexpectedly under the influence of a Terra-transmitter while he was in the process of transporting himself through a transmitter of their own and instead of the Druuf arriving at his desired destination a sack of beans were dumped into the receiver station. For an instant, an intersection of a five-dimensional plane had occurred which was triggered by the simultaneous operation of the transmitters. As the Druufs still puzzled over the beans, a lucky break worked once more in their favour. The Druuf who had landed on the Moon in place of the beans was not discovered at the moment of his appearance. A delay in the transmitter controls saved his life. The transmitter technicians of the Druufs had the presence of mind to cast the sack of beans back before the five-dimensional track was erased. The beans were returned to their proper place and their mass compensated for the perplexed Druuf who was retrieved from the Moon before he could be discovered by human eyes.

The subsequent calculations of the Druuf scientists established that the probability for a second transition of this type was extremely small. Not only did the spread of the prevailing overlap zone play a role but it also depended on the place and time of the transmitter operations. In addition it was essential that the mass of the two bodies to be exchanged were approximately equal to guarantee such an ultra-dimensional reciprocation of energy.

Clinkskate could not have visualized the frantic efforts the Druufs pursued when they became enticed by the hope of invading Terra. However all their experiments failed to accomplish by design what fate had thrown into their laps.

It was hardly feasible to send a Druuf spaceship to the Moon in order to persuade the battle-hardened veterans of the Solar Imperium that their transmitters should be operated only at certain prescribed times and with a predetermined size of the cargo. The Terrans would have been greatly amused by the naive antagonists and turned their ship into a small sun in an atomic bombardment.

The leaders of the insect race realized that their plot could only be carried out with human connivance. They would have to gain the collaboration of an influential person who could be won over by substantial pecuniary rewards. Consequently a robot ship was dispatched into the Einstein universe with all due precautions. Its task was concise but difficult to bring back a human being!

Eventually they garnered a man named Lewis Shirreffs whose sport it was to roam between the asteroids in a space-dinghy. Shirreffs was a space buff so enamoured of travelling to the stars that he spent his not inconsiderable fortune for a tiny spaceship although it was illegal to venture into outer space without the government's permission. However before he could be apprehended by the Solar Spacefleet he was captured by the robot ship of the Druufs. A few officials on Mars were arrested because they had

condoned the unlawful action of Shirreffs and a police ship was sent out to scour the expanse of space in order to nab the violator. Unfortunately the search was in vain. Shirreffs had vanished but nobody attached much significance to his disappearance since it had to be assumed that Shirreffs' vessel had been sucked into the gravitation of Jupiter. Eventually the search was abandoned and the whole story was soon forgotten.

Shirreffs didn't prove to be the right man to do the dirty work for the Druufs. However after the Druufs had brainwashed him he was ready to lead them to a willing tool: Owen Cavanaugh.

Nobody among the colonists on Mars would have bet a Solar on the return of Shirreffs when his tiny ship appeared in the sky of their planet again. The public opinion that celebrated the wayward Shirreffs like a hero prevented his imprisonment as punishment for unlicensed space travel and the judge treated him very mildly as the vagabond seemed to act rather irresponsibly and slightly confused.

Lewis Shirreffs was let off with a fine and two weeks later he looked up Cavanaugh. The unscrupulous businessman lost no time in hiring a bunch of people on whom he could rely to do anything to get rich and powerful quickly.

The rest was easy as pie compared to the initial endeavours of the Druufs. Cavanaugh acquired the caves near Yellowstone National Park and established the Intertime Sleeping Corporation under a charter of the Interior Department. The direct methods Cavanaugh used saved the Druufs a lot of time before the overlap zone drifted away again. Without practicing a great deal of secretiveness Cavanaugh converted the caves to his purposes with the aid of his accomplices.

It was rather paradoxical that the fact of Cavanaugh performing in the light of public scrutiny gave him more security than clandestine operations could have achieved for him. After the Druuf transmitter had been installed and the first sleepers arrived, everything else followed almost by routine.

The Druufs killed two birds with one stone. Firstly, they were in a position to prepare the invasion of Earth under the veil of secrecy and, secondly, they were able to keep the organic substance of their universe constant by receiving a human being for every Druuf they exported to the other plane. The latter fact was also an indispensable requisite because the Druufs could be transported via the transmitter only when simultaneously a living human being was exchanged in their place. This mutual exchange of energy and transport of mass guaranteed the smooth execution of their planned invasion.

There was only one problem for the Druufs and Cavanaugh's gang—what to do with the infiltrators—and it was Clinkskate who hit upon the solution. A young individual of the alien race had approximately the same dimensions as an adult human being. Once he was covered with bioplastic material and submerged in the nutrient liquid he could not be differentiated from a Terran.

The ISC could use the time the Druufs spent in their containers to build secret accommodations deeper inside the rocks so that they could be transferred before they reached their full-grown size. His place in the container would be taken by a bioplastic figure that resembled the human sleeper so perfectly as to fool the inspectors of the Interior Department when viewed through the windows.

The hibernation candidates who had made the mistake of trusting the ISC were now in the hands of the Druufs who had reported to the ISC that the traded individuals had survived the transition. More than 2000 applicants had already fallen into the trap of the ISC and an equal number of Druufs was hidden in the containers.

No. Clinkskate thought grimly. Two less!

Kennof had not yet been seized and in the meantime he had shot one of the extraterrestrial creatures.

A sudden noise interrupted the train of his thoughts. St. Cloud and Tober rushed in. "Four copters are circling over the landing field," St. Cloud shouted. "It seems they want to land."

"Maybe they came to take pictures for a TV show," Tober added with a silly laugh.

Clinkskate jumped up and pushed them aside. He left his private office with St. Cloud and Tober following on his heels. When they came outside they saw that half the employees of the ISC had congregated to watch the four big helicopters circling in the air.

Clinkskate became terribly alarmed and forgot all about his aching shoulder. "Stefan!" he ordered one of the men standing around. "Take two men and clean up the sleeping cave at once. That crazy Kennof has shot one of our friends. The body must be removed immediately. Who knows who's coming to visit us now!"

Stefan, a big man with blond unkempt hair and a crooked nose, grumbled: "You forget that Kennof has a bomb!"

Clinkskate's seamed face became a pitiless mask. "If these copters came to make a surprise inspection you'll soon find out who's more dangerous, they or Kennof," he retorted in an icy tone.

Tober shielded his eyes with his hand so he could look against the low sun. "They're getting ready to land," he called above the din.

"Get going, Stefan!" Clinkskate shouted angrily and waited till Stefan had picked two other men. "St. Cloud," he continued, "come with me to the landing field to meet the callers. I expect everything will be back in order again in the meantime so it'll look normal around here."

The assembled group ran off in different directions.

"Let's go, St. Cloud," Clinkskate said, setting his jaw.

"Who could it be?" St. Cloud asked dubiously.

"It won't be anybody to bring us much joy," Clinkskate surmised.

They reached the forest and walked along the path to the landing field. Clinkskate was also assailed by doubts like his companion. The arrival of the four machines worried him. Yet it was possible that they would turn out to be harmless. Perhaps it was a surveyor team. They frequently passed through this neck of the woods in the mountains. Or some park rangers who were sent out to shoot a bear that caused trouble to the visitors of the park. One guess was as good as another.

After they had walked half the distance a group of people came into view and Clinkskate counted 11 men and one girl. They carried some unfamiliar equipment and were armed.

Clinkskate swallowed hard and forced himself to go on. St. Cloud made a growling noise like a cornered animal. Clinkskate raised his good arm and waved to the approaching group in a friendly manner although he wondered whether he had ever seen as sinister looking a group as he confronted. To his surprise he heard himself say very calmly: "This is private property." His voice sounded polite but firm.

"May I ask what business you have here?"

A tall, almost melancholy-looking man stepped forward, causing St. Cloud to flinch a little. "I'm Shane Hardiston," the man said.

He had a weapon strapped to his hip of a type Clinkskate had never seen before and he carried a canister on his back.

Clinkskate told him his name. "I'm a director of the Intertime Sleeping Corporation," he announced. "This area is reserved for our conservation caves and unauthorized persons cannot be admitted."

Hardiston pulled something out of his pocket and showed it to him. St. Cloud, looking over Clinkskate's shoulder, gasped nervously.

Clinkskate moistened his lips and said hesitantly with a wan smile: "Solar Defence? Why do you give us the honour of your visit?"

The agent looked past him as if he expected someone else to show up on the path behind him at any moment. "We're looking for a man," Hardiston finally informed him. "His name is Richard Kennof."

Clinkskate pretended to search his memory. "Are you referring to one of our clients?" he inquired. "I believe I remember a man by that name." He turned to St. Cloud. "Does the name sound familiar to you, David?"

"I don't know," St. Cloud stammered. "I mean..."

"Your presence seems to baffle poor David a little bit," Clinkskate commented with faked indulgence as St. Cloud's eyes reflected naked fear. *I'd like to give that scarb (miserable wretch) a kick in the pants*, Clinkskate burned up inside. *Why doesn't he pull himself together?*

Inviting Hardiston with a gesture he said with great restraint, "Please come to my office where we can check our records and clear this up at once." Then he added in a confidential tone: "Is Richard Kennof wanted as a criminal who is trying to use the ISC to escape justice for breaking the law?"

"He's a police officer," Hardiston explained curtly, motioning his entourage to follow him.

"What's that strange equipment they're carrying?" St. Cloud whispered anxiously.

"Shut up, you fool!" Clinkskate rebuffed him sternly.

The sunlight broke through the dense leaves and cast fleeting shadows on the faces of the men walking under the trees and stirring up wilted leaves which sailed for a short time through the air before they settled down again on the ground. Now and then the equipment dangling from the agents made clattering noises.

Clinkskate slyly studied the rugged faces of the men and decided that he could expect no mercy from his escort once they got to the bottom of their secrets in the caves.

And they were bound to find out! Clinkskate was forced to the conclusion that there was no way out except to fight and flee and he began to form a plan in his mind.

When they emerged from the forest Clinkskate saw Tober standing on the courtyard before the caves. Tober watched him with a mixture of apprehension and curiosity. Clinkskate endeavoured to remain in the lead of the group.

Only the entrance to the office suites was open and Clinkskate said in a friendly tone: "This way, please!"

"If this is a trap you won't have much time to enjoy it," Hardiston stated coolly.

Clinkskate looked at him uncomprehendingly and inquired with an offended mien: "What do you mean to say by this?"

Before he finished talking he grabbed St. Cloud and pushed him hard against Hardington. The two men collided and Clinkskate saw the agent reach for his weapon. However before Hardiston was able to disentangle himself, Clinkskate managed to shut the heavy doors. He sprinted down the corridor and ran into some employees of the ISC. "Get back!" he yelled. "The police are out there."

His arm slipped from the sling Piotrowski had made for him. His wound had apparently burst open again when he hurled St. Cloud toward Hardiston. "Everybody to the transmitter station!" he shouted. "Block the passageway and release the gas!"

He was instantly surrounded by fleeing and sweating men who besieged him with questions, "Distribute the weapons and make sure to set the booby traps. They are only 11 men out there."

The office of the administration was deserted in less than a minute. A powerful explosion deafened Clinkskate's ears. The earth shook and rocks rained from the walls. Some of the men were stunned.

"Keep going!" Clinkskate drove them on. "They're trying to blast the door open. We must be out of here before they can break it down."

He could smell some smoke. A fire must have broken out somewhere. He wondered about the fate of Stefan and the two men whom he had sent to subdue Kennof. Where were they?

Clinkskate's eyes began to weep and coughing men were milling in the haze. Clinkskate ordered them vigorously: "We've got to get through. Bring a wet cloth for each of us!"

His next words were drowned out by another explosion. The shockwave rolled through the corridor and sucked the air out their lungs. He struggled hard to keep a clear mind. Presumably the agents had broken the door and prepared to penetrate the subterranean corridors with great caution, not knowing where they might encounter resistance.

Somebody pressed a moist cloth into Clinkskate's hand. He held it against his face and rushed forward through the dense fumes.

* * * *

Pandemonium had broken loose around Kennof. He crawled along the floor as flames engulfed the other side of the room. About an hour before three men had appeared with the intention of hunting him down.

He was able to plug one of them with the last bullet from Piotrowski's gun. When the other two returned his fire they hit a machine behind Kennof, causing a shower of blue sparks to shoot through the air and start an instant fire. In the ensuing confusion the detective managed to get away again. His two pursuers were probably hiding behind the curtain of flames. He figured that, for the time being, they were too occupied with their own safety to bother with him but he realized that he had to act quickly if he wanted to save his life.

After climbing out of the airshaft he had sneaked into the cave serving the preparations for the conservation where the enormous generators were located and where he expected to have an opportunity to sabotage at least *some* operations of the ISC. Unfortunately the interference of the three guards had spoiled his plan. Although Kennof had heard the two explosions he was unable to figure out what had happened and he was puzzled why nobody came to put out the fire.

The detective kept crawling and coughing. Out of the dense cloud of smoke, ashes and fire a burned-out object crashed to the ground, barely missing him. Suddenly a man loomed out of the flames with scorched clothes, holding a gun in his hand. Kennof rolled himself against his legs and caused him to topple on top of him. With a loud groan Kennof threw him off and pounced on him, aided by the flickering light of a burning piece of wood.

A rasping voice was heard not far away: "Is that you, Stefan?"

"Quick, over here!" the man lying under Kennof screamed.

With sudden clarity Kennof saw a second man standing over him. He felt a sharp sting in his side and the room began to whirl around the detective. He fell on his back. Half-dazed he noticed the man crawl away from him and heard a voice call out: "He won't bother us anymore. Let's get out of here!"

The Druufs! Kennof thought with waning strength. *I've got to leave Shane a message.*

Then the blistering fire closed in around him...

* * * *

Hardiston clamped his powerful fists around a warped iron brace and bent it out of the way. "Celia and Zekizawa remain here," he decided. "The others follow me into the cave. Payne, take over the detector. Don't forget that they might spring a trap on us."

He scrambled over the demolished door and nimbly jumped across a deep hole. "Shoot only if it's necessary," Hardiston instructed his men. "We don't want to hit any innocent victims. Keep your gasmasks ready in case they use gas. Maliverney, keep checking the atmospheric pressure at all times. Lohnert and Adams, accompany me!"

He waited till the two agents had joined him. Celia saw Hardiston's tall figure standing in the jagged entrance for a moment before he ducked into the dark corridor, followed by the others.

* * * *

Clinkskate's head seemed to spin. His pain-wracked body knew only one goal: the transmitter station.

"All our installations are on fire!" somebody shouted behind him.

Clinkskate was convinced that the fire meant the end of the Druufs. The descendants of insects were still too young and helpless to save themselves from the inferno without assistance. The life-sustaining pipes to the incubators were already severed and the liquid nutrient would ooze away in the soil of the cave while the oxygen supply system would spew out suffocating fumes instead of breathable air.

A man tugged at his sleeve. "We can't get through!" he shouted.

Clinkskate recognized Eberhard's twisted face. He probably didn't look any better himself, he thought. "We must reach the transmitter!" he exclaimed. "It's our only chance to leave this place alive!"

"The flames are everywhere!" Eberhardt yelled in desperation. "The fire extinguishers are out of reach. We should've put up more of them."

Clinkskate kicked a burning piece of plastic out of the way. "Do you really believe it would have helped us?" he scoffed.

He spotted a gap between two machines where the holocaust had as yet failed to spread. He squeezed his tortured body past a gearbox. The odour of the sizzling oil accentuated the stench of the smoke. His injured arm dangled at his side almost paralysed. He crept forward. A man screamed when he was hit by a falling white-hot part. Clinkskate wished that not all his men would come through the conflagration. If the transmitter still functioned, only a few of them would be lucky enough to make use of it.

Clinkskate stumbled over a boy lying crumpled on the floor. The clothes of the man were so badly burned that he was unable to tell who he was. Eberhardt came closer and they bent over the body.

"Turn him over," Clinkskate said and Eberhardt rolled the man on his back.

It was Stefan and he was still breathing. Clinkskate shook him up and Stefan opened his eyes.

"What did you do with Kennof?" Clinkskate asked, drawing a weak reaction from the half-unconscious man. "Did you finish him off?"

Stefan opened his mouth to say something but his vocal chords refused to respond. Clinkskate kept shaking him mercilessly. "Speak up, man!" he shouted.

"Leave him alone," Eberhardt said, disgusted. "Let's hurry or we'll be too late."

Clinkskate got up. Blue flames began to lick the machines and the paint started to blister.

"Look out!" he warned with outstretched arms. The way to the transmitter station was blocked by flames. To go on meant certain death.

"We're caught in a circle of fire," Clinkskate moaned wearily when he realized that they were

surrounded by a burning hell.

* * * *

Notwithstanding their extreme caution they became snared in the first of the obstacles.

Maliverney, who walked at the head of the column, suddenly cried out and began to totter. Hardiston seized him quickly. The metallic objects Maliverney carried glistened with a phosphorescent shine. Without a moment's delay Hardiston tore the agent's outfit from his body. Where the metal had been in direct contact with his skin, it had left severe burns.

"There must be a contact release somewhere in the wall," Hardiston said grimly. "They probably have built in a detector which can register metal in this zone and triggers the emission of rays that make the metal glow with heat."

Maliverney grimaced in pain as he whispered, "Pounds was lucky that he wasn't in my place with his three gold teeth."

Pounds winced and the men forced themselves to smile.

"If we can't find the device to destroy it, we have only one possibility left," Shane declared, "we must pass it without our weapons and other vulnerable equipment."

"What do you want us to do?" Adams asked apprehensively.

"This!" Hardiston drew his weapon and sprayed the rocky sidewalls. The others followed his example.

"I hope we can at least smash the detector," Lohnert said optimistically.

Shorty Fecher pulled a small steel shovel out of his pack and threw it in the direction of the forbidding barrier which had almost claimed a victim despite its invisibility. Nothing happened!

"We did it!" Adams exclaimed with satisfaction and continued on his way.

"Pounds, stay with Maliverney and try to take him back to Celia. She'll take care of him. Adams will carry your equipment," Hardiston instructed the men.

Adams came back again to take over the additional load.

"How is it possible that the ISC can build such sophisticated installations?" Fecher wondered.

Hardiston motioned him to move on. But after they had advanced a short distance they were blocked again by a massive metallic curtain.

"Here we go again," Lohnert muttered, putting down his detonator and starting to unwind some cables.

"Stop it!" Hardiston ordered. "I'm afraid that half the mountain will cave in on us when we blow it up."

There must be a better way."

"How about blasting a tunnel in the wall around it?" Adams suggested.

"That wouldn't be much better either." Hardiston opposed the idea. "We would have to work with such small explosive charges that it would take us much too long to get back into this corridor on the other side."

Fecher knocked his shovel against the metallic wall. Lohnert listened to the thumping sounds, trying to estimate the thickness. "I'd guess it's about 5 centimetres," he finally said.

"We'll burn a hole with a cutting torch," Hardiston decided. "It's the only way to get through without taking a risk."

"This obstruction isn't made out of tin," observed Benson, a taciturn man with small black eyes and a cowlick.

"The oxygen bottle," Hardiston demanded. "Connect the torch, Adams."

"I wish I had a thermo-nuclear burner," Lohnert sighed.

"This will have to do." Hardiston slipped a hose over the torch and fastened it with a clamp. "And now the acetylene gas."

He lit the gas mixture and adjusted the conical flame whose tip exceeded a temperature of 16000°C. Hardiston melted the metal with the cutter and suddenly the flames blew back toward him. "It's hopeless," the agent conceded in resignation. "The wall consists of several layers with tiny spaces between them, a condition which makes it extremely difficult to penetrate it in a reasonable time. We can't wait that long."

He turned off the gas and the flame blew out with a faint pop as the men watched him in silence.

"What next?" Fecher inquired.

"The barricade extends a little into the sidewall," Lohnert remarked.

"If we can't think of something better in the next few minutes, we'll have to dynamite it anyway," Hardiston proposed.

The 7 men looked at him and their eyes reflected their determination to break through the barrier come what may.

11/ THE SUPREME SACRIFICE

Dr. Le Boeuf strained his ears in the dark. Something of decisive importance must have happened shortly before he regained consciousness.

He groped toward the door of the small room in which they had imprisoned him. To his amazement he found the door unlocked. With great circumspection he, ventured out into the corridor where it was dark as well. He paused for a moment to orient himself as the smell of fire entered his nostrils. He determined that he was close to the airshaft leading into the sleeping chamber.

He started to walk, holding his hands in front of him to avoid obstacles. He became dimly aware that the situation in the subterranean vault had been subjected to a change. Without a definite plan he tiptoed forward till he struck the edge of the man-sized opening of the shaft. He was about to enter it when he was struck by a different idea. He thought of the transmitter. If he were able to damage the transmitter he could inflict a devastating blow on the ISC and the Druufs since the traitors would have serious trouble erecting another transmitter.

However he could accomplish little with his bare hands. Then he remembered Clinkskate's warning words: "The transmitter may not be put in operation unless a corresponding mass is simultaneously disintegrated on the plane of the Druufs. Any violation of this regulation will cause a catastrophe."

Dr. Le Boeuf wondered what would happen if he operated the transmitter without the knowledge of the Druufs. Would his body disintegrate or would he vanish forever in a supra-dimensional world? The energy equilibrium which was automatically maintained between the Einstein universe and the Druuf plane suggested another solution: the five-dimensional space would hurl them back! The physician was not qualified to form a clear picture of the energies thus released. He knew only one thing: they would be sufficient to demolish the transmitter and a lot of other matter too.

Dr. Le Boeuf was sure to die in the execution of his plan but he would feel neither fear nor remorse. And so the frail man with the freckled skin hastened his steps in the darkness. He had become conscious of his responsibilities toward his race in the last hours of his life.

* * * *

Lohnert brushed a strand of hair from his forehead. Benson's face was covered with tiny beads of sweat. They had to switch on their own lamps because the light had suddenly failed. Intermittently the face of a man appeared in the cone of light.

"Time is running out," Shane Hardiston reminded them. His figure threw a huge shadow on the rock behind him.

Adams and Fecher turned their flashlights on Lohnert's electronic detonator. The agent tightened the last cable.

"Look over here!" Benson shouted, pointing his flashlight to the barrier which slowly began to slide up.

The men of the Special Solar Defence Corps gripped their weapons. A thick cloud seeped out under the partition and quickly billowed into the corridor.

"Gas!" Fecher bellowed, reaching for his gasmask.

Hardiston remained unruffled. He sniffed and shook his head. "It's burning in there." he said.

The partition came to a grinding halt only half a meter above the ground. More yellow fumes poured out.

"It got stuck," Thatcher observed, "but it opened the way for us."

At that moment the first of the ISC guards crawled out through the crack. Hardiston lowered his paralysers. The man was in no condition to think clearly although he held a knife in his hand. The greater part of his clothes were burned and exposed his seared skin.

"Give him a hand!" Hardiston instructed his men.

Adams and Lohnert carefully pulled out the injured man who moaned in pain. "There are more coming," he murmured. "They're afraid you'll shoot at them."

Hardiston put on his gasmask and knelt down at the crack. "Come on out and surrender!" he shouted into the swirling opaque vapour. "We won't shoot you."

He seized one of the figures and dragged the man over to his side. Soon they had captured almost 40 men all of whom had suffered more or less severe burns. One of them was Clinkskate.

"What happened to the sleeping people?" Hardiston's voice rose above the groaning of the prisoners. "Were they consumed in the fire?"

Clinkskate opened his red-singed lids. "Don't worry," he rasped. "There are no people left in there." His bandage was a grimy crust of blood, dirt and soot. He had reached the state of exhaustion where he no longer felt pain.

"What do you mean?" Hardiston urged him. "Where did you put the sleepers?"

"The sleepers are still there," Clinkskate explained apathetically, "but they aren't humans—they are Druufs. The people you're looking for are on a planet of the Druufs."

"He's, hallucinating," Fecher interjected.

"No, he's telling the truth," an ISC-man cowering on the floor next to his boss assured him. "You can see it yourself after the fire had died down. Of course the monsters won't be alive. The fire has incinerated all connections to the containers."

"What do you know about Richard Kennof?" Hardiston asked quickly.

"He got loose," was the answer. "I guess he's dead now."

Hardiston got up. "I need two volunteers to help me search for Dick," he announced calmly. "The others have to remain here to take care of the captives."

All his men stepped forward as one.

"Thatcher and Lohnert," Hardiston decided.

Putting on his gasmask again, Shane ordered: "Nobody else may follow me—now or later."

* * * *

Dr. Le Boeuf gripped the bar and pushed himself away. The transmitter station was set up as a completely independent unit from the other caves. It would have aroused unnecessary suspicions if any power lines had been laid to the main generators. An inquisitive official could have entertained the idea of following the connection and stumbled into the secret cave.

Dr. Le Boeuf didn't know how long it would take the transmitter to start functioning. Nor did he care particularly. He squatted down on the cold floor and waited. More than 2000 persons had already been here before him—against their will. And he had been an accomplice to the crime.

He smiled bravely. His act would restore his self-respect. It was all that mattered. Would he suffer pain?

Just before his end Dr. Le Boeuf caught a glimpse of eternity. He felt a fleeting breath of inspiration that lifted all the problems from his mind. The metamorphic action of the transmitter took effect. The atomic mass of the physician was transformed into a hyper-energetic impulse and flung into another space. Under normal circumstances he would have been caught in the influence sphere of the Druufs' transmitter. However the Druufs were not informed of his deadly intentions and thus Dr. Le Boeuf remained for a period of time whose duration could not be grasped by human concepts in a space that was ruled by its unique and mysterious laws.

Then he was hurled back! But it wasn't Dr. Le Boeuf who emerged from the transmitter. *It was untrammelled energy!*

* * * *

Celia Mortimer didn't take her eyes off the blasted entrance. Zekizawa who noticed her stare didn't say a word. He kept watch on St. Cloud and Tober who were involved in a heated argument. Pounds had taken Maliverney to the airport to let the injured man rest on a stretcher.

The sun had set behind the forest and a cool breeze swayed the treetops. An eagle spread his wings, circling high up in the air and searching for prey with sharp, far seeing eyes.

Suddenly the earth began to vibrate. A tremor shook the ground as if two mighty fists tried to tear the mountains apart. A rumbling thunder surged from the caves and the rocks became covered with a fine layer of dust. Huge boulders flew through the air as if they had no weight.

Celia saw Zekizawa open his mouth and call something but the noise was too great to understand him. The other, hitherto closed entrances to the caves, split open. The whole mountain seemed to be on the verge of collapsing.

Zekizawa threw himself to the ground and pulled Celia down with him.

It was over as suddenly as it had begun. Grey dust spilled out of the gaping holes. Celia cried softly.

Zekizawa overheard Tober saying to St. Cloud: "It can only have been the transmitter."

The man must have flipped his mind, mused the agent.

Moments later the first unrecognizable figures ran out of the caves.

"They survived!" Zekizawa exclaimed, rushing toward the men.

Celia saw Fecher, Hardiston and Benson emerging from the debris. Her heart stood still for a moment. Where was Dick?

Thatcher, who was apparently injured, was carried out by Lohnert. They were followed by a bunch of half-dead ISC men, tottering in utter exhaustion.

"Celia!" a hoarse voice cried out. A dust-covered, soot-smearred apparition raised a hand.

"Indestructible Dick is back," Zekizawa proclaimed.

His words spelled deliverance for Celia's anxiety.

Kennof shuffled toward her. Celia barely saw his tired eyes light up in a spontaneous spark.

"How's Buster?" he rasped.

Then he fell forward and would have struck the ground if Zekizawa hadn't caught him.

ORDER OF THE ACTION

[1/ EVIL SECRET OF THE ISC](#)

[2/ THE EARTH AT STAKE](#)

[3/ TOO HOT TO HANDLE](#)

4/ USELESS KNOWLEDGE

5/ CAUGHT!

6/ THE ISC UNVEILED

7/ DUEL OF WITS

8/ "I'LL RULE THE WORLD!"

9/ MANKIND BETRAYED

10/ CIRCLE OF FIRE

11/ THE SUPREME SACRIFICE

THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

THE SLEEPERS

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

THE INCREDIBLE had happened.

—Thus begins chapter 1, ‘The Message of the Century’, of the next episode of Perry Rhodan’s ‘diary’,

It continues:

In clear, uncoded text the unmistakable signature appeared on the tape.

Mute.

Cold.

Inanimate.

Yet possibly signifying a turning point in human history.

—And the beat goes on. ‘Cosmic Friend & Cosmic Foe 2,000 Druuf Ships..... The Most Critical Moment in the Entire History of the Human Race’... ‘When Mutants Enter the Ring..... The Battle for Terra’.

Peril from Pluto explodes, with 4,000 Springers involved, in—

THE COLUMBUS AFFAIR

by

K. H. Scheer