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SLAVES TO THE METAL HORDE

by MILTON
LESSER



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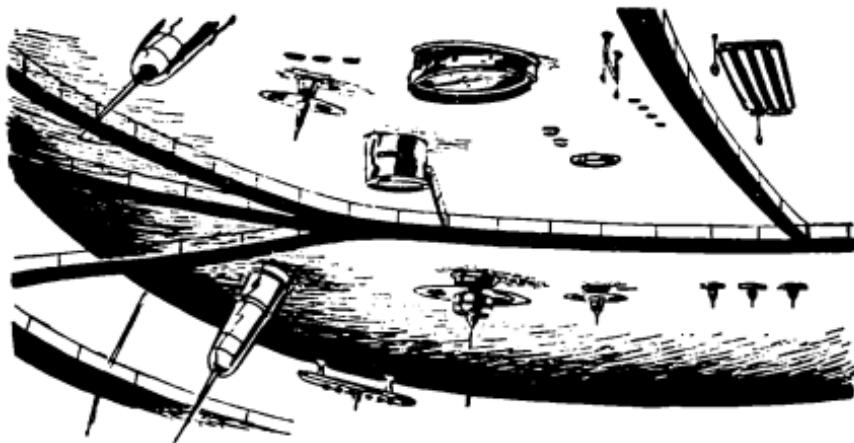
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Johnny Hope knew the robot armies had been created to serve Man. But war and a plague had destroyed civilization, leaving humans as —

Slaves To The Metal Horde

by

Milton Lesser

JOHNNY Hope backed off warily, retreating toward the sun-dried creek bed, a jagged brown scar across the parched grassland. He carried no weapon and as the others closed in about him in a tightening semi-circle his eyes darted furtively in all directions. But all the faces were stamped, as from a mold, with un-

compromising hostility.

Johnny licked his lips and said, "I want to bury them. Let me bury them and then I'll go. I promise."

DeReggio, the mayor, brandished his club—which was an old rifle stock with half the jagged, corroded barrel forming a handle. "Go," he said. He took a long stride toward Johnny, then changed



his mind when the youth held his ground. "They cannot be buried, Johnny Hope. You know your parents must be burned as the law dictates."

Blinking sweat from his eyes, Johnny felt the sun scorching down through the glaring midsummer heat-haze. "It was the last wish of my father," he said softly, his voice hardly more than a whisper. "That I should take them forth from the village and bury them with a prayer for their Christian souls."

"No!" DeReggio bellowed. He was a great-chested man with sloping shoulders and almost no neck. "We cannot deliver their bodies to you. We cannot let you come back into Hamilton Village and take them, for you comforted them in their last hours and are therefore a victim of the Plague yourself." He pointed with the rifle stock toward the far hills, purple with distance. "Go."

Johnny shook his head, planting his feet firmly, wiping sweat-dampened hands on the worn fabric of his denim trousers. Then he held his palms up and said, "Where? Where is the Plague?"

"You've been contaminated."

Nearly the entire village had gathered behind their mayor now, and the mutterings were angry. When Johnny began to walk to-

ward them, his hands outstretched to show no plague scars marked their skin, someone hurled a stone. Instinctively, Johnny hunched his shoulder and caught the missile on his collar bone. It jarred him and left an angry red mark where the capillaries had burst beneath the skin.

Staggering back toward the creek bed, Johnny was felled by a fusillade of stones. He crouched on all fours at the edge of the dry brown earth, head spinning, vision blurring with pain. He expected more stones to usher in the final blackness, but when he could again see clearly, DeReggio's muscle-corded legs straddled him and the mayor cried, "Enough! Let Johnny Hope depart with his life." It was a brave gesture DeReggio had made, approaching within inches of Johnny, whose parents had been slain by the Plague. But DeReggio and Johnny's father had been close friends all their lives and had fought together in the last days of World War III before the Plague brought warfare—and civilization to an abrupt halt.

Johnny forced himself upright on trembling legs. "I thank you for my life," he said, "but not for how you treat your dead companion-in-arms."

The color drained from DeReggio's olive-skinned face. "Think

what you will, Johnny. Think it but go while you still can. And remember that our first concern is with the living. The dead are beyond recall and the Plague victims can spread carnage in their wake. You know I loved your father like a brother, and your mother . . . ”

DeReggio and Johnny's dead mother were cousins, had been raised together under the same roof in the long-gone days before the War. Except for Johnny himself, the death of his parents could have disturbed no one more than DeReggio.

“All right,” said Johnny. “I'll go.” There was a loud sucking in of breaths—relief—from the crowd. “But first I have this to say. I have visited the old, ruined cities. I have seen Philadelphia on its river and once I went north as far as New York, the great stumps of its buildings coming right down to the water's edge on the island called Manhattan. I have seen these things and although I am young I tell you this: we will not return to our greatness unless we strike out boldly instead of sitting, huddled in fear, at the thought of the Plague.”

“It is what his father always said,” someone whispered from the edge of the crowd.

“The Robots will cure the Plague,” someone else, a woman,

declared.

Johnny laughed and had never heard such a sound before, from his lips or any others. “The Robots will cure nothing,” he said. “Has anyone here ever seen the Robots?”

The faltering wave of sound from the crowd was in the negative.

“I have seen them,” Johnny told his people, with whom he could no longer live. “My father wanted it that way. He sent me to the cities and to the mysterious places between the cities, the gleaming, white-surfaced roads which we use no longer, to see the Robots. And I tell you this: they will not cure the Plague. If anything they'll spread it.”

A HUSHED silence fell, like a pall, on the assembly. None of them had ever seen the Robots, but that was because it is not proper for a mortal to see a deity. “This was the truth my father could not tell you in his lifetime,” Johnny went on. “He knew you would have laughed and mocked—or worse. In his death I tell it to you for him. Along with his wish to be interred in the ground, it was his final thought.”

DeReggio did not look Johnny squarely in the eye. “I think you had better go, lad. You have no right to talk like that.”

Johnny shrugged, feeling the

weight of a knowledge and wisdom beyond his years. "I am twenty-three," he said. "I was an infant when the War ended. Yet my father could teach me certain things and other things I could see for myself because he taught me to be curious and take nothing for granted. You could learn the same. Someday, perhaps . . . "

"By the Robots!" DeReggio swore softly, hissing the words almost in Johnny's ears. "Go before you antagonize them. If they start throwing things again, I won't be able to save you."

Johnny turned his back and squared his shoulders in a gesture compounded as much of defiance as contempt. He told DeReggio, "At least do one thing for me."

"If I can."

"When they are burned, say a prayer. One of the old prayers, if you remember." Johnny did not wait for an answer. He set forth in long strides, his sandal-shod feet powdering the sun-baked ridges on the dry creek bed. He did not once look back over his shoulder, but now, with the people gone and his pride no longer a barrier, he sobbed softly, thinking of his parents who had died because they had to venture forth from Hamilton Village to learn some of the truths which were hidden from their people, and so had come down with the Plague. Hours la-

ter, as the sun sank toward the western horizon and the heat of the day became less intense, Johnny heard the distant baying of dogs as the village hounds picked up his spoor and followed it. As prescribed by law, Mayor DeReggio was making certain Johnny did not double back to Hamilton Village.

He was alone in a hostile world which, in twenty years, had seen civilization come tumbling down like a house of cards in a hurricane.

THAT night, he slept uneasily on the bare ground, the soft-footed padding of foraging animals all around him under the dark moonless sky. He awoke with a tremendous hunger and a parching thirst. The latter he slaked in a swift-gushing stream which flowed clean and cool even in the heat of midsummer. Presently he came upon a huge black hawk, its pinions flapping, its talons sunk into the flesh of a dead cottontail rabbit as it prepared to fly off. Johnny waved his arms and shouted, frightening the bird of prey which rose without its breakfast, circled uncertainly, and then wheeled off to the east, a soaring black ghost graceful as a feather.

Johnny built a fire with brush and dry twigs and ate his meal in silence, feeling like a scavenger.

He drank again from the stream and began to fashion himself a spear by uprooting a sapling and ripping off its branches and rubbing its tapering top to a fine point on the edge of a small flat boulder. He hardened the point in the embers of his dying fire, hefted the makeshift weapon experimentally, and headed north in the general direction of New York.

Two days later the joints of his knees and elbows began to stiffen. It came upon him slowly and he thought it was from too much walking and not enough food, but when the stiffness spread to ankles, wrist and neck and giddiness struck him suddenly, he began to suspect the Plague.

It was early afternoon and he sat down at the base of a thick-trunked oak tree, propping himself against the bole. He hurled his useless spear away and wondered how long it would take before he sank into the final coma and death. He ran swollen fingers across his knees and realized they had puffed to twice their normal size. He could now feel nothing from his knees down, and it was an effort to move his hands. A faint purple color suffused his limbs and any doubt he may have harbored about the Plague vanished.

DeReggio was right. Johnny tried to rise and failed, rolling over helplessly to lie half in and

half out of the cooling shade shed by the oak. The chills rushed up from his feet, and engulfed him, followed at once by fever. By the time he began mumbling in delirium, the sun was going down in the west, casting long red cloud fingers into the darkening sky.

CHAPTER II

DIANE darted from the stream with a glad little cry, shaking the water from her long, tawny hair, the droplets of water sparkling on her bronzed skin like diamonds, the long, lithe lines of her body clothed only in the moisture until she found her buckskin shorts and halter and dressed. Life was comparatively simple and uncomplicated among the Shining Ones, and she, of all their encampment, remembered no other way. The others might look back with bitter longing or curse softly and futilely at the silver patches of skin at elbow and knee which marked them as survivors of the Plague, but not Diane.

So what if they were shunned by others, by the non-afflicted people who clung so doggedly to their mean existence in the small villages? She had but to hunt and fish and evade the bands of roving Robots lest they conscript her in their services. The only other bane in her life was Harry Starbuck and she could take care of herself

where he was concerned. She could . . .

Something stirred in the undergrowth to her left and Diane could barely make out the flash of skin which said it was a man and not an animal. She finished fastening her halter as if she had seen or heard nothing, then abruptly picked up her hunting knife and said, "I hear you in there. I'll count three and then come in after you."

She did not have to count. The bushes parted and Harry Starbuck emerged, his skin scratched by brambles, his boyish face ridiculously out of place atop an over-muscled body, his knees and elbows covered by buckskin guards, an affectation common among the Shining Ones but which Diane had always thought as silly as wearing eye patches because you did not like the color of your eyes.

"You were watching me," Diane said angrily. "I warned you before, Harry."

"There's no law," he boomed sullenly, his deep voice belonging to the over-developed body and not the boyish face. "I can go where I want to."

Diane slapped the flat of her knife against her palm slowly. "Someday, she predicted, "this blade is going to feast on Starbuck. I mean that."

Starbuck roared his laughter. "Then I'll be careful," he prom-

ised. "But meanwhile, you realize you can't marry anyone but a Shining One, and who of our people suits you more than . . ."

"None of them suit me."

"You're young. You have no family, no close friends to protect you. I should take you . . ."

Diane shrugged, then regretted it as Starbuck's small eyes feasted hungrily on the smooth play of muscle beneath the taut, bronzed skin. "Then go ahead, Harry. But you won't sleep nights, because I'll be waiting and if you do sleep you can forget all about waking up. I mean that, too."

Starbuck was still laughing. "I've half a mind to turn you over to the Robots and let them tame you a little before I claim what I want."

Diane let her voice do the shrugging. "You can always try."

"Must we always argue?" Starbuck demanded abruptly, petulance drawing down the corners of his lips. "I don't want to fight with you. I want to . . ."

"I know what you want. You can forget it. I'm going to take a walk and maybe do some hunting. If you'll excuse me."

"With a knife."

"I'm not hunting for wild horses."

"I think I'll go with you."

Diane scowled at him, then girded her knife. "As you wish, but

be quiet."

Grinning, Starbuck shortened his strides and matched her pace as she cut away from the stream and the undergrowth and headed toward the foothills of the Pocono Mountains in the distance, where plump, juicy rabbits hid behind every blade of grass.

THEY walked in silence, the man's steps ponderous, the girl's so quick and lithe her bare feet hardly seemed to touch the ground. In an hour they had reached another stream, wider than the first and running deep with swift, cool water. Diane immediately dived in and swam, then continued walking on the other side while Starbuck carefully searched out a ford and splashed across with the water up to his waist. By the time he overtook Diane she was crouching, sitting on her bare heels, the line of her back, damp under the buckskins, a long, graceful curve.

"Take a look at this," she said, and pointed.

Starbuck looked and saw the remains of a camp fire at her feet. "Warm?" he asked.

Diane shook her head. "But not completely cold. Several hours old. Probably made this morning. Probably there's someone nearby."

"So what?"

"So if he's alone he's probably a Shining One and . . ."

"We have enough people in our camp now."

"You always think competitively, Harry. One more man won't hurt your position in our tribe."

"Well, if he's young and if he . . . well, if you . . ."

"I'm not promised to you or anyone, and don't forget that. Besides, it doesn't have a thing to do with this." Diane peered expertly at the ground and soon picked up the stranger's spoor where he had come out of the stream himself—probably after bathing—and started out on his day's journey.

"Come on," she said and Starbuck could either forgo her company or follow her.

He followed.

The spoor became erratic. It wandered in circles, doubled back on itself, seemed either headed for no goal or incapable of reaching one. "He must have been hurt somehow," Diane mused. "He can't be very far."

"What are you so curious about?"

"Curious? I don't know. I'm just interested. I—Hello! Up there."

Diane sprinted up a short rise, leaving a surprised Starbuck pounding along several paces behind her. She found the man lying, face down near a large oak tree. Although it was comparatively cool, his body was drenched

with perspiration. Diane shook her head sadly at the swollen joints and purple discolorations.

"They say it's a terrible thing," she told Starbuck as he panted up. "I don't remember; I was a baby."

Starbuck shuddered. "I remember. Watch out, don't go near him."

"What's the matter with you? We're immune."

Starbuck nodded morosely. "Yes. Immune. But he'll die anyway, so why don't we . . ."

"Why don't we take him back with us, that's what. Don't kid me, Harry Starbuck. You're acting sympathetic only because you think I'll like that. Well, I happen to feel sorry for this man. I think we'll feel better if we help him."

"Help him? He's as good as dead."

"Are you dead? You had the Plague. Am I?"

"No, but maybe one out of a hundred live. That isn't much of a chance for him."

"It's a chance, though. Here, carry him."

"What? Who, me? Now listen, Diane . . ."

Maybe a moon-struck Starbuck had his advantages. "Suit yourself, but don't expect me to speak to you again, ever."

Starbuck considered this, then mumbled something under his breath which Diane could not

hear. "All right," he said finally. "But I'm telling you it's a waste of time."

"I'll be the judge of that."

STILL grumbling, Starbuck picked the man up by one arm and one leg, staggered until he balanced his burden across one shoulder, then started back down toward the stream.

"That's right," said Diane. "We could reach camp in a few hours if we hurry."

"He'll never live through the day," said Starbuck. "I only had the Plague a few years ago. I lived in the villages, so I know. He'll never live through the day."

"Just keep walking. If he dies, we can bury him."

By the time they reached the stream again, Starbuck was covered with sweat. He forded the water carefully, Diane behind him to keep the stricken man's head above water. Despite its fever-flush, she liked the man's face. He was young, not much older than Diane herself, with dark hair and regular features, neither too boyish like Starbuck's, nor too craggy like most of the older men she knew.

Occasionally the man would mutter something unintelligible, and when they got to the other side of the stream he opened his eyes, stared at Diane without seeing her

and said in a croaking whisper, "Water."

They stopped. Starbuck dropped his burden thankfully. "I can't carry him all the way back," he said.

"Then don't. Go ahead. I'll stay here." Diane cupped some water in her hand, trickled it between the dry lips. She was not even aware of Starbuck when he left.

She made a bed of leaves for the man's head and studied him. The denim trousers suggested village life, but she never suspected otherwise. The face still appealed to her, strong in appearance despite the fever, yet not overbearing. She hoped the youth would recover. "This is fantastic," Diane said aloud. "It may take days before he recovers . . . or dies." She thought of calling to Starbuck before he retreated beyond earshot, but her pride forbade that.

Shrugging and making herself as comfortable as she could, she bathed the man's flushed face with water.

DAY and night, the touch of the ground, the cool water which bathed him, the patient hands which kept the blood flowing through his swollen joints—all became as unreal to Johnny Hope as the shadowy remembrance of some half-forgotten nightmare. His lu-

cid moments were few: there was this person, face unseen but comforting; there was a little food and all the water he wanted; and there was the fever which came and departed, leaving an icy chill behind.

Once Johnny mumbled, "Go away. You'll catch it yourself." And there was laughter, soft-murmuring, feminine, he thought. Was the woman insane to expose herself so?

The fever retreated stubbornly, in no great hurry to depart. The lucid moments became more frequent and of longer duration. The girl was beautiful.

There came a time when Johnny sat up weakly, his back propped against the bole of a tree. The face smiled at him. He willed the toes of his left foot to move and watched them wiggle. He could just barely feel them.

With long, easy strokes, the girl massaged his legs. Acutely conscious of her now, Johnny was embarrassed. "I'm all right," he said. He struggled to sit up but as yet had no real control over his limbs.

The girl placed the flat of her palm against his chest and pushed gently, easing him back against the tree. "You stay still," she told him. "You'll be up and around in a day or so, but don't hurry things."

"I ought to thank you. You're crazy. Why did you expose yourself like this? Why . . . "

He watched her as she sat before him and drew her legs up, knees thrust up. He saw the slim bronzed line of her calves and the metallic silver of knees.

"A Shining One!" he cried, recoiling involuntarily. The Shining Ones had survived the Plague, but remained carriers of it for all their days.

The girl smiled at him. "As are you. You're a very lucky young man to live through this."

The silver coated his own knees, Johnny saw, and his elbows. It would take some adjustment. All his life he had been told to walk in fear of the Shining Ones, who often swept down on the villages, forcing the townsfolk to flee or face the Plague, and taking what they wanted of the stores of food and supplies.

"I see you're a little afraid of yourself. It's common enough. I was lucky to have the Plague as an infant. I remember no other life, you see. When you're well and strong enough to walk, I'll take you back to our encampment."

"I don't know," Johnny said doubtfully.

"Just be patient with yourself. Adjustment will come."

"All my life they said the Shining Ones were monsters. When I

was a little boy I had to be good because my mother said otherwise the Shining Ones would come and get me, carrying me off to kill me with the Plague."

"You've had the Plague yourself. You've got to remember that. Besides," the girl laughed easily, "you're a big boy now to believe in bogey men."

"Well," Johnny continued stubbornly, "there are other things. The Shining Ones are scavengers. They don't work themselves or grow their own crops. Instead they invade the peaceful villages. Then the natives, my people, have to flee or become contaminated. The Shining Ones take all the loot they want."

"Some of us. I have been a Shining One all my life but have never taken part in such a raid. We do not grow crops because we are not an agricultural people. We are nomadic and hunters."

"Why?" -

"The Robots," the girl told him. "Some of our people join them voluntarily, many others are forced into bondage. If we don't keep on the move, they'll find us. Agriculture is an impossible art when your encampment is always on the move."

It gave Johnny food for thought, and something of the girl's own frankness made him do his thinking aloud. "If I remain alone, I'll

be a hermit. I've seen the hermit Shining Ones wandering through the hills, alone and friendless, wild men. If I go with you, I become almost an enemy of my own people."

"They are no longer your people. You must realize that."

"And if I go with you, I can learn about the Robots and perhaps one day bring the truth back to my people. Tell me, do the Robots cure the Plague or spread it?"

"They spread it."

Johnny smiled grimly. "I will go with you."

TWO days and half a dozen good meals later, the girl helped him to his feet and nursed him along for his first few uncertain steps. But strength flowed back into his legs rapidly. He was walking without support by the time they reached the wide stream and saw the girl's nod of silent approval as he swam across it with her, matching swift stroke for stroke.

An hour went by and Johnny became amazed at the speed of his recovery. He almost wanted to return to Hamilton Village and shout, "See? I survived. I'm back." But he was a Shining One, a carrier, forever an exile from the people and the life he knew. And his own parents were dead, mute

testimony of the havoc he might wreak among his people if he returned to them.

They walked from the stream and shook the water from themselves and looked at each other, wet like that, and smiled. "I don't even know your name," said Johnny.

"It's Diane."

"I'm Johnny Hope. I want to —"

"Johnny! Get down!"

He stood there, surprised, staring foolishly. They were on a small rise of ground above the stream. The girl, who had fallen flat even as she hissed the command at him, was tugging at his legs. He dropped prone beside her, although he still failed to see the reason for her sudden alarm. She parted the undergrowth in front of them with her hands and said the one word, "Look."

Johnny had never seen the Robots this close before. For all their ungainly bulk they trod the ground softly, walking as he had always seen them at greater distances, in a long, single file column. They were huge antenna-topped creatures, their great cylindrical head sections bigger than a man and gleaming a polished silver-blue, their eyes, four of them evenly spaced around the cylinder a foot or so below the antenna, white and bulging, with neither pupil nor

lid, their limbs many-jointed and metallic, various tool-ends fastened securely instead of hands. The legs were attached to the small body, but one fifth the size of the head; the arms came from the head itself, just below the unblinking eyes.

"They must be twelve feet tall," Johnny whispered.

"Shh! Softly. We're close to our encampment and I don't want them to find us. They average twelve feet, Johnny."

JOHNNY would never forget the sight. Many times he had watched the robots parading in thin-lined silence down the long, silent roads which men no longer used, but now he could have almost reached out and touched them. The absolute quiet was unnerving. The Robots must have weighed close to a ton each but walked with the stillness of stalking jungle cats.

"Where are they going, Diane?"

"I don't know. Who understands the ways of Robots? Who can say . . ." Abruptly, Diane was still. Her eyes went big and wide but she wasn't watching the Robots.

Directly in front of her face and staring at her from unblinking eyes, its body half-coiled and dappled with the sunlight which filtered down through the foliage,

was a copperhead. The tongue darted out in a quick, blurring red streak, the head cleared the loose coils and swayed slightly from side to side.

"Don't move," Johnny barely formed the words with his lips and hoped Diane would retain her presence of mind and obey him. A sudden motion would set the snake to striking.

The file of robots paraded by just in front of them, an occasional joint creaking, metal skins polished to keen reflection. The copperhead was fully coiled now, head cocked flat and ugly and perfectly still. Johnny placed his hand on Diane's thigh and let it crawl upwards, as if of its own volition, with an agonizing lack of speed. Now his fingers had reached the edge of the buckskin shorts and now they climbed on the smooth pelt. He could feel Diane trembling faintly, the motion unseen but felt. And now his fingers climbed to the girdling belt, grasped the haft of the hunting knife, slowly withdrew it, tiny fraction of an inch at a time.

At last he had drawn the knife clear, easing it slowly toward his own body. He balanced it on his palm, trying to judge the weight. He would have only one chance, for the quick motion of his arm would make the copperhead strike if he missed.

Sweat rolled down his forehead and into his eyes, half blinding him. He cursed soundlessly, held his hand out flat, squinted, whipped it forward. A sigh escaped Diane's lips.

There was an angry thrashing as the copperhead uncoiled. But the blade had pinned it to the ground, piercing the body just below the flat head. Ignoring the column of Robots now, Johnny crawled forward swiftly, grasped the knife and drew it cleanly toward him. The head was severed from the body. The body thrashed furiously, then lay still in death. The Robots marched on, oblivious of the drama which had unfolded at their metal-clawed feet.

The last Robot glided by, the long line retreated into the woodland, vanished.

Diane stood up, still trembling. "It took me three days to save your life," she said. "You saved mine in seconds."

Johnny handed her the knife. "Let's find your people," he said.

CHAPTER III

IT was Harry Starbuck who met them when they emerged from a long, winding defile overgrown with vegetation. The defile opened into a depression, perhaps half a mile wide, surrounded on all sides by low hills, steep-sloped and

blue green with pine. Unless the Robots happened upon the almost hidden defile, Diane's Shining Ones could not have selected a better hiding place for their present encampment.

Starbuck greeted Diane with, "In this case you had more luck than brains. I see he has survived."

"He's one of us now."

When she said that, Johnny looked down at his silver knees self-consciously. In time, he hoped, he would grow accustomed to it. But right now he felt himself somehow between two worlds, divorced from his own people but not ready to accept the nomadic existence of the Shining Ones.

Starbuck grinned without humor. "Well, then he's in time to help us move, although I'm opposed to it."

"To what?" Diane demanded angrily. "To Johnny? That's just too bad."

"Will you let me finish? Not to Johnny, if that's his name. To the move. Keleher has decided we have to move because a band of Robots trooped through earlier today. Maybe you saw them."

"We certainly did," Diane informed him.

"Well, I don't like it. Every time the Robots pass we have to start all over. What's so bad about the Robots anyway? They never bother us, do they?"

"They conscript us, whether we

like it or not."

"Well, what of it? Rumor has it the conscriptees live like kings anyhow. We've got nothing to fear from the Robots."

"That's a matter of opinion, Harry."

At that moment, another man joined them. Johnny hardly had time to realize that he did not like the man named Harry. The newcomer was a big man, bigger than DeReggio, with huge shoulders almost three feet across and a long mane of graying hair almost reaching them. He wore a beard, spade-shaped and also gray, and covered his legs not with the expected buckskin but with khaki trousers he had probably stolen from one of the villages.

He greeted Diane briefly, then said, "Starbuck here told me how you were going to nurse a Plague victim back to health. Is this the man?"

Diane nodded and Keleher stuck out a powerful hand which Johnny pumped vigorously. "Glad to have you with us, son. In time you'll learn we're not the monsters you were led to believe all your life. But mark me—you owe your allegiance to us henceforth—provided you decide to stay." Johnny did not have to be introduced. Starbuck had mentioned a man named Keleher as their leader, and the newcomer spoke not with the blus-

ter and arrogance of a leader unsure of his position, but with the calm self-assurance of a respected and powerful chieftain. Keleher would make a first-rate friend but a terrible enemy.

"He'll stay," Diane spoke for Johnny. "He doesn't look like a hermit, does he?"

"Never can tell. Where are you from, son?"

"Hamilton Village."

Keleher's smile was wry, almost rueful. "Will you put in with us?"

"I guess so."

Keleher shrugged, then took Diane aside and whispered to her. After that the big man turned and walked away. Diane was quiet.

"What's the matter?" Johnny wanted to know. "Does he always smile like that?"

"No, Johnny."

"Then tell me."

"We're going to leave this area because of the Robots. Starbuck already told you that. We're going to travel light but we're still going to restock some of our supplies for the journey."

"I still don't see—"

"I don't know how to tell you this. The nearest village is Hamilton."

"So?"

"So we're going to raid it. We're going to raid your village, Johnny."

STARBUCK'S laughter carried through the entire encampment of conical tents, each flying its clan-standard from the central ridge pole.

Johnny wanted to hit the man, then realized he would be striking out at his own mixed up emotions. Diane was staring at him with genuine sympathy, but that hardly helped. She said, "What are you going to do, Johnny?"

"I'm not sure yet. I have to think."

"Remember, you're one of us now. Any time you doubt that, look at your knees or elbows. You are a Shining One, make no mistake."

"Yes, a Shining One." But Hamilton Village had been his home.

"We don't harm anyone," Diane explained. "I told you I take no part in the raids. I don't know why, for they're harmless."

"I saw one once, when I was a young boy. Before my people came to Hamilton Village to build their homes. The Shining Ones came down from the hills and simply walked into the village. There was no resistance. Our sentries gave us warning, but it hardly helped. We packed what we could and fled, leaving most of our supplies and equipment behind, leaving an entire village which we had called home but which we could

never see again. The Shining Ones contaminate."

"Yes—we do. You do. The villagers can't fight us. We could walk down there unarmed and take what we want. Maybe that's why I prefer to hunt instead. I'm not sure, Johnny. What are *you* going to do?" She took his hand impulsively in hers and squeezed it. They hardly knew each other but they had saved each other's life.

"I wish I knew." He withdrew his hand awkwardly. He liked Diane, perhaps too much. But until he made up his mind she was a potential enemy.

Soon Keleher returned to them, not alone this time. A dozen men crowded behind him and others were leaving the tents of the various clans to join them. "Did you tell me his name?" Keleher asked Diane.

"No. He's Johnny Hope."

"Well, Hope, get a good meal under your belt and we're off. We leave for Hamilton Village later this afternoon. You ought to be able to tell us exactly where to find whatever we want once we get there."

Could a man change his allegiance overnight because he now was different physically? Johnny's heart was still in Hamilton, even if he had been stoned from the Village and his parents had been burned, as prescribed by law. But

the rest of his life he would be a Shining One.

For a time he watched while Diane fixed his venison dinner, savoring the rich, gamey aroma. Then he slipped silently from the encampment.

Often DeReggio would come to the large boulder half a mile north of Hamilton Village and sun himself contentedly, forgetting for the time at least the problems of his office. This rock was no secret. Any villager, not finding DeReggio in Hamilton itself, would know where to look for him.

Now he had almost drifted off into slumber. He always found this half-awake time most pleasant for dreaming. Then he could conjure visions of the old days, of the lost cities with the beat of their traffic pulse and the winking kaleidoscope of their electric lights, and the driving madness of their people which kept them seething with activity around the clock. He never traveled to the deserted cities himself as youngsters like Johnny Hope did, because their crumbling masonry and bomb-scarred streets saddened him. And besides, the Robots had taken over many of the cities and since no one had ever bothered to tabulate them, you were never sure when a city was deserted and when it was not. Better to dream of the old days...

"DeReggio! Wake up."

It was Sheldon Hope, his old comrade-in-arms, who had fought halfway across a world with him while civilization crumbled to ruin all about them.

"Shel . . . Shell, boy."

"Wake up, DeReggio. It's Johnny Hope."

DeReggio sat bolt-upright, circles of light floating on blackness before his eyes from too much sun. "Johnny! Go away. They'll kill you if they find you here. Are you crazy? Keep away from me." DeReggio stood up and backed off, watching Johnny. "You have no business coming here. You—"

DeReggio saw the shining knees, the silver elbows. "The Plague. You survived it. You're a—"

"Shining One," Johnny finished for him as the mayor's voice trailed off.

"A carrier, that's even worse."

"I was hoping I would find you here. I knew I couldn't go down into Hamilton. You haven't much time."

"What are you talking about?"

"Shining Ones," Johnny said quickly. "Hundreds of them coming to raid Hamilton Village. They are on their way now. You'll have to leave, but I thought if I warned you you could have some time to take your belongings."

DeReggio accepted the fact without question but with

sadness. He shook his head from side to side, thinking of the neatly laid out streets, the small, compact bungalows, the field planted with hay for the cattle, with grain, asparagus, beans and tall corn waving green in the summer sun, ready for harvest.

"How much time do we have?"

"Four or five hours, I think."

"We'll have to hurry." DeReggio was already trotting back down the trail toward Hamilton, Johnny maintaining the pace with him but hanging back half a dozen long strides.

"I want to see the village once more, then I'll go."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. The Shining Ones want me to stay with them, but I had to warn you. If they find out . . ."

"For my people, I thank you, Johnny."

First person plural. My people. Johnny no longer was included. If the Shining Ones discovered his treachery, he would indeed be homeless. He wondered what Diane would think.

"Look at the Village and then go, Johnny. If they find you, I won't be able to do a thing. And I wanted to tell you, I said the prayer."

A figure appeared on the path up ahead. As he came closer the man's face was familiar, but his

name eluded Johnny. "Mayor DeReggio!" he called. "I wanted to tell you my wife thinks . . ." His voice trailed off. He scuffed his feet in the dust of the path and squinted. "Johnny Hope!" he cried. "By the Robots, keep away. I have a wife and children."

"I only wanted to see Hamilton once more."

"We don't care what you wanted."

"He brought a warning," Mayor DeReggio explained. "The Shining ones are coming."

The man held his distance, but spat on the ground in disgust. "Look at him? You heed his warning? Look. He's a Shining One himself. It's some kind of a trick you've fallen for."

DeReggio shrugged hopelessly. "You'll have to go Johnny."

Already the man was sprinting back down the path toward Hamilton. "I'll bring some of my friends," he called back over his shoulder. "We'll see about this. We'll see if a damned Shining One can go parading around Hamilton Village any time he wants. And you've got some explaining to do, DeReggio."

Then the man was gone. DeReggio turned to Johnny, almost shaking hands with him from force of habit, then drawing away in self-conscious confusion. "Good luck, boy. We'll be moving, des-

pite what Lawford said. Don't try to follow us."

"I hope I haven't got you into any trouble."

"It won't be the first time."

"Thanks for the prayer. They would have liked that."

When DeReggio looked up, Johnny Hope had vanished into the woods.

STARBUCK led one party of Shining Ones toward Hamilton from the north while Keleher took the main band in from the east. They never reached the Village though. Each leader saw the black pall of smoke rising long before he reached Hamilton. Each knew the Village had been put to the torch.

They met on high ground northeast of the flaming town and watched the fire, fanned by a strong summer wind, burn itself to embers and leave the charred skeleton of a village behind it.

"They got word," Starbuck said, waiting for Keleher to draw his own conclusions.

"It's happened before, but now —has anybody seen the new man, Johnny Hope?"

None of their followers had even heard of him.

"Diane would know," Starbuck suggested.

"She rarely joins our raiding parties." And Keleher checked, but

as he suspected, Diane was not present. "Well, we move on empty handed. Starbuck, you take your men back to the encampment and round up stragglers or anyone who remained behind. We'll wait here."

"You're as bad as the people of Hamilton. Always on the run. I don't mean to argue, but—"

"Then don't. Men who want to be conscripted by the Robots are free to leave our encampment at any time, get that straight. But I don't want forced conscription of all of us, Starbuck. Understand? The Robots are around."

"Well, I was just letting you know how I felt. What about Johnny Hope?"

"Timè enough to see about him later, if he's still with the encampment. Naturally, if he's guilty he won't go unpunished."

"If he's guilty?"

"That's what I said."

"You're growing soft, Keleher."

"Yes? We don't elect our leaders, Starbuck. Any time you think you want the job, you can try to take it."

Starbuck blanched. "I didn't mean it that way. I was only giving my opinion."

"Don't, unless you're prepared to defend it—and yourself."

"I'm sorry." But Starbuck's eyes were smouldering.

"Get back to the encampment,

then. I'll expect you here with the rest of our people day after tomorrow. Can't make up your mind where you belong, can you?" Keleher pointed with amusement to the buckskin kneepads.

"I know you're trying to goad me," Starbuck whined.

"Maybe."

"You don't like me."

"As a type, Starbuck. Personally, I'm indifferent."

That was goading of a more subtle sort, but it was lost on Starbuck. Diane's indifference would irk him; Keleher's indifference was at times preferable. "We ought to be friends," Starbuck boomed. "I'm generally recognized as your second in command."

"Only because I want it that way. Amos Westler, for example has forgotten more than you will ever learn."

"That's clever," declared Starbuck. "That's expert. You play us off one against another and keep the power for yourself."

Keleher shrugged massive shoulders. "It wasn't original with me. But you're unusually perceptive today, Starbuck. And I'll say this: you've got more spunk than Westler, for all his brains."

"He's soft."

"You bring our people. I'll wait. Tell your men that since they have to pack our tents and cart our belongings, they'll be able to rest

when we reach our new encampment. My group will set the place up."

"He ought to be a hermit, that Amos Westler."

Keleher shook his head. "Too scholarly. No outdoor know-how. Give him a book and he's happy. He wouldn't last a week. But he's still a good man, Starbuck. We need men like Amos Westler."

"And we need men like me."

Keleher grinned. "You should have let me say that. Trouble with you is you try to ape me. I'm always a step ahead of you, though. And don't forget it."

"Maybe someday I'll catch up."

"That would be interesting," admitted Keleher, dismissing Starbuck with a shrug and issuing instructions as his men began to assemble their bivouac.

Starbuck sensed he had been bested in the verbal battle, but was too petulantly egotistical to admit it even to himself. Instead, he made plans for his return to the encampment. He hoped the new Shining One, that Johnny Hope kid who Diane had nursed back to health, would be foolish enough to return. Without Keleher around to steal the show, Starbuck might make himself a hero.

IF it weren't for the tawny-haired girl who had saved his life, Johnny Hope never would have

returned to the encampment of the Shining Ones. He left DeReggio with the intention of again heading north toward New York, but his way led him close by the encampment and he remembered the sudden touch of the girl's hand and before that the vision of her face, lovely and comforting, while he burned with the fever. Calling himself a fool, he entered the encampment warily, half-expecting a dozen men to leap at him with the word traitor on their lips.

But the camp was almost deserted and no one paid him any heed. He found Diane returning from the hunt with a small deer, its antlers not yet branching, slung across her shoulders. She dropped the dead animal with a happy shout and ran to Johnny.

"I'm so glad you're back."

"I'm glad to see you, too."

Then the smile left her face. "Did you—warn them?"

Johnny considered his answer. Well, he had returned because he wanted to see the girl. It would be senseless if he were not honest with her. "I had to," he said.

She nodded slowly. "It isn't hard for me to understand. They were your people. But tell me, does anyone know?"

"I'm not sure. When they find the village deserted and probably burned, though, they'll know."

"Yes," Diane agreed with him,

then snapped her fingers. "But not if I say you were with me all the time. See, you even went out hunting with me. We caught this fawn together."

"You'd be lying to protect me. You may get yourself into trouble."

"How? It's my word against a lot of guessing."

"I can't let you take the chance."

"It's no chance at all. I want to do it. I want you to be one of us, Johnny. We all don't raid the villages. I don't raid them, do I?"

"No, but I—"

"But nothing. You came back here, didn't you? No one forced you."

"I came back to see you, I guess."

"Well, you're going to stay with us. A man wasn't meant to live alone like a hermit. Here." Diane took his hand and led him forward, "you can stay in my tent for now. It would be silly to build yourself one since we're going to move the encampment as soon as Keleher returns from the raid."

"I can't—I mean—"

"Can't, nothing. I'm a good girl, Johnny Hope. Make no mistakes. Touch me at night and I'll scream. But I trust you. I like you."

Her frankness was both charming and unnerving. He wanted to say he liked her too, but

could not bring himself to utter the words. Instead he slipped his arm about her waist and walked with her to the tent, where she skinned the fawn expertly and prepared it for cooking. By then Johnny was sound asleep and did not wake up until Diane stirred him and offered him a platter of tender young venison.

SHORTLY after noon the next day, Starbuck returned with his men. Those who had remained behind were disappointed because the raiding party had come back empty-handed. Starbuck wasted no time adding fuel to the fire. "Has anyone seen that traitor, Johnny Hope?" he demanded.

"You mean the new man, the one Diane brought?" someone asked him. "He's here."

"The ingrate, the dirty ingrate," Starbuck boomed so all the encampment heard him. "One of us saved his life and first chance he gets he turns traitor. Next thing you know he'll want us to be conscripted by the Robots."

"You should talk," Diane cried as she and Johnny emerged from her tent. "You're always talking about how nice it would be to live with the Robots. Johnny Hope isn't like that at all."

Starbuck raised a finger to his lips and whispered, "Keep it quiet. If they hear about this, they'll

lynch Johnny."

"All of a sudden you want to keep it quiet," Diane hissed at him.

"That's right, softly."

"Well, for your information, Johnny was with me all along. We went hunting yesterday, just the two of us. Didn't we, Johnny?"

Johnny mumbled something under his breath and waited for Starbuck to speak. Suddenly the man was shouting again. He slapped Diane on the shoulder, smiled, roared: "Thank you, Diane, thank you. I thought so. Did you all hear her? Diane told me she saw this man sneak off to warn Hamilton Village yesterday."

"That's a rotten lie!" Diane cried.

But Starbuck smiled blandly. "That's all right. I know you didn't want him to know you told me, but there's nothing to worry about. You all heard her, didn't you?"

"We heard her whispering something to you," one of the men admitted.

"She whispered because she didn't want the traitor to hear. She was afraid. She should have known we'd protect her. I'm surprised at you, Diane."

For answer, she flew at him with her knife. He laughed softly, so softly that only she heard it. A shocked look appeared on his face as he parried the blow, twisted

her arm up, spun her around and held her that way while she writhed helplessly and dropped the knife to the ground. "I don't know what's the matter with you," he said. He still looked shocked.

"That should be proof enough," she panted. "I never told Starbuck what he claims."

"If you're covering up I can only assume you went with him. I am deeply shocked."

"I did not go with him. I was hunting."

"Then you admit he went!"

"I didn't admit anything. You are hurting me."

Starbuck's big hand had twisted her wrist painfully. He gave no indication of letting her go.

"She said you're hurting her," Johnny snarled. "Let her go!"

"I'm all right," Diane said.

Starbuck was going to let her go, but Johnny did not wait. He circled Starbuck's arm with his hand and wrenched until the bigger man bellowed and released Diane.

"Good," Johnny said. "I have no fight with you, but—" He had turned to look at Diane when Starbuck's balled fist slammed against the side of his jaw, knocking him down.

HE sat there dazed, uncomprehending because he had not seen the blow coming. But Star-

buck stood above him, fists clenched, and that was enough to tell him. "I still have no fight with you," Johnny said softly. He thought he could have taken the bigger man and at this moment could think of nothing he would rather do, but Starbuck had already accused Diane of being his accomplice and he did not want to involve the girl further. He hoped Starbuck would be content to boast about this one-punch victory instead.

"Scared?" Starbuck leered down at him, prodding his ribs with one foot.

"Get up and punch his teeth in," Diane pleaded.

But Johnny remained sitting on the ground, and shook his head. He explored his jaw gingerly with the fingers of one hand as if the thought of rising to take more of the same frightened him. His time of reckoning with Starbuck would come, he promised himself but now wasn't the time, not when it might involve Diane.

"You're not going to sit there?" Diane insisted. "Don't just sit there!"

Johnny shrugged. "Fighting him won't prove anything." He climbed to his feet and retreated out of Starbuck's range. He was the picture of abject cowardice and hoped it would inflate Starbuck's ego sufficiently to make him for-

get the charges he had brought against Diane. Starbuck was smiling smugly and booming something about letting Keleher decide what to do about Johnny Hope after they moved the encampment. But when Johnny stalked away from him toward Diane, calling her name, she presented him only with a stiff, haughty back and by the time he reached the tent the flap was down and tied securely. Johnny heard sobbing from within.

A few moments later Starbuck and another man came and led him to a different tent where he remained under guard until the encampment had been broken, the tents and equipment packed and ready to move, the people assembled in the square clearing which now was dotted with folded tents and bedding rolls.

"Let's move it!" Starbuck roared in his booming voice. The men stooped for their burdens, the few horses carried three and four times their normal loads. Starbuck waved the group forward dramatically, aware of his moment and making the most of it. They marched double-file into the narrow ravine and were soon well on their way toward where Keleher waited.

CHAPTER IV

63-17-B was twenty years old, but a trip to the repair bays every time

he returned to New York City kept his beryl-steel body gleaming as if it had rolled but yesterday from the assembly lines. Now 63-17-B could sense a stiffness in the second joint of his left leg and suspected corrosion. He was looking forward with keen anticipation to the time, in the near future, when he would stretch out in the repair bay and have his worn parts exchanged.

That, however, was not on his primary level of thought. While not unique with 63-17-B, the secondary level was not universal among the robots, for the idea of individual sentience had crept into the original plans only accidentally. On his primary level of thought, 63-17-B was in closer rapport with Central Intelligence than the three-hundred robots stretched out in a long, sun-reflecting line behind him. Like Central Intelligence itself, and unlike the few humans who thought of such things, 63-17-B believed that matter and energy are not merely components of one another but are actually the same thing. Thus he explained his greater primary level of thought by saying that the energy-matter bridge connecting him with Central Intelligence, invisible but measurable in quanta as was his body, was stronger than most. On the social level, this gave 63-17-B leadership of the three-hundred.

Thought-quanta crackled back and forth between 63-17-B and Central Intelligence in New York and, as on all such occasions, 63-17-B was not sure how much of the conversation reached the other Robots. "Hamilton Village is aflame," 63-17-B thought.

"Did you fire it?" The answer was immediate—and angry.

"Certainly not. We arrived too late to prevent it."

"Yet your scouts reported the Village was going to move out. You know a moving Village may or may not remain together. As often as not, it separates into small bands, which will spread out and find their way to distant communities. An ideal means of spreading the Plague, although I need not remind you of that."

"I am aware—"

"The error is unpardonable, unless the Villagers have not yet fled."

"Unfortunately, they have."

"Then another opportunity slips through our fingers. 63-17-B, upon your return you are to report to the Intelligence bays for a re-examination of your rapport synapses."

"But—"

"But nothing." The thought-communication crackled to silence.

63-17-B made the mental equivalent of a sigh. Such re-examinations, he knew from bitter exper-

ience, were shams. Re-shuffling was more like it. At a whim of Central Intelligence he might become nothing but a second-class Robot. On the surface, Intelligence would discover a flaw in his synapses. Actually, Intelligence would produce the flaw and pass his mantle of leadership down the line to some other Robot.

Sullenly, 63-17-B called a halt. Like all Robots, he was vindictive. Constructed originally as machines of war, the Robots had had revenge built into their mind-patterns as a strong factor. Actually, second-class Robots were not aware of this. The feelings merely existed and they acted accordingly. But 63-17-B was only too acutely aware: it pained him. The Robots had never actually functioned as machines of war, for the War had taken a bacteriological turn before the mechanical infantry could march off to battle.

The Robots had been stored as useless while disease swept Earth—with the development of the Plague itself making all further fighting impossible on an international scale. But the Plague got out of hand, 63-17-B remembered dimly. The slightest contact meant almost certain contamination and mankind prepared grimly for the end of its brief dominion over the Earth — until someone thought of the Robots. Let them

cure the Plague; the antidote was known, they merely had to apply it. 63-17-B's memory coils tightened angrily. Until that time, the Robots had been slighted, although they had waited patiently to serve their masters. Masters, indeed. 63-17-B recognized the vindictive pattern of his thoughts for what it was: mankind had had its chance, had failed. After man, the Robots. It was as simple as that.

But now 63-17-B was seething. He'd been advancing steadily in the Robot-hierarchy and had even expected himself to be assigned to Central Intelligence itself before too long. Because the impetuous people of Hamilton Village had set their city to the torch before he could arrive, all was lost.

He scanned the surrounding countryside with photo-retinal cells. Far below, just leaving the edge of the burning town, were a pair of stragglers—man and woman, he thought, but couldn't be sure at this distance. Well, revenge on two individuals would be better than nothing . . .

Strong hauling ropes were prepared, and now 63-17-B could see the figures were not two, but three. Since his photo-retinal cells could not perceive color except as shades of black and white, he had no way of telling the three figures were not Villagers but Shining Ones.

“WE'RE approaching Hamilton Village,” said Starbuck over his shoulder as Diane overtook him at the head of the column to get her first look at the place. “You can see the flames.”

“I thought you said the fire was almost out when you left Keleher and the others.”

“I did, but you can't predict those things. Apparently it has started again. See?”

They had reached a rise of ground and could see what was left of the village in a broad valley below them, a great pall of black smoke rising from it sluggishly. Starbuck saw something else a few miles off to the north, but said nothing. It was a long, thin column, gleaming metallically. At this distance he could not be sure, but it looked like a line of Robots.

“Keleher and the others are close by,” Starbuck said mechanically. He was not thinking of Keleher. The trouble with this group of Shining Ones was, no one understood Starbuck. Not only were his talents for leadership unappreciated, he was actually made fun of. He'd been sullen ever since his mental rebuff at the hands of Keleher. He'd acted inconsistently. His anger had been a free-floating thing, and he'd very nearly got Diane in trouble for it.

That was ridiculous. The an-

swer seemed obvious enough: if one is not appreciated in a particular place, one should go elsewhere. There was Thomas Burwood, a youngster whose father had been chief before Keleher and who had been killed by Keleher. Burwood almost certainly would join Starbuck. And Diane could be taken by force if necessary.

Starbuck put the stocky man named Gilbert in charge of the column and sought out Burwood. He found the younger man on a fringe of the column, plodding listlessly along.

"Listen, Tom," said Starbuck in a confidential voice. "We've often talked about life among the Robots, but we're letting our years fritter away. What would you do if the opportunity presented itself?"

Like Starbuck himself, Burwood was an over-sized young man given to fits of temperament. "What's the use?" he said. "You can't just walk into the Robot Citadel. They would kill you first and ask questions afterwards."

"No, but you could join. Robots in the field. It's done that way most of the time, since the Robots venture forth either to spread the Plague or gain conscripts among the Shining Ones." Starbuck whispered in his best confidential voice, "And, Tom, there's a group of Robots two or three miles from here right now. What

do you say to that?"

"Let me think." Burwood frowned. "I don't know. It's one thing to talk about it but another to—"

"Keleher didn't give your father a chance to think, did he? Not when your father was growing old and Keleher knew he could take him. He killed him, struck him down like an animal, don't forget that, Tom."

"That's true, but—"

"You're worrying about life among the Robots, are you? From every rumor I've heard, you can live like a king, like the days before World War III ruined our civilization. What do you say, Tom? An opportunity like this doesn't often come."

"Well—"

"Of course, if you're afraid . . . but I thought you were made of the same stuff as your father, the only leader I have ever served faithfully."

"That's enough, Harry!" Young Burwood's voice broke. "I'll go with you."

"I knew you would. You're just like your father, Tom. There's one thing I want to do first . . ." The two whispered together for a time, then Starbuck drifted back toward the rear of the column and permitted himself to straggle until he was out of sight of the rear guard, first making arrangements for the prisoner, Johnny Hope, to

be taken off the trail into the woods. Tom Burwood, meanwhile, double-timed up toward the head of the column.

“DIANE, I was looking for you.”

“Hello, Tom. What is it?”

“Some one wants to see you. Rear of the column.”

“Who?” All through their march, Diane had wanted to make her peace with Johnny Hope, but the opportunity had never presented itself.

“I’m not at liberty to say,” Burwood told her slyly, and winked.

“Is it Johnny Hope?”

Burwood smiled affably. “I can’t say. Please, Diane. I was only told to fetch you. It’s been arranged temporarily, but he can’t remain back there indefinitely.”

“I’m coming. Lead the way,” Diane said eagerly, and fell into step with Burwood. Johnny Hope must have had his reasons for not fighting with Starbuck. He was not the cowardly type, unless Diane had suddenly become a bad judge of people. Perhaps he thought, in some strange way, he was protecting her . . .

“Where is he, Tom? I don’t see anyone.”

“A little further.”

“But we’ve already left the column.”

“Just around that clump of

trees, I think.”

Something rustled in the undergrowth. “Johnny?” Diane called expectantly.

He stepped out into the trail and faced her. It was Harry Starbuck.

“What kind of a joke is this?” Diane demanded angrily, turning to rejoin the column. “I thought I was coming back here to meet Johnny Hope.”

Burwood laughed easily. “I never said that.”

“Well, whatever you’re planning you can count me out. Of all the nerve, bringing me back here like this—”

“Would you like to see Johnny Hope alive?” Starbuck asked in a conversational tone.

“What do you mean by that?”

“That you had better cooperate with me, Diane. The three of us are leaving the column now, you, Tom and I. If you don’t, I can’t guarantee anything about Johnny Hope.”

Diane did not know whether to believe him or not, but would hardly endanger Johnny Hope’s life on a notion. “I’ll go with you,” she said.

Less than an hour later, they approached the vanguard of the file of Robots. Burwood and Diane saw them at the same time, contempt filling Diane’s eyes as she began to understand what had

been on Starbuck's mind. Fear was there too, threatening to unnerve her at any moment, but the scorn she felt for Starbuck prevented it from overpowering her. "Of all the cheap tricks," she said. "You—you wanted to join the Robots, but you also wanted me. Johnny Hope was never in any danger. It was all a lie, to get me here. Well, if you think I'm going with you—" Diane crouched abruptly, came up with a handful of dry earth and flung it at Starbuck's face, blinding him. Then she began to run.

"Get her, Burwood!" Starbuck roared. "Don't let her escape."

It wasn't Burwood's fight, but if he had thrown in with Starbuck he wanted to remain in the man's good graces, at least until he could figure things out for himself. Besides, his first sight of the Robots had almost choked him with fear. Chasing Diane would take his mind off them. He set out after her, aware that a still half-blinded Starbuck was circling around in another direction.

Diane guessed her best chance for escape would lie along the very edge of the file of Robots. She did not relish the idea, but she had seen the look on Burwood's face when the creatures of metal had appeared and figured he would be loathe to follow her in that direction.

Did the Robots see her? She ran

in their direction, her clothing catching and tearing on the undergrowth. She neared the head of the file, could hear Burwood stumbling along behind her. The metal figures stood there, unmoving—watching her? Each one twelve feet tall, they could have stamped her to death.

BEHIND her, Diane heard a hoarse scream. She whirled instinctively, lost her footing, fell. One of the Robots had taken Burwood, who was thrashing and kicking helplessly as it bore him aloft and held him feet pounding on air, two yards off the ground.

She didn't like Burwood, but she had nothing against him. He screamed again, his voice breaking.

"Put him down," Diane shouted. She might as well have been talking to the ingots from which the Robots had been fashioned for all the heed they paid her. She whirled again, sought Starbuck, couldn't find him. Starbuck always talked of the Robots, perhaps he knew how to communicate with them.

Now the Robot had set a trembling Burwood down on the ground. Now a great noose of rope was drawn about his neck, its other end slung over the branch of a huge, bare-limbed tree. Now . . .

Something neither warm nor cold touched Diane, grasped her

about the middle, lifted her. It was a nightmare. It was unreal, not happening to her. The ground spun giddily, all vision receded behind a wave of vertigo, then returned, still spinning.

Diane clawed at the metal head, at the hard, unblinking eyes, scraping uselessly. She might as well try to scrape down the side of a mountain with her fingernails.

Burwood was hanging.

Feet dangling, arms bound behind him, he twisted and writhed in his last death agony. Diane shuddered, turning away, striking her head sharply against the hard metal of the Robot. When her vision cleared again, she was on the ground, another Robot stalking soundlessly toward her for all its great bulk, a noose identical to the one from which Burwood dangled suspended from its metal hand.

But the scene had changed. Diane realized wildly. A great airship, a rocket, had landed midway between the file of Robots and the burning village. Vaguely, she remembered that Starbuck had once said only Robots from the Citadel itself used the rockets, since only a few remained from man's last great War.

Starbuck was nearby, shaking but holding his ground, shouting at the Robots as if his very life depended on it. And, Diane thought

despairingly, it did.

"Leave her be!" Starbuck cried. "You're making a terrible mistake. We're not from the village. We're Shining Ones. We're Shining Ones, I tell you. We came here to join you, to be conscripted. We want to work for the Robots. See, we're Shining Ones!"

Did they understand? Diane couldn't tell. The Robots with the noose reached down and grabbed her, drawing her aloft again. She wanted to scream, but all her energy could bring forth only a whimper. She wanted to shut her eyes tightly and wake up, trembling but otherwise all right, in her tent. She could feel a lurching motion as the Robot began to move.

Burwood hung slackly now, twisting gently from side to side, like a rag doll, with the motion of the rope. Diane fainted.

Within half an hour, all the Robots had filed into their waiting ship. It blasted skyward on a jet of flame which was all but lost against the fires which consumed Hamilton Village.

CHAPTER V

"**W**ILL Harry Starbuck please step forth and make his report?" One of Keleher's assistants brought the command to the Shining Ones who had

joined the larger group near Hamilton Village.

There was a silence.

"Where is Starbuck?"

No one knew. The assistant shook his head and returned to Keleher for further instructions. Had anyone seen Starbuck? A short while ago, yes. Not for the past hour, though. Keleher next called for Diane, who had found Johnny Hope, the alleged traitor, along with Starbuck.

Some of them had seen her marching toward the rear of the column with Tom Burwood not long since. She did not answer the summons. And Burwood could not be found anywhere.

"Is everyone going crazy?" Keleher stormed. "Fetch the prisoner himself. We'll see what's going on."

Moments later: "Hope, charges have been brought against you concerning our raid on Hamilton Village."

"I know all about the charges. I refuse to discuss them now."

Keleher smiled without mirth. "You—refuse?"

"They were looking for Diane. They couldn't find her. They were looking for Starbuck too, and couldn't find him. It is Starbuck who has made the accusation, so we'll have to wait until he's found. I don't care one way or the other about Starbuck, but I want to find

Diane."

Plump Gilbert came forward, said, "I may be able to shed some light on this. After Starbuck gave me charge of the column he conferred with Tom Burwood for a time, then disappeared. But Burwood whispered something to Diane and she joined him, heading for the rear of the column."

"You see?" Johnny demanded. "Starbuck went someplace with Diane. From the looks of it, she was tricked into going with him."

"Mere supposition," said Keleher, "although I wouldn't trust Starbuck particularly."

"Listen," Johnny went on, "that girl saved my life. I want to find her. Since you can't try my case until Starbuck is found, let me look for them and—"

"How do we know you will return?"

"My word," said Johnny, but the look on Keleher's face said that would never satisfy him.

"If the lad promises and if meanwhile he cannot be tried . . ." began Gilbert.

"When I want your advice, I'll ask for it," Keleher said curtly. "The boy stays here."

"But he merely wants to find Diane," persisted Gilbert.

"Enough. If someone thinks to depose me, let him try. Meanwhile, I command here. The boy stays. He will be considered innocent."

cent until we can bring him to trial, but he will not be permitted to leave the encampment."

"Her life may be in danger," Johnny said grimly.

"I doubt it. I have given my orders."

"They don't satisfy me," Johnny told Keleher bluntly. "Am I to be regarded as prisoner or member of the community until my trial?"

"You are one of us, a Shining One, until proven guilty. It is the way of our law."

"In that case," Johnny informed him, "I challenge your right to rule. I would depose you." Even as he spoke the words, Johnny doubted their wisdom. Keleher was large and powerful; Johnny had recently recovered from the Plague and did not feel fully himself. Still, he had to find Diane, and if there was no other way . . .

Keleher was grinning. "Perhaps you do not know what that entails. I'll admit, it's primitive. Upon your challenge we fight. Not with weapons, Johnny Hope. With our bare hands. Call it a peculiarity of mine, but I prefer brute strength. It is as if civilization, in closing its book for mankind, has put men like me in its stead. The ballot, the tribunal, the town meeting — all these are sophistications leading ultimately back along the road to civilization. If that means anoth-

er war and a worse one, I want no part of it. Small communities, living by mean strength, fighting for their existence tooth and nail, can't start a civilization growing.

"The level I want to maintain is physical, brutal, elemental. Knowing that, do you still challenge my right?" Keleher folded huge-muscled arms across his massive chest and stared with scorn at Johnny. "Well?"

"I was aware of that. The answer is yes."

"Then we can start making arrangements for the time and place. Would you prefer it on our journey before we reach a new permanent encampment, or after we have arrived to set up camp? You still look pale from your time with the Plague, my young friend."

"I prefer it right here," Johnny said. "I can't wait. Right here, and right now."

The sudden complete silence was broken by Keleher's explosive laughter as he unbuckled his weapon-belt and let it fall with knife and club to the ground.

"**W**HAT do you think, Diane?"

"Don't speak to me. I think it was a dirty trick, but I should have expected it from you. And you let Tom Burwood die, too."

I couldn't do anything about that," Starbuck protested. "I tried.

By the time I got through to them, Burwood was already dead. As it is, I saved your life."

"For this?" Diane gestured around her scornfully, to take in the tiny cubicle aboard the rocket which they occupied. After depositing them within it ten minutes before, the Robots had ignored them.

"I'm surprised at you. Have some patience, Diane. Someday you'll be grateful I took you along. You're young, you have no idea what life could be like in a civilized place."

"Do you? How do you know how the Robots treat people?"

"I have heard rumors. We all have. But I'm older than I look. I was a small boy before the war, Diane. But I remember, I remember. The luxuries, the comforts. You'll see."

"I ought to kill you," Diane said coldly. Starbuck blanched. "I might, too, first chance I get. You're so self-centered, you're almost inhuman. But maybe I'm dumb enough to think you'll realize your mistake someday and two of us will have a better chance of getting away than one. I don't know. I ought to kill you, though."

"I did it for you. I wanted you with me. I couldn't enjoy the life we're going to lead without you."

"You're a fool, Harry. . I can't even hate you. I feel sorry for

you. What do the Robots do from day to day? You don't even know that. You haven't the slightest idea what you've let us in for. You don't even know for sure where we're going."

Starbuck shook his head. "You're wrong about that. We're going to the Citadel in New York. We should be arriving in a few minutes. You'll change your mind, Diane. Wait until you see the Citadel. Wait until—"

"You've never seen it. You're just guessing."

"It's more than a guess. Every rumor I have ever heard. Diane, I want you to share it with me, to learn to love it with me. You're beautiful. You weren't meant for buckskins," Starbuck fingered the tattered clothing barely covering her torso.

"Keep away from me."

"Don't you realize it's just the two of us now—and the Robots?"

"I'm warning you."

Starbuck shrugged and sat down at the other side of the small cubicle. "You're frightened now," he said. "I've got patience, if you haven't. Wait and see how the Robots will provide for us."

Diane shuddered and tried to hide it. Trapped aboard a ship full of Robots, she was companion to a madman. Strangely, no thought could comfort her but the image of Johnny Hope, somewhere

many miles behind them, a prisoner of Keleher and the band of Shining Ones. Perhaps, she thought grimly, the madman had for company a madwoman . . .

THE Shining Ones were bivouacking not two miles above the gutted ruins of Hamilton Village. Wood had been stacked for the cook-fires, but as yet no spark had been coaxed into flame. Half the tents had been raised tautly about their ridge poles, others were still to be unpacked. Five-hundred strong, the whole group gathered around a natural clearing in the woods, where deft-fingered girls were applying grease to Keleher and Johnny Hope.

They had stripped to shorts, Keleher with his thick-thewed limbs glistening in the fading sunlight, arms folded like some immobile, heroic statue, all muscle and sinew, carved from granite, Johnny fidgeting, waiting for the fight to start. He was surprised at his own objective lack of fear; he wanted only to start out after Diane.

"You probably wonder why they grease you," Amos Westler declared. Westler was a small, slim man with close-cropped graying hair and eyes that would twinkle, Johnny thought, even in darkness. He had come to Johnny's corner as a sort of unexpected second, to

ready him for battle. "It's a concession on the part of Keleher, Johnny Hope. He has declared openly your strength is no match for his. The slicking will make speed and dexterity count for more."

"Am I supposed to be grateful? The only reason I'm fighting him is because he won't let me seek Diane any other way. She could be in danger right now, her life might be at stake. Keleher is a fool."

"And life among the Shining Ones has always been an expendable item. Diane's life, your life, even Keleher's."

"What happens if I win?"

Westler sighed wistfully. "You won't. This won't be the first fight for Keleher, nor the last. Actually, I hope you do win."

"Why? And you haven't answered my question."

"Because I've always wanted to leave the encampment. But I'm not a man for the outdoors, Johnny. I wouldn't survive a week. With your companionship, I might. Should you win the fight, and should you decide to seek Diane, I would like to join you."

Johnny grasped his hand, shook it. "Done," he said.

Westler smiled, wiping grease on his trousers. "To answer your question, if you win you're the chief of this encampment."

Now Johnny was smiling. "A job I'm not particularly interested in. I only want to—"

"I know. Look for the girl. During the excitement, something went entirely unnoticed. A rocket ship took off, near the ruins of the Village. Rockets mean Robots—and from the Citadel. Tell me, Johnny Hope, if the trail leads there, will you follow?"

Johnny shrugged. "I hadn't thought of that, I didn't realize the Robots were near."

"Then you're going to back down?" Disappointment was in Westler's expressive eyes.

"Never. I saw New York once. I stood on the Jersey cliffs at sunset and gazed across the broad river at the Citadel with its winking lights and beacons. It is not a place of fear, but a place that men built, long ago. I will go."

Again Amos Westler sighed. "I wish you win this fight, Johnny Hope. I never wished for anything as much in my life. I was a college professor before the war and I learned this: the search for knowledge is a strange thing and knows no fear. But I am no young man, and this may be my last opportunity."

"Ready?" Keleher's voice roared across the clearing. "If the girls are finished carressing you with their oils . . . ?"

THE girls stepped back, looked at Johnny, tall and lithe but so small compared to Keleher, and shook their heads.

"Ready," Johnny said, moving out toward Keleher warily.

"His legs," Amos Westler confided. "He uses them like another pair of arms. Watch them."

The grease on his face had been applied too close to his eyes and Johnny found he had to blink to clear his vision. Keleher came lumbering across the clearing, gathering momentum. By the time he neared Johnny he was fairly rocketing down upon him. The muttering of the assembled encampment had been stilled as if by some unspoken command. There was the sound of Keleher's thundering feet and nothing else.

Juggernaut thundered close, was almost upon him, great arms outstretched, huge body shining red in the last light of the sun. At the last moment, Johnny sidestepped, thrust out his leg, added momentum to Keleher with his arms as he pounded by. Something struck his leg, there was a loud, bull-bellowing cry. Keleher flipped completely over and sprawled in the dust a dozen feet away.

He came up roaring his rage as Johnny waited, balancing on the balls of his feet, fists up and ready. Keleher parried Johnny's left hand when the blow was too long in

coming, struck with his own great right fist. Johnny went over on his back and felt Keleher at his throat almost before he had hit the ground. Now the crowd was churning with excitement and Johnny found himself thinking they must have smelled blood on the air.

Their heavily greased bodies prevented Keleher from applying a stranglehold. Johnny squirmed out from under, straddled the bigger man's back and felt himself borne aloft, still clinging there, as Keleher climbed to his feet and charged about the clearing. Johnny held grimly, his forearm circling the thick throat, choking off Keleher's breath. But the shaggy head twisted, broke free. The legs drummed backwards and Johnny whirled in time to fathom Keleher's plan.

He was going to crush Johnny against the bole of an oak tree, cracking his ribs and ending the battle at once. Without mirth, Johnny smiled. So intent was Keleher upon his plan, he did not bother to hold Johnny on his back. Possibly he thought that was Johnny's intention, anyway. Johnny leaped away, rolling clear, as Keleher backed into the tree trunk with all the strength of his huge muscles.

There was a terrible crunching sound as Keleher hit the tree and

went down as if axed. Groggily, he began to rise, but Johnny was waiting for him, waiting to see if there was any fight left in the half-conscious man. The eyes were watery, the lips slack, the arms twitching. Johnny waited . . .

"Stop!" someone cried. "I bring news."

At first the encampment shouted him off, but presently Johnny became aware of loud talking, of angry shouts, of a buzzing, as from a sundered hornets' nest, which swept the clearing. He whirled to face the newcomer as Keleher slumped at his feet, clawing the ground and gasping, "I don't . . . surrender . . . Johnny Hope. Only give . . . me . . . time to catch my wind . . . and . . ."

THEY turned to Johnny Hope, all of them, their new leader. For Keleher had spoken those words, then fell forward on his face. Three men carried him off to a tent, where two women brought vessels of water.

"They went looking for the three missing ones, Hope."

"What can we do?"

"The Robots."

"Tell us, Hope."

"What they did once they might do again."

Johnny laughed as reaction from his ordeal set in. They crowded around him, flies swarming for

honey. They hadn't given him a chance in the fight, but now because Keleher had cracked his own ribs instead of Johnny's, Johnny was their leader. It was a job he neither wanted nor would tolerate.

"What they're trying to say," Amos Westler told him, "is that they found Tom Burwood not far from here."

"What about Diane?" Johnny demanded eagerly.

"No Diane, no Starbuck. They found Burwood, hanging by his neck, dead."

"Dead?" Johnny said, dazed. "Diane?"

"You're not listening to me, young man. Diane they didn't find." Then, as if he suddenly realized he was addressing their new, if bewildered, leader, Westler apologized. "I'm sorry. While Burwood's corpse was the only one they found, there were shreds of clothing in the undergrowth. There—"

"Diane?"

"Possibly, they're not sure. I would say all indications point to the Robot Citadel. You said you would go, but now that you are our leader, perhaps you've changed your mind. When leadership is thrust upon a man—"

"When an old leader is vanquished," plump Gilbert bubbled effusively, "there is a celebration,

sir. And there is an edict to be handed down by the new leader. Do we banish Keleher from the encampment when his condition permits? Do we slay him for you? Do we—"

"Do whatever you want," Johnny said irritably. "I'm not staying."

"This is some joke!"

"I have nothing against Keleher. I still have nothing against him. I'm leaving. When Keleher regains consciousness, when his body heals, you may tell him for me I did not depose him. He is still your leader."

"That is clearly impossible."

"Is it? I command you in this. Keleher remains on as chief. But tell him this for me: some day I may call upon him and his people for help, and when I do . . . "

"You have vision," said Amos Westler, admiration in his voice.

"When I do, I want no delays. That is my message to your ruler, to Keleher. Is it understood?"

Gilbert and some of the others nodded. A small, intense man, Westler fidgeted about impatiently while the girls returned with thick strips of cloth and scrubbed the grease from Johnny Hope.

"I'm now a celebrity," he said to Westler, feeling himself briefly as one with these wild people as they gathered around for his ad-

vice, preparing a victory banquet over roaring fires as darkness covered the bivouac area. He munched a savory leg of fowl, slaked his thirst from a moist leather wine bag, the claret stream gushing into his mouth from the spout.

"You see," Westler could not hide his disappointment. "It is even as I said. You will stay."

Johnny grinned at him. "Are you tired?"

"Why, no."

Tossing a chicken bone into the fire, Johnny went on: "And do you know the way to New York in the darkness?"

"No—o."

"I think I do. Are you ready to start?"

"Are you serious?" Westler cried. "Do you mean that, Johnny Hope?"

"Let's go." And not waiting for an answer, Johnny clapped Gilbert on the back, told him to take charge until Keleher had recovered, and left the clearing with Westler trailing at his heels.

The night closed in about them, not quiet, but alive with the sounds of insects and the occasional soft-pad-padding of small hunting animals. Johnny set a quick, mile-eating pace which made Westler's breath wheeze in and out of his lungs asthmatically, but the older man did not complain once.

CHAPTER VI

"WE have openings in the repair bays or for servants among the inner circle of Shining Ones who work hand in hand with our masters," the old woman told Starbuck and Diane after they had been taken from the rocket ship in New York and shunted underground where the subways had been converted into living quarters for humans without being given a chance to see the city. "Which will it be?"

"We're not cut out to be menials," Starbuck said coldly, "but the repair bays don't appeal to me, either. You say servants to the leaders themselves?"

"To the top echelon of Shining Ones, yes. You will find the socio-economic hierarchy rigidly enforced here. Well, which will it be?"

Starbuck had heard about palace revolutions. It would be servants to the leaders, naturally. Let them bide their time, let them learn what they could of the Citadel and its Robots. "Servants," he said.

"Are you married?" The old woman, shamelessly bare to the waist on this hot day, smiled at them with a perfect set of false teeth which seemed laughably incongruous in her gaunt, seamed face. Her bare breasts were dry as parchment and hung, flat but

pendulant, almost to her waist. From a distance she looked almost like a manikin, a leathery, humanoid robot.

"We are," Starbuck beamed.

But Diane said, "Certainly not."

The old woman cackled. "I believe the woman. In that case, you will live in these underground dormitories."

"Not in the City upstairs?" Starbuck demanded, disappointed.

"Not in the City, that is correct. Do not ask why, it is merely so. We work for the Robots and obey them, is that clear? Some day the only humans left on Earth will be Shining Ones, or so the Robots tell us. Then we will climb up into the light of day and take our rightful place, side by side with them. Meanwhile, we do as we are told."

"Are you satisfied, Harry?" Diane wanted to know. "The Robots make promises—and destroy our brothers."

"Our brothers?" Starbuck laughed. "You mean the people of the villages? Those, our brothers?"

"The Plague makes brother hate brother, but you're a fool, Starbuck. The Robots want that, this playing of human against human."

"Yes? How do you know? You've never . . ."

"I don't know. But Amos Westler always said so."

"Westler!" Starbuck spat con-

temptuously. "A reader of books. We go out to hunt or raid, Westler seeks his books and grows soft looking through them."

"With more Westlers and less Starbucks in the world," Diane began, "we probably wouldn't have had to fight three World Wars and never would have—"

"That's enough," said Starbuck, his eyes darting suspiciously to the old woman, who was taking in their conversation with an amused look on her face.

"It is quite enough," agreed the old woman. "If you want to last here more than a few days."

"Can the Robots actually understand us?" Starbuck asked.

The old woman shrugged thin shoulders. "Some say they can read our minds. It is not important. Those of us who rule can understand. Since they can somehow communicate with the Robots, it is the same thing."

"We will conform," promised Starbuck.

"Like robots of robots," said Diane bitterly.

JOHNNY Hope rubbed the stubble of beard on his face and frowned at Westler. "I'm not sure, but I think I know this place. We should reach the New York River this afternoon."

They stood in a forest glade not a hundred yards from one of the

overgrown concrete highways upon which the Robots were known to tread. A path paralleled the highway through the woods, and upon this they made their way.

"Sometimes I wonder if you know what you're letting yourself in for," Westler mused.

"I want to find Diane. I'll take whatever goes with it."

"Do you mind if I ask why?"

"I'm not sure I know myself. All I know is I think of her all the time. Nothing matters as much as finding her—and freeing her."

"We could be wrong. Perhaps she is not with the Robots at all."

"What do you think?"

"I think she is. Everything points to it. I was only pointing out that we're not sure. Johnny, not many years ago I met a man, another Shining One, who had fled from New York. He was old and he didn't last long, but he told me things which—"

"About the Robots, you mean?"

"Yes. You know, of course, they can help cure the Plague. Instead, they spread it."

"I never could figure out why."

"Who knows what sort of thinking the Robots can do? We're not even sure if they possess sentience at all, although I suspect they do. But in the last days of the War, man made a frantic mistake. The Robots were conceived as fighters, were constructed as fighters, were

built to hate man and to kill man. When we gave the Robots a different mission entirely, it failed. They've simply strengthened the Plague toxoid and made it lethal. I don't think they'll rest until every man on Earth is destroyed.

"We're weak now, disorganized. We've left civilization behind us. You'd think the Robots could do the job overnight, but the only thing that prevents them, actually, is their lack of numbers."

"Most of my people—I mean the villagers, not my people any longer—most of them believe the Robots somehow *will* cure the Plague."

"And most of my people," said Westler, "believe their destiny is hand in glove with the destiny of the Robots. They put it this way: we are hated by the rest of mankind, we are apparently not hated by the Robots. Why not cooperate with them, then? Actually, a free band of Shining Ones as large as Keleher's is the exception, not the rule. Every day, more and more Shining Ones go to the Citadel in New York or elsewhere to work for the Robots. Not a pretty picture, is it?"

"What can we do about it?"

"At present, I don't have the slightest notion. We've got to do something, though. Someone's got to do something, unless nature's ready to write off mankind as a bad experiment. Perhaps I am a

pedant, Johnny. I do not know. But I will tell you this: when all the great strides in human history were made, the pedants, the scholars paved the way. I want to see the Citadel not only to learn but to see if there is something, some way, to end the reign of the Robots. It seems incredible that men, their makers, lacked the foresight to equip them with an Achilles Heel, if the need ever arose."

A BRUPTLY, Johnny motioned Westler down with a wave of his hand. "It looks like you're going to find out soon enough. Take a look."

Johnny parted the bushes in front of them. Here the dirt path had angled sharply toward the highway so that not more than thirty yards separated them. Marching silently along the concrete in the direction of New York, quiet but for the clanking of their joints, was a long file of Robots.

"Spongey metal foot-pads." whispered Westler, staring eagerly at the Robots. "We built fine fighting machines, Johnny, and now find we have to suffer the consequences."

Johnny nodded impatiently, hardly feeling philosophical. "This is what we came here for, Amos," he said. "Afraid?"

"To tell you the truth, I'm not

sure yet."

Johnny was not sure, either, but did not want to brood about it. He stood up recklessly, forcing his way through the undergrowth toward the highway. By the time he reached it, Westler trailing uncertainly at his heels, he was shouting. It worked magically. The long line of Robots, extending as far as they could see to the left and several hundred yards to the right, stopped its steady advance. The great metal heads, each bigger than a man, swiveled on the sockets which joined them with the tiny bodies. The unblinking eyes which now faced them—another set for each Robot surveyed the rear, Johnny knew—were lined up row on row.

"We want to join you," Johnny called out. "We want employment in the Citadel." Did a human ask a Robot for employment? Johnny hardly knew, for nothing had been further from his mind until recently.

The leading Robot came back down the line toward them. Johnny could read nothing in the artificial eyes and had to check a wild impulse to run.

"Sometimes I prefer the uncomplicated life of an unimaginative man of action," Westler moaned softly.

It was, Johnny knew, a good

point. He did not bother telling Westler that both traits had merged in him, which might have been better or worse, depending upon the circumstances.

Then the Robot was upon them.

"63-17-B?"

"Yes, sir?" All Robots, even those with a primary level of thought as high as 63-17-B and an existing secondary level, addressed Central Intelligence as sir.

"After exhaustive tests, it has been adjudged that an over-estimation has been made regarding your mental ability. Since that is the case, it will mechanically be necessary to change your position."

Sullenly, plotting shapeless revenge at a Central Intelligence which would never consider the possibility of an outside factor intervening unexpectedly and hence altering or spoiling what had been planned, 63-17-B listened to his fate.

"A position currently is vacant as supervisor of the Shining Ones in a section of the repair bays. Do you have any objections to assuming this new duty in place of the old?"

To object was disastrous. To object was to admit you needed not merely a lesser job commensurate with your lesser skill but also complete readjustment of your

thinking process. "No objections at all, sir," thought 63-17-B, all the while smouldering with resentment. His time would come. What was the old human expression about every dog having his day?

"Then you will report at once to repair bay 151. Do you know its location?"

"I will find it." That was the prescribed answer. One rarely asked questions. One found out for oneself from Central Information. 63-17-B half thought he was still being tested in some less-obvious and hence all the more deadly fashion. But to be placed in charge of a gang of humans! It was degrading.

"In time, 63-17-B, you shall be tested again. If it is our opinion you have gained back what we thought you once possessed, you will again be elevated to a higher station."

63-17-B cursed Central Intelligence on a private wavelength. Central Intelligence was the creator of perfect plans. If a plan misfired, Central Intelligence could not be held responsible. Since accidents of nature had never been considered valid excuses, blame always fell on the executing Robot. Until recently, 63-17-B had managed to beat the system, largely through luck. Now while he realized it was the most mechanical thing in

the world to do as you were told, he could not hide his bitter disappointment. But he pushed it from his mind all at once when he felt another mind nibbling at his private wavelength. No one could be trusted, not when each Robot tried to outdo every other Robot in the eyes of Central Intelligence, not when private thoughts could be intercepted by monitors, not when communal thinking was considered preferable to individual thinking.

... That thought made 63-17-B shudder, his joints clanking as a sudden surge of power, the electrical equivalent of adrenal secretions, coursed through his frame. He was indeed thinking not along the prescribed lines. Probably something *was* wrong with him.

THIS is ironical," said Amos Westler as the first inert Robot came sliding down the conveyor belt to stop, a rusted man-shaped creature twice man's size with huge conical head and withdrawn antenna, in front of his bench. "We'll never learn anything this way. You won't learn the whereabouts of Diane at this bench, and I won't learn what I've come to find out."

"We're not on duty twenty-four hours a day," Johnny reminded him, unfastening leg-joints with a

large, wrench-like instrument and wiping the parts with an oily rag before he reassembled them. "If Diane is here, I'll find her."

"Well, we've learned nothing so far. They took us into the Citadel through a tile-walled tunnel—"

"Surely one of the wonders of the world!" Johnny cried, remembering.

"The world has many wonders, natural and man-made, if we could but see them. Anyway, they then deposited us in those underground quarters where all the humans seem to live here. The old hag interviewed us—"

"Yes. She wouldn't say if she'd seen Starbuck and Diane or not when I described them, but it sure made her smile. I think they're here in the Citadel, Amos."

"— then assigned us to this repair bay for work. Do you realize that except for the brief time it took to go from the tunnel exit to the underground quarters, we haven't seen the light of day. Try learning something in these, these caves!"

Without warning, the conveyor belts were stilled. Hidden lighting in the walls flared brighter as a group of Robots entered the large vault.

"ATTENTION!" A voice blared at them, oddly metallic. Johnny could not tell where it came from.

"Robot 63-17-B is now entering the vault. As your supervisor, 63-17-B is to be obeyed as if he were Central Intelligence itself. He is to be addressed not directly, but through your human supervisor."

The Robot numbered 63-17-B (but the numbers were hidden under the central face plate and you hardly could tell the machines apart) made a brief inspection of the vault, then climbed to his niche in the wall, where he sat completely without motion while the other Robots filed from the chamber.

"Although we can't address the Robot, our supervisor can," Westler said eagerly. "That means, at least, communication of some sort is possible."

"I guess so. Why don't you get to know the supervisor?"

"You're much better at that sort of thing than I am, Johnny?"

"We came here for different reasons, don't forget. There's an old hag I'd like to answer more questions when I find her."

"Here comes our supervisor now," Westler whispered. Then, aloud: "My name is Amos Westler."

"I don't care what it is. It's recorded. Keep working, friend." The supervisor was a brutal-faced man who snarled out his words. His jaw, cheekbones and forehead were

silver-sheened with Plague scar, with the Plague silver remaining there as well as on his limbs. His face seemed metallic as a Robot's.

"See?" Westler whispered in despair as another damaged Robot slid to a stop in front of them.

Johnny offered a wan grin. "Take it easy," he said, but hardly felt more than the last remaining shreds of patience within himself. If the old hag wouldn't talk when he saw her tonight . . .

"DON'T bother calling me names, young man," cackled the hag. "I'm virtually immune. It is against existing regulations to give you that information since it is felt all ties with the past and the outside world must be broken, not gradually but at once."

"Listen," Johnny said desperately, "you must remember your own youth." He had tried every other verbal assault he could think of. Now he hardly thought flattery would work on the ancient bag of bones in front of him, but it seemed his last hope. "You must have had your lovers in your day, were you as attractive for your years as a younger woman . . ."

Something melted in the hag's eyes. She scrubbed her breastbone with the knuckles of one parchment hand, as if preening. "Why, yes," she admitted.

"I'm in love with the girl. You must know how I feel. He—he took her." At least in part, it was the truth. In love with Diane? He'd never thought of it, yet what had impelled him to battle Keleher in an uneven fight, to set out for New York when he could have ruled the encampment instead, to surrender himself to the Robots of the Citadel? Johnny smiled. Trying to awaken something in the hag, he had succeeded in awakening something, all right, but in himself.

"Such information I cannot give you, young man—"

"And I thought you remembered your youth!"

"—but they say the view from the corridor 13 exit is magnificent. To reach it, one travels along corridor 14, which is a dormitory for some of our young, unmarried women." The hag cackled. "Don't get caught."

"I won't. Thank you."

"Good luck, my boy." The hag patted his shoulder, crowed something which he failed to hear, disappeared from the room.

Outside at a forking of four corridors, Johnny found a map and studied it. Lights recessed high on the walls showed him his direction, and soon he was pounding down the corridors and praying silently that the hag knew what she was

talking about. By the time he reached corridor 14 he was breathless.

Several young women stood in the corridor talking. Their chatter was stilled when they saw Johnny, and those who had been in various stages of undress hastened to cover themselves. Clearly, it was not common for a man to venture this way, particularly at night.

"Are you lost, man?"

"No. I'm looking for someone. A girl named Diane."

They were smiling, and Johnny began to wonder. He suspected that corridor trysts were not particularly uncommon.

"Is she expecting you?" demanded the boldest of the women, who had stepped to the fore while her more timid companions drew back, ready to dart into the surrounding cubicles.

"I cannot truthfully say," Johnny admitted. "If she knew I was in the Citadel, I think she would be expecting me." But even that was with tongue in cheek, for ever since he had refused to fight with Starbuck, Diane had said not a word to him.

"This Diane, what does she look like?"

Johnny described her. When he finished, the woman chuckled. "Could you perhaps be trysting? From your description, I would say

you love the girl, for no woman could be so beautiful. I think I know who you mean, though."

Still chuckling, the tall woman entered one of the cubicles while her companions melted away into the others. Soon Johnny stood alone in the corridor, waiting as nervously as a youth in Hamilton Village might wait while the village matchmaker entered a house to fetch him his bride. Someone appeared in the doorway. Not the tall woman. Diane!

"Johnny . . . Johnny Hope . . ."

"Diane, I never thought I would see you again. I thought Starbuck . . ."

"I was so afraid for you, because you couldn't adjust to your new life, because I thought you might do something desperate. I was a fool, I should have known why you refused to fight with Starbuck. Johnny, Johnny . . . let me look at you."

"Look later," he said, his eyes suddenly, unexpectedly misty. He drew her to him and for a long time stood there with her, feeling the beat of her heart tight against him, the warmth of her body and long smoothness of limbs. She was trembling, the warmth of her all a-flutter against him. She was murmuring something softly against his shoulder. He was whispering in her ear, "I love you. I love you,

Diane . . ."

HER lips were perfumed and yielding, her arms went behind him, hands joining behind his neck, then playing with his hair. The Plague, his exile from Hamilton Village, the fight with Keleher, the long trek, even captivity in the Citadel—all were a small price to pay, he thought dreamily, then abruptly drew back.

"We don't want to stay here all our lives," he said.

"I'll go anywhere with you, Johnny."

"Save that for later, darling—but I love to hear it. I don't think we'd have much trouble leaving the Citadel."

"Not if we go tonight, we wouldn't. Every day I work with Starbuck, but if we left at once, now, tonight!"

Her new-found enthusiasm not only matched his, but added wings to it. He was on the point of saying yes, of leading her through the corridors in a dash for freedom, when he remembered. "We can't," he said. "Not tonight. We've got to include Amos Westler in our plans."

"Westler is here?"

Johnny explained the situation to her, then added, "Tonight Westler went looking for some information about the Robots. He feels

certain they have an Achilles Heel someplace, if only he can find it. Actually, it won't be easy dragging him away from the Citadel, even tomorrow night."

"We can wait one night longer, sweetheart. You convince him tomorrow."

"I don't like the thought of leaving you alone again until tomorrow night."

Diane stilled his words by placing cool fingers to his lips. "We have no choice. I can take care of myself one night more."

"Starbuck?"

"I can take care of myself in that respect, too. Go back to your dormitory and get some sleep."

"Tomorrow night. Same time, same place. Westler will be with me."

They came close and drank of each other again. They parted, Johnny edging down the corridor backwards until the last shaft of light disappeared from the entrance to Diane's cubicle. His head was whirling in a giddy new delight, in a rapture which clouded his mind with a buoyant optimism which almost made him forget the Citadel, the Robots, and men like Harry Starbuck . . .

Footsteps pounding down the hall, heavy, too heavy for a woman's. Quickly, Johnny flattened himself in the darkness of a niche

which served some nameless purpose. With the light behind it, a shadow loomed, reared up toward him.

It was Harry Starbuck.

Johnny held his breath until the big man with the smug boy's face strode past. Heading for Diane? In all probability, yes. Follow him? Stop him? Attack him? Wild thoughts ran their course through Johnny's head. And lose everything, all they were looking forward to, for his impulsiveness? Footsteps receded. The shadow vanished. Even if he could follow Starbuck, overpower him and escape with Diane, their secret would be secret no longer, which would leave Amos Westler to fare for himself.

Wait for tomorrow, Johnny Hope. His course seemed clear, yet he had to fight himself all the way back down the corridor until he had reached the male dormitories.

For many hours—which seemed like days—he waited up for Amos Westler, but his thoughts were all with Diane. If Starbuck so much as touched her . . .

CHAPTER VII

"I FOUND it, Johnny! It was so obvious, it seems incredible no one has tried to end the Robot's

reign before. We can do it. One man could do it, alone. One man, with careful planning—”

“Diane is here, Amos. I saw her tonight. We’re going to try to break out tomorrow night, the three of us.”

“You see,” Westler went on, “there are two items of importance to consider. The first is Central Intelligence, the mind, the *elan vital*, the sentience which motivates the Robots. Did you know, could you ever imagine, that there was but one Central Intelligence for the entire western hemisphere, Johnny? It seems incredible, but it is not. That was the Achilles Heel we sought, the seed of destruction which some pessimistic scientist had sown into the Robots in case man had created a Frankenstein.”

“Can you believe it? Tomorrow night, the three of us will be on our way out of here. I think we stand a good chance, Amos. If we—”

“The second item—why, what in the world are you talking about? Escape? Now? Never! Within our grasp is the chance to free humanity from a thraldom which it does not yet fully recognize. Would you give up the chance to render the Robots harmless in exchange for your own personal safety?”

“Not mine. Diane’s. We love

each other, Amos. I wouldn’t expose her to any danger. We’re leaving tomorrow and we want you to come with us.”

Westler paced back and forth, caged in spirit more than in body. “Look at you,” he said bitterly. “You call yourself a man. But have you the right to a woman’s love when you think only of tomorrow, of one day out of thousands, of one small life out of all that humanity has to offer? You want to hold the girl and kiss her and show her your virility, eh? While the rest of the race goes to pot.”

“That’s enough, Amos!” Johnny cried. “My motives are my own. We leave here tomorrow.”

“You’re weak, Johnny Hope. You’re a coward.”

Johnny said, “Shut up, damn you.” He couldn’t deny all that Amos was saying, but his parents had perished at the hands of a man-made Plague, he had been driven from his home, rejected by the Shining Ones, even, until he proved himself in battle. What did he owe to humanity, to that big, sprawling concept which took in all kinds of men and their women, children, good people, bad ones, big and small, with every type of mind and every type of body . . . ?

“All right, marry the girl. Will

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you raise a family? You're Shining Ones, Johnny, both of you. The rest of humanity fears you, and rightfully. Your children will be stoned away if they venture near normal people. Perhaps life with the Robots would be best for them after all.

"Here you have the chance to stop all that. Not only could we negate the power of the Robots, but we could destroy the Plague as well. Did you hear me, we could destroy the Plague? Before you give me your final answer, let me tell you what I found."

"I'm listening. But—"

"But nothing. Only listen. This Central Intelligence is a vast cybernetics machine occupying an entire building—ironically, it is the United Nations building where once were housed the dreams of mankind. Now, understand this, Johnny. Every Robot in North and South America has its own particular wavelength, although the master intelligence is in tune with all of them. Each individual Robot sentience is dependent for its existence upon the great cybernetics machines in Central Intelligence. In other words, if you were to destroy them, at one blow you would 'kill' every Robot in the hemisphere!"

"How did you find all that out?"

WESTLER smiled. "There was one thing the Robots did not bargain for—an ex-college professor! The information was available in, of all places, the main library for humans here in the city. It took some finding, but as an old hand at research I had an edge even on the Robots with their mechanical minds. Anyway, all you'd have to do is destroy this Central Intelligence, and—"

"Might as well say destroy the moon, Amos. It's probably so well guarded a whole Army of men couldn't break through, let alone two of us."

"That's right," Westler said eagerly, "men could never hope to get through, but Robots could."

"What are you talking about?"

"The second thing I learned tonight. Once again, it was so deeply cross-referenced, so thoroughly hidden away that although it was available if one knew where to look, the science of research is such a dead thing that no one knew of its existence, probably not even the Robots. Johnny, the earliest model Robots, were built to function in a double fashion. They were Robots, yes—but they are also compartments in which a man can fit for manual control. They were originally designed, you might say, as glorified suits of armor. While the research material is nat-

urally old, all I could gather seems to indicate that no changes have ever been made structurally in those early models. In other words, a man could climb inside a Robot today, right now, and no one would know the difference."

"You're forgetting one thing," Johnny pointed out. "Are you going to walk up to a Robot and tell him, 'Pardon me, old fellow, I'd like to borrow you and use you for a disguise for a while'?"

"I'm not forgetting anything. We work in the repair bays, remember? We have access to partially dismantled Robots. We could find ourselves two dismantled old ones, somehow manage to get inside, make our way to Central Intelligence . . . "

"I still haven't said I'm going to do it. I'd like to help you, Amos. I'll take your word about the plan. It has possibilities. But that still has nothing to do with my own problems. Right now Diane is the most important thing."

"Diane's future, your future, all our futures ultimately depend on this. What's the matter with you? You fail to see the forest for the trees. Tomorrow, what's tomorrow, with all mankind's days ahead of us—slave or free? Perhaps one man could do the job alone, although two would have a better chance. But I think you

know I'm not the man for the job. I don't await your answer, Johnny Hope. I've no one else to turn to. Humanity awaits your answer."

"Let me think," said Johnny, waving Westler away when he would have continued talking. More quickly than he dared hope, he had found Diane. With equal swiftness, Westler had discovered what he sought. That left Johnny in the middle of a tug-of-war which wouldn't wait indefinitely for his answer.

AS the closing gong sounded, 63-17-B watched the Shining Ones shuffle away from their benches and make their way down the corridor toward the cafeteria which would serve them an unimaginative but well-balanced evening meal. But two humans remained behind, talking avidly over the gleaming bodies of two stripped-down Robots. Strange, thought 63-17-B, who was now confronted with the first even mildly unusual event since taking over the dull routine of his new job that they should continue working after the closing gong had sounded. He could summon Hartness, the scarred human supervisor, and have him talk with the two, or . . . Hartness, his metal-jointed foot! He would do no such thing. If perhaps the humans were up to some mischief,

and if it did not endanger 63-17-B's own position still further, then let them play. If it gave a few Robots and even Central Intelligence a hard time for a while, it served them right. Of course, nothing really serious could come from the tampering of two helpless humans . . .

"What about that guy up there?" Johnny raised an eyebrow in the direction of the supervising Robot, motionless on his stone perch. "Is he watching us?"

"It appears that he is. Unfortunately, we can't do a thing about it. At least not until we find out if these gadgets will work with us inside them. Here, Johnny—you see these tiny items? These are transistors, using germanium instead of a vacuum grid to activate electrons, smaller, more compact, more powerful, of longer life. Without them the whole science of cybernetics which ultimately made the Robots possible would never have advanced beyond the rudimentary stage. For with transistors replacing vacuum tubes you still need the entire U. N. building to house Central Intelligence. Under the older system, all New York City would not have been enough."

"Tell me later," Johnny pleaded. "I want to get started. The longer we delay here the longer it will take until we're finished.

And I still have that appointment with Diane tonight. I couldn't contact her during the day because she said she works with Starbuck. We've got to hurry."

Westler's hands, guiding the complex tools, moved with swift efficiency, as if, indeed, he had worked with the Robots all his life. Wires were crossed, insulated, re-arranged. Gaps and relays were tested and retested, gears changed, long-unused parts oiled, cleaned, checked for defects. Surface plates were clamped into place over layers of insulation. At last the two Robots lay there, supine but—Westler hoped—ready for human use.

"He's still watching," said Johnny.

"Let him. We couldn't prevent him. Only hope he suddenly doesn't decide to come down here for a closer look or send for help. It seems amazing he's done neither so far."

"Maybe he's asleep."

"Robots do not sleep. I assure you. Well, it's ready." Westler reached into the Robots' interior before clamping on the final head plates. Each Robot stood up in ponderous silence.

"You first, Johnny. I can clamp my plate from the inside. Are you sure my explanations on how to work this were satisfactory? Once inside we'll have to contact each

other by signals only."

"What about the radio sets inside? I don't know much about radio, but you said they worked."

"They do, but the wavelength might be too close to a Robot wavelength and we'd give ourselves away. Remember, we are to be nothing more or less than two Robots once we climb inside. That way, there shouldn't be any trouble. All ready? Up you go."

Johnny was boosted up, pulled himself within the cramped interior of the Robot. There was barely room for him to stand upright, his shoulders hunched, arms tight in front of him. A dizzying mass of dials and levers confronted him suddenly, and although Westler had explained them and diagrammed them and made Johnny memorize them, he was still bewildered by direct contact. He was almost afraid to try his first movement, lest the Robot remain immobile.

The face plate slammed home. Johnny could see through the one-way plastic of the Robot's eyes as Westler climbed into his own machine.

Johnny pulled the starting lever and felt his Robot lurch forward. Must learn to control the motion . . . so . . . he was now aware of a lumbering gait, of a steady advance toward the farther wall . . .

Something made him whirl and peer through the rear eyes. The Robot supervisor was coming toward them at a rate of speed they couldn't match.

"YOU see?" said Starbuck proudly. "I am no longer a servant. I suppose you would call me a junior executive now. But I'm on the way up. Definitely on the way up. In a while there is no telling how far I can go."

"I'm sure of it," Diane nodded agreement. She didn't want to be bothered by Starbuck today, not when her thoughts were all on the night and Johnny. She was so nervous she couldn't keep from looking anxious. If only Starbuck, all wrapped up in himself the way he was, would fail to see it for a few hours longer.

"I suppose you wonder how I can advance so rapidly. It is quite simple, Diane. I look around me. I make contacts. I miss nothing. As an example, I even know of your meeting with Johnny Hope last night."

"What!"

"I wouldn't really mind it, except that my informant said you are considering escape from the Citadel. That, of course, is out of the question."

In his short time at the Citadel, Diane realized, Starbuck had af-

fected a way of speaking which hardly fit his booming voice or boyish face. It was as if he had decided to ape the Shining Ones who stood highest in the Robots' confidence. To Diane it was contemptuous, although now her mind was awhirl with the thought that she and Johnny had been discovered.

"What are you going to do?" she asked in a small, helpless voice.

"Hope will be arrested. Naturally, he will never be permitted to see you again."

Diane stared at Starbuck in horror. Johnny must be found and warned. There was still time. They could alter their plans, this time in secrecy, without any women around who could spy on them for Starbuck. But she had to find Johnny before it was too late.

In sudden despair, she realized she didn't even know where to look.

CHAPTER VIII

STOP! Stand perfectly still. The thought was unexpected, peremptory, driving into Johnny's brain with more authority than any words. He wanted to stop, wanted to immobilize the Robot in which he hid—but where had the thought come from?

Westler's Robot was pointing a

many-jointed metal arm at the supervising Robot which rushed toward them. Then, did the thought originate there? Could the Robot somehow send a soundless message to them?

Stop! Let me dismantle you.

The urge to render his own Robot motionless became stronger within Johnny. It was as if the unbidden thought originated outside his head but tried to direct his own muscles, as surely as his own mind.

Something made soft beeping noises in his ear and it took a while before he realized Westler wanted to break their radio silence, so soon after they had started. The other Robot was almost upon them.

Awkward and uncomfortable in his cramped quarters, Johnny found the radio switch and pulled it.

"We've got to destroy that Robot, Johnny. Now, at once, or we're finished."

"But how—"

The Robot was upon them, its unbidden thoughts stronger.

Halt . . .

It was Johnny who struck the first blow — clumsily, lifting his great right arm up and bringing it down stiffly on the other Robot's head. Metal arms came up, swung blurringly. A clangling tumult deafened Johnny as dents appeared

inside the chamber of his own Robot's head. He triggered the levers mechanically now, aware that they were fighting under a tremendous disadvantage, for their fingers were still stiff on the unfamiliar controls and their artificial reflexes could not hope to match the Robot's.

"Look out, Johnny—"

Two metal shapes loomed, Westler and the real Robot. The three of them came together, clashing, clanging, metal arms swinging and wrecking metal bodies. It was Westler's Robot which went down first, slowly, buckling at the knee joints and then collapsing. Metal feet drove down upon it ponderously, crushing the head section. Westler's Robot was still.

Johnny hammered with huge metal hands at the other robot hardly knowing where he might strike a mortal blow. But the Robot slowed, its reactions grew feeble, its blows denting Johnny's head-chamber no longer. Finally, it sprawled across Westler's Robot, then rolled away and was still.

Cursing to himself, Johnny climbed down from his Robot, found the battered head plate of Westler's, forced it open.

He saw at once he could never hope to extricate the older man, for the metal walls of his chamber had been crushed, knifing into bone and flesh and trapping him.

"Amos, can you hear me?"

THE eyelids fluttered opened with pain. "I never will see the end, Johnny . . ."

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't . . . fool me. I'm all broken, inside. I—"

"We'll get you out of there in no time."

"You'd have to melt . . . the metal down to . . . do it, and you know it."

"We'll do it."

Your only hope is that the Robot did not have time to broadcast a warning. If . . . he did . . . you will have to hurry, but—"

"They still don't know our plans. Maybe they think we only want to escape, using these Robot bodies for a disguise."

"Perhaps. I hadn't thought . . . of that." Westler lapsed into silence, his face twisted with pain. "If you can do it, if you can destroy their cybernetics center . . . new start for humanity. I was going to tell you about the Plague, Johnny. The Robots . . . have been using . . . a particularly virulent form of the . . . toxin which does not exist naturally. Spreading it in the air, all over the earth. That, combined with the . . . toxin carried by a Shining One, causes illness . . . and death." Westler's words were harder to hear now,

low, the barest whisper of sound. Johnny leaned close to the glazed eyes, the barely opening lips. "When the Robots are . . . gone . . . the Plague will die out almost at once. Shining Ones even will be harmless. You see why it's so important? You see . . . "

"I could never do it without you. We'll hide away somewhere, nurse you back to health—"

"Stop fooling . . . an old man. We both know I'm dying."

"That's ridiculous."

"Please . . . don't interrupt me. I want to finish telling you . . . the Robots communicate with humans by telepathy. You witnessed it yourself, a few . . . minutes ago. They can make it seem like your own thoughts and . . . who can say? Thought waves are electromagnetic, like . . . so many other things. There is nothing mysterious about . . . telepathy. Give humanity a chance to study what the . . . Robots have done and . . . you'll have civilization flourishing again within a generation. Give humanity the chance . . . " It was a whisper, a prayer.

On that final note of hope, Wester died.

“THE human has emerged from the underground within his Robot and is heading northeast across the city."

"I still think we ought to stop him now, while we know we can do it."

"Silence. Think on the primary level. In unity we will triumph. It is our one weapon they cannot hope to match."

"But 63-17-B warned us before he perished—"

"Precisely. That the humans were attempting something other than mere escape. We must find out what that is, what they have learned. Don't you realize that if this man fails another might succeed in his place? Whatever knowledge he has, perhaps it is widely disseminated. We must find out before we kill him."

There was a silence among the conclave of motionless Robots, their unblinking eyes intent upon a huge three-dimensional map of the city, following a tiny pip of light in its slow progress.

"He seems to be heading straight for Central Intelligence."

"That's hardly possible, unless it is mere coincidence."

"I don't think so . . . See? Not half a mile away, now."

"Have the supervisors discovered who is missing?"

"Yes. He was employed in the very repair bay where 63-17-B perished—a defective Robot, incidentally, and no great loss. We have given his name to the top-

level Shining Ones in the hope that they can help us."

"There is a Shining One, a human, here right now. He wants an audience concerning the rebel.

"Very well, although we'll have to make it brief."

Starbuck entered the chamber cockily, then lost his poise when he saw the solemn, unmoving conclave of Robots. "I have outside," he began, moistening his lips and talking rapidly, "a woman who this man, this Johnny Hope, loves. Can you understand me? Do you know what love is? He won't do a thing that might harm her."

We can understand.

"I thought that—"

We can read your thoughts. Leave your name with the Robot outside. Take this woman within the U. N. building and hold her there until you hear from us.

"The U. N. building?"

No questions. Go.

Starbuck shuffled from the room, self-conscious and fearful under the mental command.

"I doubt if we'll need the hostage, but you never can tell."

"It seems incredible that—"

"Does it? The man has almost reached the U. N. building. It will take him perhaps half an hour, for the rubble is piled high there. Underground he could reach it in a few moments, but apparently he

is unfamiliar with the passages."

"He has only recently arrived at the Citadel."

"Somehow, they have learned something. It is why we cannot kill the man until we are sure. Have them alerted at Central Intelligence, but let him enter. Watch him. If he blunders about as if he has arrived there by accident, kill him. If he knows something, take him alive."

"Someday we must learn the secret of Central Intelligence, if we are to survive. We must learn how to duplicate it or face the possibility of perishing in a single accident."

"Men built it once. Men could do it again."

"Defective! Silence. Man can do nothing we cannot do."

Then they were quiet, watching the tiny, darting pip on the three-dimensional map as it struggled through the uncleared rubble southwest of the U. N. building.

EVEN in ruin, the city held more wonders for Johnny Hope than he had ever thought possible. In many ways, it was like a scar on the face of the earth, pitted with bomb craters, strewn with the debris of toppled towers, its streets choked with fallen, crumbling masonry and blocked by the skeletons of buildings which

once had stood, bare and rusted now but not always so, as monuments to the greatness of man. Yet it was a scar which could be healed, a broken, dying city which could be made great again, with men and women roving its streets, repairing the structures, making the living city function once more.

That was Amos Westler's dream. It was the dream of all mankind, Johnny thought philosophically, although they did not realize it as they roved the earth in hunting-bands of Shining Ones or tilled its soil in small communities fearful of the Plague.

Now, directly ahead of him, he could see the monolithic slab of the U. N. building. Like one structure in five, it stood incredibly intact, a remembrance of the past and a promise of the future. We can build again, Johnny thought, without the Robots and the Plague. They could build again or they would die. Natural world or artificial world — men or Robots — they could not survive jointly.

Battered and broken but still functioning adequately, Johnny's Robot pushed through the debris south of the U. N. building to the edge of the river. He stood there a moment and stared upstream at the gaunt ruins of a bridge, now tumbled down the river and resting on the river-bottom, thrust-

ing its towers up beyond the surface of the water and toward the sky. Men had used that bridge once, long ago but within the memory of Johnny's father, to reach the country beyond. The bridge might be rebuilt. Men might learn to use it again. It was as if, in dying, Amos Westler had transferred his own vision to Johnny, showing him a dream of the unborn tomorrow — its birth or still-born death depending entirely upon Johnny's success or failure today.

Half a dozen Robots stood about the wide terrace leading to the building, but Johnny ignored them, for he had passed many in the broken streets of the city and grown accustomed to them. He entered the building through a door of glass and metal and was not aware of the Robots entering it behind him.

His impulse was to climb down from his Robot, to stretch his cramped arms and legs and find something to eat, then explore the wonders of this new place. Above his head, the ceiling was high and vaulted. Ramps led away, curving and graceful, in all directions and he longed to feel his feet, his own feet, upon them, and to explore until he satiated himself with this wonder and sought another.

To leave the Robot would be sui-

cide. Had the thought been his own—or a metal-made thought, instilled in him some unknown way, an unbidden suicide thought? It was less specific than the commands of the Robot that had perished in the repair bay, but Johnny guessed it came from outside nevertheless.

He advanced mechanically, for Westler had given him careful directions. The ramps led up, higher and higher, past the rooms in which men from many lands once, long ago, used to debate their future—then higher still, climbing

... There was noise behind him. He whirled in cramped quarters, peered from the Robot's second set of eyes. A dozen Robots climbed the ramp behind him, gaining. He let his mind drift blankly, let their thoughts reach him.

He is not wandering aimlessly. Somehow he learned. He learned. Capture him.

HE ran now, awkwardly, his own Robot not smooth and graceful, a flawless piece of machinery like the others. He clomped and clattered up the ramp and prayed for time.

The ramp soared upward, curved to the left. Once he looked down at the floor of the rotunda so far below and became giddy with the distance and the thought of falling.

He leaned over the railing and looked. His head whirled ...

At the last moment, he drew his Robot back from the edge, stabbing half-blindly at the controls which propelled it. They had almost driven him to suicide. He must keep his mind a perfect blank—or, better still, think of something which would keep them at bay. Diane, his love for her—Diane ...

A Robot waited for him at the top of the ramp. Those behind him were gaining rapidly, driving death-wishes deep within his brain.

The Robot above him abruptly swung into motion, but Johnny desperately sidestepped the lunge which would have sent him hurtling to the floor of the rotunda. The other Robot checked its own inertia and came for Johnny again, huge arms swinging, trying to crush him within the metal chamber as Amos Westler had been crushed. Johnny parried the blows with his own metal arms, then reached out and heard machinery groan within his metal frame as he lifted the other Robot and hurled it in the path of his pursuers.

There was a grinding, clattering crash of metal. Johnny saw three forms detach themselves from the arcing ramp and tumble, swinging and twisting in air grotesquely, to the floor, where they struck resoundingly and broke apart, the

metal arms and legs flying.

Then he was climbing again, the remaining Robots far below him and disorganized now. But soon, he knew, they would be capable of following.

It was as Amos Westler had predicted. After a time, the ramp grew smaller. It no longer climbed now—it had soared high and now was just below the girdered ceiling. It was hardly wide enough for Johnny's Robot, it shook dangerously with the tread of metal feet. Here, Johnny knew, was the sanctuary. This was the Achilles Heel. This was the entrance, this ramp which no Robot could traverse. Here the way led to self-functioning, self-repairing machinery, to Central Intelligence. Here was man's final hope in the eyes of the original inventor. Here was the guarantee that the Robots, if they became some Frankenstein monster, could be met and conquered.

For no Robot could guard the final portal to Central Intelligence. No Robot could even draw close enough to alter the thin ramp. Johnny smiled grimly as comprehension grew. If Robots could become neurotic, this was the place for it. They could have employed their human servants, the Shining Ones, to alter the place, but would have divulged their secret in the process.

Still smiling, Johnny halted his Robot, opened the face plate clumsily from the inside, and climbed out. He sat on the ramp and flexed stiff arms and legs, then stood up and heard the Robots below him. He could see them now, no longer advancing, milling about in confusion. Their weight would destroy the ramp, and they knew it. They could never hope to reach him.

It was all so incredibly simple. Was it?

One Robot had been above him.

Then they knew he was coming. What had they prepared for him beyond the point where the Robots could not climb? Shrugging, he advanced warily.

Soon he could see where the ramp reached a small doorway, much too low and narrow to admit a Robot, even if one of the machines could have climbed the ramp this far.

"Hold it,—Johnny Hope. Don't come any closer."

STARTLED, he looked up. Harry Starbuck stood in the doorway, holding Diane in front of him.

"I'm not fooling, Hope. If you come any closer I'll throw her off. It's a long way down."

"You're crazy, Starbuck. You'll never leave this place alive." But

even as he spoke, he knew he could never reason with the man. "The Robots can't let you carry their secret from here. Your only hope is to cooperate with me."

"Is that so? They're sending some more men up to get you. All I have to do is hold the fort until . . . cut it out, Hope! Stay right there." Starbuck edged out of the doorway, dragging Diane along with him to the railing at one side of the ramp. "I'll do it if you make me."

"Don't listen to him, Johnny! I'm not afraid." Hair disheveled, clothing torn, face bruised, she still looked beautiful to him. All at once she stood for everything Westler had mentioned; for the future of man, for the dreams of tomorrow, for a free world with no Plague and no Robots. But for Westler the choice would have been easy. The girl—or humanity.

Westler had not been in love.

Now Starbuck had forced Diane, back arched, breasts thrust forward, out over the railing. She struggled in his grip, but futilely. He could hurl her out over the edge and into space or not, as he wished.

"Back up, Hope. I want you to go back down the ramp and surrender to the Robots. You're only delaying things. More men will be here soon. You're licked and you know it."

Wearily, Johnny retreated. "Don't hurt her," he said. "Promise me that."

"You crazy? I want her for myself."

The thought numbed Johnny. He hadn't considered it that way. A live Diane or a dead one was one thing. But a Diane forced to submit to Starbuck . . .

He reached his own immobile Robot, saw the others, not twenty yards below him, waiting, thought he heard shouts somewhere behind them. He must do what he had come to do as if Diane did not exist. It was Starbuck who had made the choice for him.

But there was a wild possibility . . .

Quickly, he climbed within his Robot, activated it, lumbered forward. He could feel the ramp shaking with each step he took. At any moment, its struts might collapse and send him hurtling to his death, trapped in his man-shaped metal coffin, far below.

Soon he could see Starbuck again, on the ramp outside the doorway, holding Diane. Starbuck's eyes went wide. Starbuck frowned, then began to lick his lips anxiously.

"You can't come up here!" he cried. "It won't hold you. I sent the man down to surrender, anyway. Do you have him? Is he

dead? What do you want, anyway? I can come down myself. Don't come any closer, not unless you want the ramp to collapse. Keep away, you hear me?"

Johnny advanced slowly, the ramp shaking with each stride no longer, but dipping and rocking constantly now, almost ready to go. Starbuck retreated, taking Diane with him. Through the doorway they went—

Out fell the faceplate of Johnny's Robot. He tumbled after it as the ramp shook, metal grinding against metal, then snapped. He leaped forward as the ramp caved in. He felt his feet shoot out from under him, saw metal dropping away, twisting, to his left. He clawed out with his hands, gripped a jagged edge, pulled himself up slowly as blood made his hands slip.

He stood in what was left of the doorway, trembling as reaction set in, his heels on the brink of nothing, his bloodied hands aching.

Starbuck roared and charged at him, attempting to drive him back a few inches to his death. But Johnny caught him, met him halfway with no room to evade the charge, and they grappled there, teetering on the edge.

"You tricked me," Starbuck moaned. "That Robot . . . was you."

A KNEE blurred up at Johnny, exploding in violent pain. He felt himself falling and managed to twist away from the edge of the sundered ramp. He hit the floor with waves of nausea boiling up from his stomach. He lay there, blinking his eyes.

Starbuck came for him.

He drew his legs up instinctively, the knees bent, then straightened as Starbuck leaned over him. His feet caught the big man squarely on the chest, lifted him, pushed —

Starbuck went over the edge of the ramp, screaming all the way down.

Inside, Johnny found Diane, dazed, on the floor. He ignored her. She could wait, for now he was a man possessed. The machinery which he could never hope to understand was all about him bank on bank of it lining the walls, humming with its strange, sentient energy, glowing and flickering with a million lights.

Kill yourself.

Two words, clamoring, insistent, inside his skull. Their final hope . . . He felt himself edging back toward the doorway, and the death which awaited him just outside. He looked at Diane, huddled on the floor, her lips parted—"Johnny . . ."

I love you, he thought. The words of death and those of life

and hope fought inside his skull, twisting his brain, battling there for mastery . . .

He found something, a length of metal rod. He ripped it loose and began to attack the machinery he would never understand. He was a wild man. The strength flowed in from elsewhere, raising his arm, swinging it high over his head and down. Sparks flew as his metal club battered the crystalline tubes, the delicate wiring, the metal cases. Glass shattered, sprinkled him, brought blood from a dozen cuts on his face. Electricity hummed, then shrieked, then wailed off distantly on a register too high for his ears.

Raise his arm and plunge . . . lift it and bring it down, battering, the metal club part of him . . .

It was Diane who eased the twisted rod from his fingers, soothed him with her words. "It's finished. Easy, Johnny. You've done it."

The place was a shambles. Bank on bank of gutted machinery lay silent there, on a floor strewn with glass, with wire, with filaments, with nameless things which were the brains for a million Robots.

"There's another way out, Johnny. Starbuck took me here. Behind that wall, you—"

She took his hand and they went.

The passage was dark and cool and smelled musty, as if air did not circulate very well within it. It was a place for thinking and dreaming of tomorrow. It was a place for realizing you could go back to the hills and find Keleher and his Shining Ones and convince them they should at least look at the City, the City which belonged to them now, to them and DeReggio and his villagers—and all the others. And there must be a coming together of Keleher and DeReggio, with Johnny as mediator, and a realization that the last Plague victim had been smitten and humanity had a long path to travel but could set foot upon it right now, at once.

Outside, it was growing dark, but Johnny could make out the still forms of the Robots, gleaming red with final sunlight, sprawled upon the broken streets. The Shining Ones within the City stalked about furtively in small groups, not yet knowing what it meant to live without their masters. Perhaps in time Keleher and all the others could teach them.

"Hungry?" said Johnny. "We could stop and eat."

"No. You?"

"In a different way."

They followed the last slanting rays of the sun to the western river and the mainland beyond it.