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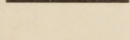
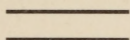
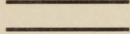
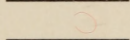
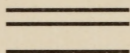
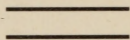
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He fought the invasion of
the brain-snatchers

BEACHHEAD PLANET

ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS





THE HIVE OF HELL

Valthor looked down with mingled awe and terror at the scene below him. Once this had been a vast network of mines; now it was being transformed into a gigantic hivelike complex deep beneath the earth.

Thousands upon thousands of the little robot men were working with their picks and shovels. Directing them were grotesque two-headed monsters with deadly atomic guns. And wandering amid the maze were green-fleshed creatures who had once been human.

And somewhere, unseen but ever-present, inspecting Valthor even as he stood here, were the all-powerful, all-knowing beings he had come to battle. . . .

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BEACHHEAD PLANET

ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

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**BEACHHEAD
PLANET**

RECEIVED
JAN 19

CHAPTER ONE

The big jet helicopter was sliding toward a slow approach to the landing pad of the newly rebuilt ghost town of Golden Fleece, Colorado.

As the big ship was slipping down between the surrounding mountains, an almost-naked man came stumbling out of a mine tunnel dug long before into the slope above the landing field. He was in mad flight from something that existed, or that he *thought* existed, somewhere in the vast maze of underground tunnels and shafts that old-time miners had dug in these mountains in search of gold.

He saw the big helicopter in the sky almost level with him and so close that he thought he could reach out and touch it with his hand as it went by. Through the windows, he saw the ship crammed with passengers.

As though his hope of life itself depended on attracting the attention of the pilots or the passengers of the helicopter, he lifted his left hand and waved frantically.

Bzt!

A missile that sounded like an angry hornet came from behind and above him. It struck his upflung arm at the elbow, cutting flesh and smashing bone.

And from the broken elbow, light as bright as that from a white-hot sun blazed into existence.

The man did not seem to realize that his arm was hit. He ducked away from the sound in full flight like a batter avoiding a bean ball and turned his head to look behind him. Above the mine tunnel was a heavy growth of stunted cedar from which a single tall fir lifted itself. He stared at the clump of trees but seeing nothing there, he looked suspiciously at the mine tunnel from which he had fled.

He saw nothing.

Except for his shorts, which looked as if they had been shredded by animal claws, the man was naked—no shirt, no pants, no shoes. His feet were bleeding from the sharp rocks over which he had run, but he seemed unaware of them.

Only after some time did he notice his left arm. It was not the pain that called his attention to his arm, it was the intense light puffing outward there. It was as if, below the surface of the skin, a blowtorch had begun to burn, igniting flesh, blood, and broken bone—and simultaneously destroying all of them.

He still did not feel the pain—if there was pain—but the sight of the intense flame that burned without smoke reminded him of something. He began to moan like an animal caught in a trap. Grasping his left arm with his right hand, he pulled the injured member tight against his stomach.

He did not look again toward the clump of stunted cedars nor toward the open mouth of the old mine tunnel. It was as if he did not want to see what he suspected was there. The roar of the helicopter's vanes caught and held his attention. He stared at the ship. Inside the helicopter he could see passengers staring downward at the old mining town—but not at him. Releasing his left arm, he tried to wave with his right hand, struggling to make gestures indicating that he

wanted help, that he had to have help immediately if he was to live.

The movement of his right hand was seen by whatever lurked on the slope above him.

Bzt!

Again an angry hornet leaped downward. The sound it made was like the shriek of a small projectile splitting the air molecules as it moved. It was similar to—but was *not*—the whistle of wings moving at near supersonic speed. It was like—but was *not*—the scream of a rotating bullet fired from a high-powered rifle. Perhaps the sound was actually like the shriek of ions moving at mad speed within the enclosure of an atomic lattice that turned them forever inward upon themselves, the tortured energy screaming to be free from its limited space. It was a small sound, this *bzt*, like the whistle of a hornet charging full tilt at an enemy, but its intensity could only have come from a mighty source.

The hornet missed the already wounded man. Passing within an inch of his ear, it arrowed downward. He jerked his head around to stare behind him. The mouth of the tunnel held his attention. This tunnel had been dug when the gold rush had made big news in the region. To keep the roof from falling, the old miners had added supporting timbers, some of which had fallen outward in the more than a century that had passed since the mine had been worked. Now several of the timbers were lying askew, partly in the tunnel and partly out of it, with the result that the gaping hole of the old mine looked like the mouth of some monster that had once lived within and which died in trying to crawl out of its rocky home, the fallen timbers at the tunnel's exit giving the impression of broken fangs.

The man stared at the mouth of the tunnel as if it really were the mouth of a dead monster. His gaze then moved to the clump of cedar, and from there to the skyline. Confusion showed in his face. His body stank

and looked as if a greenish oil had soaked deep into his skin.

Below, unnoticed by him in his intent searching, the helicopter spun itself into a soft landing and blew clouds of dust from the newly constructed landing pad. Reception committees, already on hand, had begun to gather the moment the helicopter had been sighted in the sky. The mayor and two aides were there, buttoned up in old-style coats, along with the sheriff and one deputy, whose big stars shone on their shirts and who wore their pistols in holsters at their hips—all with big friendly smiles for the ship's passengers. A few residents of Golden Fleece had gathered, too. An old-time prospector, white-bearded and bent with age, who had been leading a loaded burro up the main street, paused at the edge of the pad to grin toothlessly at the flying ship that had landed there.

Inside the big helicopter, nervous stewardesses looked out at the reception committees. Their passengers had come from places as far away as New York and Chicago, a few had come from St. Louis, and many had come from nearby Denver to see what had happened to the old mining town of Golden Fleece. For their benefit, the old dance halls that had flourished during the mining boom had been put back into order: the old saloons had been refurbished, the old dance halls rebuilt. Modern misses had been trained to resemble the pretty waitresses of bygone days. Mustachioed bartenders in checkered vests had been reestablished in the old saloons. Old-time player pianos had been lifted in via helicopters. In the old days, Golden Fleece had been supplied by a narrow-gage steam railroad, but the old rails had been removed in a scrap-iron drive of the past, and the roadbed had been converted into a road for automobiles. Since the road was just as narrow as the old railroad had been, with many tunnels and few turnout spots where cars could pass each other, hardly

any motorists cared to risk reaching the old town this way.

The Brocknor Corporation, which was responsible for rebuilding the old mining town, wanted visitors to come by helicopter. Not only was transportation safer by air, but the corporation could make a dollar by selling tickets, a dollar that could be added to another dollar made from the exhibits. The Brocknor Corporation hoped that these dollars would add up to a nice profit. Not that a profit was really important to the Corporation—it was government-financed for ultra-secret research work—but a profit would come in handy.

At the top of the canyon, where the old town was located, a large aluminum building had been erected. The men who worked there came down to the old-time saloons and dance halls for recreation when the day's work was done, but none of them ever spoke about their work to each other or to residents of the community. The building itself was surrounded by NO TRESPASSING signs.

The old mines were being reopened and new pumping equipment was brought in to remove the vast pools of underground water that had often forced the old miners to abandon veins of rich ore. Rumor had it that more gold was underwater in these mountains than had ever been taken out. Whether or not this was true, no one seemed to know; but one fact was certain, that the Brocknor Corporation was moving vast quantities of expensive equipment underground through the old shafts and tunnels. Powerful machines for digging tunnels, diesel-powered electrical generators, and much delicate electronic equipment moved in the same direction, its ultimate destination and use known only to the Brocknor Corporation.

Regular crews of miners worked underground, emerging at the end of each shift to clump down to the saloons and dance halls where they were as silent as the men who worked in the big new building at the head of the

canyon. In addition to the saloons and dance halls, the old-time grocery stores had been reestablished, carrying everything from side meat for the kitchen to gaudy suspenders for the man of the house and fancy doodads for the ladies. Beside one of the grocery stores in a vacant lot kids played marbles for keeps, learning early about gambling losses and gains.

Daily helicopter loads of tourists came from nearby Denver to wander through the old town, to peer at the old mine tunnels in the slopes, to listen to the old player pianos, and to do whatever else occurred to them to do. Late in the afternoon, the helicopters lifted them back to Denver.

Nobody ever counted to see if the same number of tourists departed as had arrived.

As this helicopter load came in, nobody saw the dazed man still squatting on the slope above the landing pad, still desperately searching, his eyes moving from the skyline to the clump of stunted cedars to the old mine tunnel with its fallen timbers in its gaping mouth.

When the blades of the helicopter stopped turning, the stewardesses opened the door of the big ship and the passengers began to file out. As tourists, their proper duty was to stare wide-eyed at everything in sight. At the edge of the landing pad, the mayor was clearing his throat, preparatory to making his set speech. He gave the same speech to every load of tourists. Little motor-drawn trains of open-sided cars were drawing up at the edge of the pad, waiting for the passengers from the ship to select which of the tours they would take first.

"Ladies and gentlemen—" the mayor began. He had a fine speaking voice, a little croaky and perhaps a little rustic, but readily understandable. "I want to welcome you to the beautiful community of Golden Fleece. Here we have restored for your enjoyment one of the most famous mining towns of the Old West. Everything has been reproduced exactly as it was in the old days—with one exception." Here the mayor paused to smile. When

he began to speak again, his voice had a chuckle in it. "Whereas in the old days bandits and road agents might sometimes be encountered in Golden Fleece, now the activities of the sheriff and his crew of loyal deputies"—he nodded graciously toward the sheriff, who smiled and bowed in reply—"have made this community safe for visitors. Here you are as safe as you would be in your mother's parlor—"

Suddenly, from the slope above the landing pad, the hunted man screamed. The sound turned everyone's head in his direction, including the mayor's. A look of horror crossed his rugged face.

"Hey, mom, look!" yelled a six-year-old from the group of tourists. "There's a naked man up there on the side of the hill!"

"He's wearing swimming trunks, dear!" his mother hastily told him.

"But they almost got tore off," the six-year-old pointed out.

"Shhhh, dear!" his mother said.

The man screamed again, louder—a wolf howl that came rolling down the slope and set off echoes from the surrounding mountains.

The mayor looked at the sheriff, who turned and looked at his deputy. The deputy spread his hands in a helpless gesture which said he knew nothing of this—and wished to know nothing. The sheriff turned to the mayor and made the same gesture. Their apprehension showing on their faces, they turned to look again up the slope at the terrorized man.

He cried out again—and hit at something with his right hand.

He hit nothing, but something came down the slope and struck the asphalt landing pad. From there it bounced upward and fled toward the opposite slope, screaming as it moved.

"This fair community does not permit any—" the mayor began. He got only that far before his voice

trailed into confused sputtering sounds similar to a tape recorder running at a too-fast speed.

Above him, the man struck again at the air beside him.

"What's after him, mom?" the six-year-old demanded.

"Nothing, dear, I'm sure. I—I don't see anything."

"Is he crazy?"

"I just don't know. I—I don't see anything. . . . Oh, yes, now I do! What—what—what—?" Her voice became a screech.

What she saw was in the clump of stunted cedars and gave the impression of being ten feet tall, and having two heads. Standing quietly in the clump of cedars, one of its heads was looking down at the man.

Something leaped from its forehead; she could not tell what it was at that distance. But it apparently struck the man and brought him to his feet, turned him around, pointed him down the slope, and started him running.

He ran with great leaping strides, screaming and slapping at the air with his right hand. His left arm flapped loosely from the shoulder. Losing his footing, he fell heavily and rolled, scrambling to his feet again to race down the slope toward the landing pad. When he reached the bottom, he headed toward the group of tourists.

"Arrest that damned fool, quickly!" the mayor said. "Get him out of here!"

"Yes, sir."

"When you catch him, send him down the elevator," the mayor said. With his thumb he gestured toward the ground.

"Yes, sir," the sheriff repeated. Grunting at his deputy to follow him, he ran toward the man who now was lunging toward him. "Hey, you! Hey, you! You're under arrest! Stop where you are!"

The man did not seem to see the sheriff. Stumbling to his knees, he got to his feet and ran forward again.

"Halt!" the sheriff shouted, drawing his big pistol from

its holster. Beside him the deputy did the same. The man faced two guns.

Now he seemed to see the sheriff and the deputy, but the weapons did not hold his gaze. His eyes went past the sheriff, past the helicopter, and came to rest on the tall peaks to the south of the old mining town. Snow glistened there. As if these peaks were the most beautiful sight he had ever seen in his life, he stared at them. His lips moved. "Heaven—" he muttered, "heaven is . . . must be . . . nearby!"

As if these were exactly the words he wanted to say, he nodded. Then, his muscles no longer able to hold his head erect, he looked down at the asphalt of the landing pad. The expression on his face showed there was something about the asphalt that horrified him. His lips moved again. "Black, like the eternal night . . . black, like the ever-lasting grave—"

Bzt!

Another angry hornet came down the slope behind him, swung in a hot circle around him, then hissed as it went back up the mountain. Hearing the sound, the man turned to follow its direction of flight. For the first time he actually saw what was in the clump of stunted cedar. It had moved a little, and now he could see it clearly.

"That thing . . . no good!" he intoned. "That thing . . . out of hell!"

The sheriff, the deputy, the mayor, the drivers of the little trains of cars, the spectators from the town, the tourists who had just arrived—all now saw what was up there, and the sight of it froze them motionless.

Bzt!

This time the angry hornet struck the man and spun him in a circle so that he was facing the slope. Two more angry hornets struck him and turned him around again so that he was facing the crowd of tourists and the helicopter on the landing pad. He took one step toward them, and then he began to glow.

Over his body, in definite spots, light appeared,

shining through his skin, of such brilliant intensity that it seemed as if little suns had taken shape within his flesh and had begun to radiate hellish energies. Like tiny fireflies emerging from the cells where they had been born, little flickers of light began to dart through the skin of his exposed body, moving from the inside out and quickly losing their intensity in the surrounding air. With the light sparks came tiny puffs of smoke.

The man stopped moving. The tourists seemed unable to move. The sheriff, his deputy, and the mayor had become statues, incapable of motion.

The tiny sparks became more numerous on the man's skin. Cracks joining them began to appear. An expression of agony now appeared on the man's face. It was as if at this moment, for the first time, he felt what was happening inside his body. Opening his mouth, he tried to scream, but no sound came out. Smoke emerged instead.

"Mama, the man's on fire!" the boy yelled. Grabbing his mother's leg, he tried to climb up into her arms, just as a monkey tries to escape from danger by climbing a tree.

"Shut up!" his mother screamed.

Again the man tried to scream, this time with such effort that, from his mouth, mixed with smoke, came a wailing ululation that had no resemblance to any sound ever voiced by any human anywhere on Planet Earth. He began to run in a circle. On his body, the cracks of brilliant white light ran together, setting his whole body on fire.

Bzt! Another hornet struck him, jolted him, sent him lurching in a wider circle. With white light and smoke spurting from his body, he had the odd look of a fire walker from the South Seas who had lost his ability to control the fire while in the middle of his bed of hot coals.

Quickly, the lurching walk ended and the spinning began again, but it soon ended too. Falling like a tree

crashing down in the intense blaze of a forest fire, the man went down. White light and smoke continued to spurt through the widening cracks on his body, and he lay writhing on the asphalt of the landing pad. His left arm flopped aimlessly when he moved, but the pain from broken bones grinding together must have been so slight in comparison with the pain from the inward-burning fire that was consuming him that he seemed not to know the broken arm existed.

The man finally exploded. The explosion was not of the usual, nitroglycerine type; it was a quick puffing outward of the whole body, an internal swelling that blew guts and stomach and heart out from the body cavity, that blew the head from the trunk and the arms from the body, pushing them outward and away. Rolling along the asphalt, the man's bloody head bumped against the toe of the sheriff's boot. The sheriff was looking upward, toward the thing that had left the clump of cedars and was clearly visible. He had not really noticed the burning man until the thump of the head against his boot pulled his gaze downward. Indifferently, he kicked the head away and resumed his intent study of the thing on the slope above him.

"Mama, I want to go home," the six-year-old wailed.

His lament reminded every tourist present that he also wanted to go home. Turning, they raced to the helicopter, fighting each other to enter the ship.

The thing kept staring downward, awkwardly balancing its ungainly height with one head looking forward and one looking backward. It had a left arm that was too short and a right arm set backward in the shoulder.

"What?" the back head asked in a shrill treble voice.

"Not know," the front head answered in a deep bass.

"Let me look!" the back head commanded.

"Well—" the front head said grudgingly. "But only for a little."

Slowly the two heads turned so that the head behind

looking backward was now looking to the front and down. This lasted for only a second and then reversed.

"You made a mistake!" the back head screamed.

"I did not!" the front head denied. "He was getting away."

"Oh," the back head said in understanding.

"I had to knock him," the front head said. "Nobody must escape—ever."

"Yes, yes, yes," the back head said.

On the ground at the edge of the landing field, the parts of the body continued to burn. The smell of it became toxic, a stink that sickened the nose and made the stomach want to vomit, an odor more horrible than that of burning flesh alone.

When the last of the tourists were back in the helicopter, the pilot started the motors. The great vanes beat the air as the ship began to lift.

"That crazy ship—it flies!" the back head said. Alarm raised the voice to an even higher treble.

"I see," the front head said.

"And so have they!" the back head answered. "If you allow them to get away—"

"Unhuh!" the front head grunted in sudden alarm.

"You must stop them!" the back head said. "You must absolutely stop them!"

"But—" the front head protested.

"They have seen you and me," the back head answered. "They have seen the death! If you let them get away, you will be dropped into the river that never stops running. And I will be dropped with you!"

"But the ones here who have also seen the death—and have seen us too—"

"Will *they* talk?" the back head jeered. "That crazy ship is rising, isn't it? The sound is louder."

"Yes."

"You have the weapon," the back head said. "Use it!"

In the middle of the bulging forehead of the head that

looked forward a small window appeared. Round and perhaps half an inch in diameter, it looked like the iris diaphragm of an unusual camera. Behind the hole was deep blackness.

Out of this darkness flew the small missile that sounded the same as an angry hornet. Like an arrow it curved downward and struck the rising helicopter, passing through the thin aluminum. Inside it struck flesh.

"Mom!" the six-year-old yelled. "Mom! Something just bit me!"

"Nonsense, dear. Nothing can bite you in here—" The mother's voice went silent as, horrified, she saw her boy's body begin to spout white electric flame and smoke. In only seconds, he was burning with a light so intense it hurt her eyes.

Turning in his seat, the pilot saw the flame and thought the ship was on fire. Hastily he shifted the controls to set the ship back on the pad below. As he did, a second angry hornet entered the ship and passed through both sides, missing the pilot by inches. He slapped at it, an involuntary gesture. Instantly it swept around in a tight circle and reentered the ship through the same side it had just passed through. This time it struck the pilot. He yelled in pain and lifted his hands from the controls to clutch his body. As white-hot electric flame shot outward through his skin, the helicopter went completely out of control.

Bzt, bzt, bzt! The strange missiles whipped through the thin walls of the ship. Some found lodgings in the bodies of the passengers, who were now frantic and afraid to move from their seats. One hornet hit the fuel tank.

The ship was now very close to the landing pad. It tilted and one rotor struck the asphalt with a scream of tortured metal. For a moment, because the rotor was slowed by striking the ground and by the shut-off power, the tilted helicopter seemed to walk on stilts across the landing pad.

The mayor, the sheriff, the deputy, and the onlookers from the town ran frantically to get out of the way of the lunging ship. The three officials found cover and lay flat, watching. At the edge of the landing pad it turned over and exploded in a rolling roar of sound that trumpeted back in echoes so that the whole range of mountains seemed to be caught in thunderous, mock artillery fire. Fire blazed up where the wrecked helicopter had come to rest, and from the fiery ship came a few screams that went quickly into eternal silence.

The mayor, the sheriff, and the deputy got quickly to their feet. Just as the sheriff had ignored the man's blown-off head that had touched his boot, they all ignored the wrecked helicopter. Their attention was wholly concentrated on the hillside above them, where the ten-foot tall creature stood looking down.

For some seconds it scanned the little mining town of Golden Fleece, then turned and with ponderous tread moved to the mouth of the old mine tunnel and passed the fallen, ancient timbers. Stooping and twisting, it entered the tunnel—and was gone from sight.

"What—" the sheriff began.

"Hell!" the mayor answered.

"I—I—I—" the sheriff stuttered.

"Shut up," the mayor said.

"But—" the sheriff tried to begin again.

"Worse than hell!" the mayor said. His face was gray and his voice was erratically jumping from tenor to bass. His vocal chords worked up and down but no sound emerged. He swallowed.

"Hell's loose," the mayor said.

They continued looking upward, but of the creature that seemed to have made a beachhead on Planet Earth, there was now no sign of any kind.

From the pieces of broken body that had once belonged to the terrorized man who had fled in vain, from the helicopter, from its crew and passengers came intense electric flame. Black roily smoke climbed up-

ward into the clean mountain air. With it went a stink, foul beyond any meaning of the word.

What sounded like rustling wind came up and hovered very close to the mayor. Sensing it was there, the sheriff and the deputy rolled their eyes toward it, then seemed to freeze into immobility. The mayor seemed to listen to a voice that only his ears could hear.

When the voice had finished, and the wind had moved away, the mayor spoke.

"We will say the helicopter crashed on landing," the mayor said.

"Yes, yes, yes," the sheriff answered. His gaze went down to what little was left of the man's body. "What—"

"We will say he never existed," the mayor said. Furtively, out of the corner of his eyes, he glanced upward toward the spot where the intruder on the beachhead had vanished.

CHAPTER TWO

John Valthor slipped the phone back on its rest and swung back in his easy chair, his face fretted with concentration—and with problems. Least among his problems was a mild wonder as to why his caller had used the old phone system—long out of date in 2151 A.D.—instead of the modern instruments which projected the face of the caller along with his voice. True, the old system had the advantage of rarely being spied on, simply because no one who knew how easily such lines could be monitored by impossible-to-detect electronic equipment ever trusted any information of any importance to such a line. The nature of his caller's work required him to know all about such electronic spy systems, and yet he had used the old system. Did he feel no risk was attached—or was he simply careless? Men who followed this caller's profession rarely lived long enough to develop careless habits.

Valthor shrugged. The fellow had called from the local heliport. Perhaps the visaphones had not been operating in the heliport and the man had had to use what was available.

Valthor's building, which was located in an elaborate industrial complex in Southern California, housed excellent laboratory equipment in many fields. Around him were the soft hum of turning motors and the gentle

clicks of various counters reporting on everything from ground radiation to cosmic rays. There was also a feeling of electric charge that seemed always present—and was, in fact, always present—the charge resulting in part from the slight negative potential that was always kept in the air and from a carefully metered mixture of gases which included small quantities of carbon dioxide. This magic gas, which controls breathing in the human and which, when present in the air in small amounts, tends to stimulate breathing, in turn increases available oxygen, and thus enhances the effectiveness of the human brain and nervous system.

There were other subtleties present in this sprawling concrete and steel building. One was a feeling that other humans were present, men and women who were perhaps more aware and more alive than run-of-the-mill folk and, in consequence of being more alive, were very, very busy.

All these impressions were very familiar to John Valthor. He had planned the construction of this building, had personally laid the detector systems in the concrete of the foundation and in the walls, and had designed the detector systems in the concrete roof—all these systems being sensitive enough to detect the whirling of the wings of a gnat a mile away. Or so rumor said. Valthor had never bothered to deny this rumor, or any other rumor. He felt that the more lies people told about him, the more false rumors that were in circulation, the less likely anyone was to discover the real truth about him. It was not that he was trying to be a man of mystery, it was just that he dealt with subtle things that had roots in other worlds, in other universes, but that sent exploring tendrils into the world of physical matter known to man as if they were seeking ways to enter. Most people did not believe in the existence of these other universes. Valthor never challenged their right to disbelief. His biggest hope was that the time would be long delayed when the goblins in which they did not

believe came to eat them up. He was one of the men dedicated to delaying the coming of the goblins.

For a moment, as he leaned back in his chair, he let his hands sag into his lap. They were big hands, the hands of a man who might be a boxer, a wrestler, or who might do mechanical work, throw a football the length of a football field, or fight his way to the top of the heavyweight boxing world. In point of fact, John Valthor was none of these. Electronics was his field—he held a doctor of science degree in electrical engineering—and electronics was his profession, the way in which he earned his living. In addition, as a hobby, because he loved doing it and could afford the cost, he conducted a unique school where a student pursued what he pleased as long as it was somehow related to the field of electronics—and what wasn't? The school had no formal course of study, it awarded no degrees, and it was accredited by no university; but around Planet Earth its students—though no one was ever graduated—were treated with respect by insiders everywhere. Those students who could pay for working in Valthor's lab did so; those who could not pay were paid by Valthor. Admission to the school was by invitation—rare indeed was the man or woman who refused such an invitation—and money could not buy entry. Invitation, strictly limited, depended on Valthor's whim, brains, and a devil-may-care attitude. The students also took their attitude toward life from their teacher; namely, that it was to be lived to the fullest—and to be let go without the slightest hesitancy or regret.

Sometimes this attitude saved their lives.

Sitting in his easy chair, his hands drooped in his lap, keeping himself very quiet, Valthor began to check his inner world, his mind-emotion hookups, his mental mechanisms that remembered the past, evaluated it in terms of the present, then projected both past and present into the possible futures that might emerge from this blending. Known from the lost times of earlier

civilizations, this technique of concentration has been called many names, including "going into the silence." Somewhere in this silent inner world was that which answered questions—though sometimes the answer was simply more silence. When this happened, it meant the question had been improperly formulated and could not be answered or that, time entering into the future, no answer was as yet possible. Out of this silent inner world all dreams arose, Valthor was convinced, as well as all correct answers, plus many nightmares.

Listening to what his inner ear was hearing, watching what images were playing on the screen of his inner mind, Valthor found that his question about his caller went unanswered. His inner world was wary, very much so. In its response he sensed something akin to birds who have glimpsed an eagle in the sky and are alert for flight but do not as yet know whether the eagle comes or goes. The impression he got from his inner world was that something was very much amiss, somewhere. He grunted at this answer. On Planet Earth something was always amiss somewhere. China and Russia were fighting border skirmishes. Having once more risen to the status of a world power, Japan was wondering if she might again test the thundering might of the United Americas, hesitating because of bitter memories of a mistake once made at a place called Pearl Harbor.

Abruptly, Valthor rose from his chair. Moving like a big cat stalking his prey, he went into the adjoining room. Here, in machines that resembled old-time typewriters, were hundreds of banks of keys, above which was a small screen. Valthor punched first the key on which was inscribed the symbol that meant words, then he punched other keys. So fast did this computer operate that words were flowing across the screen almost the instant he had punched the last key.

Edward F. Smith, major, internal security forces,
age 37 as of present. Square jaws, round face, blue

eyes, average weight about 180. Military record clear. At present, 2151 A.D., Major Smith is assigned to check security angles of developmental work being done by the Brocknor Corporation in Golden Fleece, Colorado, said work being done under a large Federal grant. . . . If more specific data is required, press required button. . . .

Valthor did not press the required button. Instead he punched other buttons. The computer seemed to sigh at the task of finding appropriate words to express in general terms the mass of data available on this new setting, but then it buckled down to work. Words began to flow across the screen.

The Brocknor Corporation was organized by Erasmus Brocknor to develop what he called a *simulated brain substance*. For further data on this substance, see file 9-217-643-812-A-313. Brocknor's essential claim was that this substance, an electrochemical colloid, could exhibit many, or all, of the functions of a human brain, that it could learn, that it could retain its learning, and that it could selectively use at a later date what it had been taught. This substance has not been patented, and Brocknor has never revealed its exact composition. In 2138, he was given a government grant of \$61,000,000.00 for further developmental work on this simulated brain substance. He moved his entire organization to the old gold mining town of Golden Fleece, Colorado, and set up his research work there, utilizing the extensive tunnels and shafts of the old abandoned mines. If more specific data—

Valthor grunted, stopped the computer, and punched other buttons on it.

Golden Fleece, Colorado. In 2063, paying quan-

tities of gold were discovered here, and over a billion dollars in gold ore was taken from the huge mines in this region before the combination of ore depletion and constantly rising mining costs resulting from underground water forced the end of work here. *More coming.*

Valthor waited for the computer to do its thing. Then the *more* that was promised was on the screen.

Recent data says the Brocknor Corporation has rebuilt the old ghost town as a tourist attraction and that tourists are being flown from Denver to Golden Fleece. This is a commercial operation undertaken for profit. *More coming.*

Again Valthor waited. Again words moved on the screen.

On 21 July, just three days ago, a helicopter carrying tourists crashed on landing at Golden Fleece. The exact number of dead is as yet unknown but is thought to be more than forty. There were no survivors. That is all on this subject. Further instructions awaited.

The only further instructions Valthor had for the computer was to turn it off. For a moment he stood very still, again checking his inner world. Inside him, somewhere, was a far better computer than the elaborate machine he had just used, far better, indeed, than any computer that ever had been—or ever would be—built on Planet Earth. Each cell in his brain—in anybody's brain—had more connections and greater potential than the biggest computer in existence. The neat trick, the really difficult art, was to induce the computer of the internal world to operate, then to interpret the meaning of its report. Rarely did the human brain report in

neatly organized sentences in English as did the computer in this room; it reported its interpretation of enormous amounts of data in the form of symbols, as cryptic as the geometry of multispace itself.

The computer of the inner world was still silent. But it was very wary.

Moving out of his private office, he entered the main room of the big building. On his left men and women were at work, some building elaborate electronic equipment which was on special order, others working with a pencil and a pad of paper developing the intricate equations involved in the flow of charged ions through and around metal wire. Still others were working with breadboard hookups, testing how their ideas might work out in practice, knowing that between theory and practice there was often a gulf as wide as the gap between Earth and Earth's moon. Background music, soft and gentle, filled the building.

This was not Valthor's main laboratory. It was, however, one of the places where he earned a living for himself and for his staff. It was located in one of the many enormous industrial and residential complexes in Southern California. By 2151, a continuous city stretched along the Pacific Ocean from Canada on the north to Mexico on the south, in the latter instance spilling over through Tia Juana into Baja California. This region, from Canada to Mexico, was the wildest, most amazing, and most fantastic residential and industrial complex that had ever existed on the planet where men lived. Since the days of the gold rush, migration had poured a flood of people into this largely barren land. They had brought in water from great distances and had turned the deserts into orange groves. Because of the many atomic generating plants scattered along the coast, electricity was cheap. This plus a great supply of workers with alert minds and nimble fingers plus millions of potential customers close at hand were facts that had endeared the region to John Valthor for the location of

his laboratory. He had another laboratory located in an almost inaccessible region of the High Sierras. Hidden under miles of rock in the high mountains, Valthor called this second laboratory his atom bomb refuge. He also considered it to be a refuge from evils worse than any form of the bomb, but he rarely mentioned these horrors.

As he stepped out of his office, the men and women working in the big room looked up at him, grinned and waved, then returned to work. It was as if they sensed his presence, and, in fact, he encouraged them to do this. Along the wall to his right were private offices. Air- and dust-conditioned, screened against spy beams, they were used by his staff of assistants. The door to the first office was closed. Valthor made a wry gesture with his lips, but he did not knock or attempt to enter. Here even the boss would not intrude past a closed door, which meant that the occupant, who was drawing a fine salary from Valthor, was deeply concentrated and did not wish to be disturbed—or was asleep.

This was a place where much of the work was done in the borderland between sleeping and waking. In this strange region, the computer of the silent inner world was best able to express itself.

The door of the next office was open. Inside, seated behind a big glass-topped desk, a fat, bald-headed man was staring in perplexity at a group of playing cards spread in front of him. Looking up as Valthor entered, the fat man grinned.

"Johnny, come in!" he said.

"How are you, Dr. Krick?" Valthor asked.

"I have been better," the fat man answered. His eyes went down to the cards on his desk. "But the cards, they talk of trouble not far away. The queen of spades, she has been haunting me for days." He tapped one of the cards laid out in front of him.

"Trouble for whom?" Valthor questioned. Although he would have disputed that the queen of spades—or

any other single card—meant that trouble was coming, he did not dispute that the cards were an ancient method of concentrating the mind in such a way that the computer of the silent inner world could come into operation.

Dr. Krick sighed and spread his hands. "Johnny, I do not know. My doctor, stupid fellow, says I eat too much."

"Your doctor is right. I pay you too much. You eat too much," Valthor said.

"Well, it may be both you and the physician are right," the fat man admitted. "But then again, this world is always short of fun—and for me, eating is much fun. If I increase the fun of the world by eating too much, who is to say that the world is the loser?" He looked up at Valthor through thick-lensed spectacles. "But what can I do for you, Johnny? Perhaps I should do something besides reading the cards to earn the very small salary you pay me? Perhaps you wish me to go with you—somewhere?"

"Just now I do not know who is to go with me, if anybody, or if I am going anywhere. However, in a few minutes a caller will come here. His name is Smith, he's a major in internal security. The computer says he is all right, but—" His voice slipped away into silence.

"You wish me to pwyll him for you, Johnny? To smell him through the psychic nose, to feel him through my emotional world?"

"Please," Valthor said.

"I will do my best," the fat man said. "But you know, of course—"

"I know that accuracy cannot be guaranteed," Valthor said. "If you miss, perhaps Margo will come up with the right answers—"

"That witch and her crystal ball—all she can do is guess!" the fat man sneered.

"The question is, can you guess better with your cards than she can with her crystal ball?" Valthor said,

grinning as he exited. He knew his words put the fat man into a sweat. However, Dr. Krick worked best when sweating.

The door of the next office was closed. The sign on it said OUT TO LUNCH. BACK SOON. Valthor glanced at the sign and shook his head. He had complete confidence that the man who occupied this office would return from lunch someday, perhaps to feed strange data into the computer, but the fact was that the sign had been on the office door for almost two years. Mr. Roto, who occupied this office when he happened to be on the continent of North America, was a Chinese of mixed blood who had strange ideas about time.

The door of the next office was open. In it, a woman with a purple handkerchief tied around her black hair was staring with disgust into a huge crystal ball resting on a black cushion, which was itself resting on a marble-topped desk. "You have been speaking to that nasty fat man about me," she said, without looking up. "He is a glutton, that Dr. Krick. Sooner or later he will eat so much he will really turn into a pig. Yes, yes, I see the coming man. He is visible right here in my ball. He is coming in a taxicab and will be here soon. He has been or is in the military service. A square face on a round jaw. His name—his name—" Her voice faltered and she looked up. "I do not get his name. I—I saw it for an instant but something like a wind blew it out of my beautiful ball." Concern was deep in her violet eyes.

"Pwyll him for me, please, Margo?" Valthor requested.

"Yes, sir. Margo will do." Her eyes went back to the crystal ball.

"Computers and crystal ball gazers and fat men who stare at cards and see the shape of things to come, all on one staff!" Valthor muttered, to himself. "I wonder what respectable scientists would think of me!"

In fact, John Valthor did not care what respectable

scientists, or anybody else, thought of him. He knew that many hard-core scientists would publicly deplore such activities as these, considering them to be the work of an addled brain, but privately would come to him to ask how he had accomplished the results that had made him famous. They would criticize him severely for having mediums on his staff, but would want to consult them! As for the use of *pwyl*—that strange ability to pull all the factors of a situation into focus, then to sense the meaning of everything together, including the shape of things to come—the hard-core men would regard this as so much nonsense. If they considered it at all, they would want to conduct statistical studies on how often such predictions were right, without ever realizing that such studies automatically skewed the outcome.

Valthor had no criticism of the thinking of the hard-core men. They had their thing, he had his—and the world needed both if it was to continue on its wobbly course.

The two end offices were open but empty. Glancing in them, he saw their occupants had fled. This was no unusual situation. The two people who occupied these offices might also have gone out to lunch and forgotten to come back. He was starting back to his own office when a quick voice called from the middle of the maze of experimental layouts in the main room of the big building. The woman who had called came quickly to him, a gangling red-headed man following, both quitting a breadboard mockup on which they had been so completely concentrated that they had not seen the boss come out of his private office.

The woman was a tall, black-eyed, natural brunette. Most men would have thought she was striking in any garment, but when wearing the tight-fitting slacks she now had on, they would have looked twice. Feminine to the depths, she had that little something more that set her apart in any gathering. She worked in Valthor's laboratory as one of his trusted assistants because she

had an intuitive knowledge of the behavior of ions and electrons. In addition, she had a degree which she never mentioned—and rarely admitted—as a doctor of science in the field of electronic physics. About her, always in expression, was an eagerness for life in all its phases, in all its moods, in all its joys, with all its dangers—and with all its sorrows if sorrow came. Mishi Greer was the type to drink deeply of the cup of life until the cup was drained to the last drop, whether the last drop be sweet or bitter, and then to toss the empty cup into the fire.

Following her was an ugly red-headed man with a crop of freckles and laughing blue eyes and a grin so engaging that you forgot how unhandsome he was. Looking at this man, most people would instantly decide that here was a rusty-faced kid who had grown up into a man without ever comprehending all that was involved in the growth process. Most people would also decide that this man with the shambling gait, the long arms, and the big knuckles was—wholesome. His name was Keth Evan. A stupid look was one of his stocks in trade but his IQ was actually at the genius level.

“Yes, sir,” Keth Evan said, grinning eagerly at his boss. “If you want us for something, sir, we’re right here, Mishi and me. We’re always ready, sir.” His eager manner conveyed the impression that no matter what the boss wanted, he and the tall brunette would be glad to get the job done.

“I guess the words saying you’re right here and right ready if you’re wanted describe you and Mishi better than any other words I know,” Valthor answered, grinning back at Keth.

“Yes, sir. That’s right, sir!” Mishi said. “What do you want us to do?”

Valthor explained what he wanted. “Pwyll him, sir?” For an instant the eternal grin vanished from Keth’s face. “We’ll do it for you, sir, that is, if Mishi feels up to it.”

“I feel up to it,” the tall brunette said, tartly.

Valthor stood looking at the two. About each of them was the feeling not only of readiness but also of eternal youth. And of something else. He tried to put this something else into words. "You two always make me think of beauty and the beast—" he began.

"Yes, sir," Keth Evan interrupted. "I'm beauty, sir, and she's the beast." He ducked quickly as a small but very firm fist leaped toward his right eye. "You're beastly all right," Mishi said.

Valthor grinned, then gestured toward Keth. "What do you see in this man, Mishi?"

"Nothing good, mostly," she answered.

"She just can't help loving me," Keth said unabashed. "Some day she's going to marry me."

"And trade a laboratory for a nursery and a kitchen and dirty diapers and three o'clock feedings!" Mishi answered. "Hah! That'll be the day, Keth Evan!" She looked at Valthor and smiled at him. "I'm going to marry the boss!"

"Heaven help me!" Valthor said, alarm on his face. "I don't want those three o'clock feedings, either!" His voice grew suddenly gruff. "That fellow will be here any minute. Ah! There's the front guard looking for me. Major Smith must be here now."

The two watched him go. To them he was a broad-shouldered man with a great mop of unruly black hair. There was in his walk a slight waddle, the kind of swaying movement that seamen occasionally exhibit on land, but he moved with a sureness and firmness that was full of meaning.

"When I am near him, the world is a warm, friendly, and secure place," Mishi said, her voice soft and musing. "But when I see him walking away, the world grows cold and dangerous."

"I guess a lot of people feel the same way about him," Keth Evan said. All lightheartedness was suddenly gone from his voice. "People who don't even know he exists sleep better at night because he does exist."

Watching, they saw the guard at the door admit a round-faced, square-jawed man who gave Valthor a snappy military salute and got one in return. They watched their boss deferentially conduct the man back to his private office. At this point, they returned to their interrupted experiment. If their concentration on their work had been close before—and it had been—now it became much tighter, closing down so that they were unaware of their surroundings. In one of the offices a woman with a handkerchief around her head concentrated with equal intensity on the scenes the crystal ball helped her see. In another office a round-faced fat man carefully laid out a deck of cards again and again and stared at them through thick-lensed spectacles as if he expected to see the history of the world and all the wonder that would be written in a secret language in the colored symbols on the shiny cards.

At the table which held the breadboard hookup on which he and Mishi Greer were working, Keth Evan reached inside his mind—and kept on reaching—and found nothing. He glanced up at Mishi. Her concentration gone, she was turning quickly to look at something she thought was behind her. As he saw her do this, Keth realized that he also had the impression that something was just behind him. He turned quickly. Nothing was there. He turned back to the table to face Mishi. "What is it?" he whispered.

"It's—nothing," she answered. "It's a kind of ghostly feeling that I cannot describe—plus. . . ." Her voice slipped away into silence.

"Plus what?"

"Plus the feeling that a kind of circular funnel of wind is blowing right behind me. However, I don't believe anything is there."

Keth looked over her shoulder. "Nothing," he said. "But I've got the same feeling. Will you look for me?"

Her dark eyes glanced casually at him, then moved on. The shake of her head was very slight.

"Are you picking up anything on the man with Mr. Valthor?" Keth asked.

Again she shook her head. "All I can pwyll is a wind—and the feeling that something is behind me."

"Did—did that man bring something with him?" Keth asked.

"If he did, it's that funnel-shaped wind that I can't see but which I feel is blowing behind me. What do you get, Keth?"

"Just frustration," the red-head answered. "I don't pwyll a single thing!"

"Keep at it."

They kept at it, concentrating their minds to the point where the big laboratory around them was a thing of shadows, until the sounds that their ears heard had faded into silence, until all the world seemed to exist in silence. Sweat formed on their faces—but silence was all there was. Then each jumped as Valthor spoke to them. Looking up, they saw the boss was there, his face grim. "Didn't you see me let out our visitor?"

"No. We—"

"You were deeply concentrated. That was good. Did—did you sense anything?"

"No!" Both answered in one voice. "Only a wind that seemed to blow behind us."

"A wind?" Valthor questioned. His thumb gestured toward the offices. "That's all that Dr. Krick got. He said it blocked his mind. Margo got the same thing. She said it blocked her crystal ball!"

"You have already talked to them—and we didn't notice you?" Keth answered. He wiped sweat from his face.

"I took our visitor to the front door, then came back and talked to Dr. Krick and Margo—and you did not notice me," Valthor affirmed. "This wind. . . . Do you feel it blowing now?"

"No!" Surprise was on Mishi's face. "It came—and I

did not feel it coming. It went—and I did not feel it going.” She looked at her companion for confirmation.

“Me, too!” Keth said.

“Margo said it was a psychic wind that came in when our visitor came—and left when he left,” Valthor said. “Dr. Krick said it stopped all pwylling efforts.” He shook his head and stood in concentrated thought. Around him, the big lab became a hum of reduced sound. When he spoke again, his voice was very low and the words came very slowly.

“There is no sure way in which we can know the enemy. As he appears on this beachhead, he will show us a thousand faces and a thousand forms. He will speak with a thousand voices but behind every word he says will be a firm insistence that he is our best friend and that he has come here to do great things for the human race. It is only by eternal vigilance on the part of those who are capable of pwylling the coming enemy—plus bloody war if necessary—that we can hope to hold the planet. Always, from one direction or another, the challenge comes to humankind. It rises from below, in the evolutionary process; it comes from the deep swamps and from the dark caves of ocean as new and mutant life forms; it comes from the depths of space as scouts for new forms of life, pouring across the void. We either meet it, we learn the difference between our real friends and those who claim to be our friends, or we will be swept from this planet!”

Margo and Dr. Krick had come out of their offices and were listening. All the workers in the big laboratory had stopped their tasks and had drawn near to hear better. All of them were collectively holding their breath. Valthor shook his head. “I guess none of this is exactly news to any of you.”

“No, sir,” Margo said. “But that man—he wiped the pictures right out of my ball! What—what of him?”

“His credentials as a major of internal security are genuine,” Valthor answered.

"But what did he want?" Mishi asked.

"He wanted to hire me as a consultant to the Brocknor Corporation," Valthor said. "As a sort of additional interest—as if the thousand dollars a day I would get as such a consultant were not enough to interest me—he told me a fantastic story of a strange creature with two heads that is worrying Erasmus Brocknor, head of the corporation. He claimed that such a creature had actually been seen, though not by him, in the mountains near Golden Fleece."

"With two heads?" Keth Evan asked. "Was he pulling your leg, sir?"

"I don't think so. I suspect the two-headed monster was his real reason for coming here. There is nothing very unique about a two-headed monster. Two-headed calves have been born, two-headed snakes, two-headed humans. A two-headed monster is not impossible—and is probably not even really important. What I did consider important, however, was his claim that Erasmus Brocknor has under secret development—the whole region being under close security guard—an instrument, a device, or whatever, which utilizes his discovery of a simulated brain substance, and which, when developed, will be the biggest boon that humanity has ever known. 'As great as the discovery of fire, as great as the invention of the wheel,' Major Smith just told me!" He looked around at his listeners.

"I seem to have heard this part of the story before!" Keth Evan said. He quoted, "'Our enemy will reveal a thousand faces—but he will always speak with one voice—and this voice will tell us how big a friend he is.'"

"That is essentially what Major Smith just told me about the stunning discovery made by Erasmus Brocknor and now being developed by the Brocknor Corporation at Golden Fleece. This is also what really intrigued me about the place."

"You don't mean you're going there, sir?" Mishi Greer asked, alarm in her voice.

"Of course I am!" Valthor answered. "I need that thousand dollars a day! This laboratory needs it—so my auditors tell me—if I am to continue paying the salary of my staff of assistants. Of course I am going. And you"—his finger pointed at Mishi—"are—"

"Going with you?" Joy suddenly replaced the alarm on her face.

"No," Valthor said.

The joy vanished.

"You—and Keth—are going to follow me!" Valthor said. He tried to back away from Mishi but was too late to do anything except protest, "But you don't have to kiss me just because I am taking you with me. Remember, Keth will be along too, as chaperone."

"Pooh on chaperones!" Mishi Greer answered. "When do we leave? What do we take with us?"

"In Denver, you and Keth will rent a mountain-climbing car, camping equipment, and good rifles," Valthor said. "I will go with Major Smith by plane to Denver, then to Golden Fleece by helicopter. There must be back roads into that old mining town. Find one and use it!"

"Yes, sir!" Keth Evan said. His tone of voice said that if Valthor told him to find a back road into hell, he would go looking for it.

"But how do we know that anything is really there and—" Mishi began.

"Getting scared, young lady?"

"You know I'm scared. I'm always scared. But being scared has never stopped me yet!" Her dark eyes blazed at him.

"Answering your question as to how we know something is roosting in Golden Fleece—we don't know for sure. But when winds blow in my laboratory and stop my staff from pwylling, I know something evil exists *somewhere*."

"We also know it is much too close to home for us to be comfortable," Dr. Krick said.

"Right!" Valthor spoke. "As to when we leave, I will go right away with Major Smith. You and Keth will take the next available flight to Denver."

"Yes, sir!" Mishi Greer and Keth Evan said in one voice.

CHAPTER THREE

In the shaded spot where a long spur came down from the tall peak to the west, snow lingered until late July, perhaps into the middle of August. Looking at the white stuff, John Valthor resisted the impulse to ask Major Smith to stop the strange vehicle in which they were riding long enough for him to get out and make snowballs to throw down the deep canyon that now was barring further progress. The set line of the major's jaw told him, however, that the internal security officer had too much on his mind to yield to such a childish whimsy. Valthor watched the security officer closely from the corners of his eyes—unnoticeably, he hoped. He also kept in touch with the deeper levels of his mind, although there was mostly silence there—too much silence—and a kind of cold feeling as if a chilling wind was blowing through the deep chambers of his brain. Valthor tried to tell himself that this feeling came from the high country here, where patches of snow lay close by and a glacier was melting just at the edge of the high peak. But he did not succeed in convincing himself that the wind he was sensing in the depths of his mind came from outside his head.

Grunting, Major Smith pulled the vehicle to a halt before they quite reached the edge of the canyon and

gestured downward where the town of Golden Fleece could be seen in the noonday sun.

"You see the pad there, with the black smudges on it?" the security officer questioned. "That's where the helicopter crashed."

Valthor nodded. "Did you see it happen?"

"No. I was underground then, with Mr. Brocknor. Both the mayor and the sheriff told me about it, and I also checked it out with other eyewitnesses from the town itself. This two-headed monster"—his arm lifted to point—"stood over there by that old mine tunnel and knocked that ship down!" The major's voice was grim and tight as he spoke.

"You didn't mention this in my office," Valthor said.

"I was afraid you wouldn't believe me," the security officer answered. His face was round, his jaw was square and firm; there was no sign of shame at his failure to convey important information.

Watching, Valthor decided that playing poker with this man would be a hazardous game indeed.

"Then the monster crawled back into the tunnel you see over there," Smith continued.

"Has it been seen since?" Valthor questioned.

"No, sir." Smith gestured upward toward the sky. "We've got a helicopter up there loaded with men and spotting equipment, but they haven't seen a sign of it."

"Presumably it is still underground then. Have you organized a search through the old mines?"

"No, sir," Smith replied. "You may not believe this, sir, but there are actually hundreds of miles of old mine tunnels and shafts around here. There's hardly a place anywhere in these hills where some prospector didn't start digging in the old days. They found color everywhere and sunk shafts or tunneled into the hills following the gold traces they had discovered. Also"—the major's voice grew even grimmer—"that monster was chasing a naked man. It stayed up there on that slope and hit that man with—with—"

"With what?"

"With something that sounded like big bees, or maybe like hornets or wasps. The man exploded—and burned."

"What?" Valthor said with an involuntary gasp.

"His head blew off and his arms blew off, and the pieces of him caught fire and burned to nothing!"

"Did you see this?"

"No, sir. The mayor and the sheriff both told me. I saw the smudges on the landing pad."

"Nothing left of this man?" Valthor questioned. "Not even a piece of bone?"

"Nothing!"

"Where did the man come from?"

"We don't know. You can't identify smudges on asphalt!" Smith said. "There weren't any fingerprints—no fingers! Even the fillings in his teeth had burned."

"Must have been a hot fire," Valthor commented. "This fire was set off by something that sounded like a bee or a hornet which this monster set loose on the naked man?"

"We can't *prove* that," the security man answered. "But that's what we suspect. Maybe it's what we are afraid of."

"How are the people above you taking this thing?"

"Clear up to Washington. They're crawling right out of their shoes and hunting for holes in the woodwork where they can hide!"

"There has been no publicity on this?"

"No!" the security man replied. "The only reason you are hearing about it is because you have top-level security clearance."

"How do you know I have?"

"I checked before I flew out to Southern California to talk to you," Smith said.

"What does Mr. Brocknor think of all this?"

"I'd rather you talked to him about it," Smith said. "That way, you will get it straight."

"What kind of a man is Brocknor?"

"A genius!" Smith answered. "But maybe a little—"

"Cracked in the head?" Valthor questioned.

"I wouldn't say that, sir, but sometimes geniuses don't think like ordinary men."

"They rarely think like other men," Valthor said. "Has anybody else ever seen this monster?"

"Not to our knowledge," Smith replied. He looked upward again. Far away and above them, a helicopter was circling lazily in a sky so blue it looked as if it had been painted that color. "But the boys are looking! They have radar on that ship that would spot a flea on a ground squirrel anywhere in these mountains."

"Was the naked man . . . *human*?" Valthor questioned. His words drew a quick glance from the corners of Smith's eyes.

"Well—" the security man began. "I never thought—the idea never came into my mind that he could have been anything else. So far as I know, there is no evidence of the existence here on Earth—" The security man suddenly shrugged. "Everybody I talked to *said* he was a man. I never thought—"

"Don't crack up about it," Valthor said. "Earth is only one world. There are other planets. While we have not as yet discovered certain evidence of intelligent life on any of the worlds we have explored—the moon, Mars, and one expedition to Venus, which never returned—on Mars we found strange ruined structures that looked like cities. Nobody's home there now. Did all the inhabitants of these cities die, or are some of them roaming around in space looking for another world to squat on? We know nothing about Jupiter, Saturn, Neptune, or Pluto. And our Solar System is only one little nest of planets—about the size of an anthill—in the Galaxy. Beyond the Galaxy are other galaxies. Nor is this all—"

"What else is there?" the security man demanded.

"There are the invisible worlds of the higher frequencies," Valthor said.

"Do you mean ghost worlds?"

"Something like that," Valthor admitted. "The point I am trying to make is that worlds and the life-force are everywhere. To the creatures on some of these other worlds, our planet may be a beachhead that they are exploring—"

"A b-beachhead?" Smith gasped.

"How did we get here?" Valthor questioned.

"Why, our species—that is, we evolved here. Other people believe we were created here. I—"

"And nobody really knows," Valthor said.

"But—but these ghost worlds—"

"They exist!"

"Are—are they real?"

"They are real if you are in one of them!"

"But—" Smith sought for words. "How do you get into one of them? Do you just fall into it? Or are you taken there—by something like a flying saucer maybe?"

"This is one way you can think about these ghost worlds," Valthor answered. "You can think of places here on Earth where the insulation between our world and other worlds, which you call ghost worlds, has sort of grown thin. Sometimes I think of these places as doors, sometimes as huge vortices of swirling energy. If you wander into one of these doors, into one of these vortices, into one of these places where the insulation has grown thin, you may leave your home world behind you—and go into an alien world. Similarly, the creatures of the ghost worlds come to us—sometimes by accident, sometimes by intention."

"Could one of these doors, these vortices—could it be right where we are now?" Smith asked.

"It could be," Valthor said. "They occur most often in mountain regions."

"How—how would you know it was here?"

"You wouldn't," Valthor answered. "Some people—mystics, psychics, seers—sometimes actually see into these other worlds, sometimes they go into them and

return with tales stranger than those told by Marco Polo—”

“About this two-headed monster—do you think it came from some ghost world?” Smith questioned.

“I don’t know where it came from,” Valthor answered. “However, it does seem to me that now and then creatures from such ghost worlds appear here on Earth—to test our defenses.”

“Test our defenses?” Smith’s voice was suddenly a hoarse whisper. “Why would they be doing that?”

“To see if they are strong enough to take over and run us off our world,” Valthor answered. “Did you suppose the human race owns Planet Earth as a result of a decree from Heaven? No, sir! We won it by strength of arms. We will hold it just as long as we are stronger than anything that can come upon us, from the worlds of our space or through the thinly insulated spots from the worlds of ghost space!”

“I—I never thought of anything like that!” Smith gasped. “Maybe that’s the explanation—” His voice cut off and he seemed to choke.

“The explanation of what?” Valthor questioned.

Smith did not answer. He seemed to be listening to some voice inaudible to anyone else. Listening with him, John Valthor suddenly had the impression that directly behind him an invisible wind was blowing.

When he turned his head nothing was there.

“Something behind you?” Smith said, in a whisper.

“I thought—” Valthor said.

“Sometimes I have thought I felt it—” the security man left the last word unsaid. His lower jaw sagged; then, as if he had just remembered his orders, it became square again. It was too late to add the word *before* to his reply anyway, for the voice box located between the two rifles on the instrument panel of the strange vehicle in which they were riding had come alive.

“Bird to goat, bird to goat!” the speaker said.

“Goat to bird. Go ahead,” Smith answered, looking

up toward the helicopter circling in the sky. It had moved closer now and was almost directly over them.

"I've spotted something in the canyon below you," the voice from the sky answered.

"What is it?"

"I don't know yet. It's in the brush just outside an old mine tunnel. It may be a bear."

"Check it out!"

"Yes, sir. Oh, now I see it clearly!" Amazement was suddenly in the voice coming over the radio. "It's not a bear, sir! It's—it's—I don't know what it is, sir, but it has two heads."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir."

"Stay handy in the sky!" Smith said. "We're going along the canyon to our right until we can find a place that will take us down to the bottom!"

"Yes, sir!" the man in the helicopter said. "But two heads, sir—"

"Out!" Smith said. The speaker died in a burbling gulp. Smith looked at Valthor and nodded toward the two rifles held in clips on the instrument panel. "I assume you know how to operate one of those!"

"I think so," Valthor said.

"Then shove a clip of ammo in it, push a round into the chamber, and put a couple of extra clips into your pocket to have ready in reserve in case we leave this goat automobile and go on a little hunting trip of our own!"

"Yes, indeed!" Valthor said.

"Now hold on tight," Smith said. Motors howled, and the broad tires spun as he moved the mountain car to the edge of the canyon. Opening the door, he looked down without leaving the vehicle, then shook his head and slammed the door. "The overhang of the wall keeps me from seeing straight down. We'll have to go down to the bottom. I know a place." Spinning the steering wheel, he took the vehicle along the rim of the canyon.

Eventually, he found a spot where such a car as his could be maneuvered to the bottom of the canyon. There was an old narrow-gage railway bed. The rails had long since been removed, and most of the ties had rotted into nothing.

"This old road leads to another mine," the security man explained. Carefully he sent the ungainly looking vehicle along the path here. Overhead in the sky the helicopter floated into sight. Smith pushed a button on the panel and spoke quickly. "Do you still see it?"

"Yes, sir," the voice answered from the sky. "Yes! Now I see it quite clearly. It is looking up as if it has seen our ship, sir! What—hey!" Sudden surprise was in the voice of the man up above. "Somebody shot at me. The bullet passed through the ship!"

"Who—"

"I don't know, sir. But—hey! That bullet turned around and came back through our ship from the other direction!"

"Impossible—" the security man began.

"There's another bullet! It hit me! Sir, I've been hit! Sir, I am on fire. Sir, inside of me, I'm burning up! Sir—" The voice became a scream that tore into silence. In the background, rising above the sound of motors and vanes from the helicopter, other voices could be heard.

In a rumbling roar that was as sharp as a crack of thunder, the helicopter exploded. From the mushroom of smoke fell pieces of metal and the bodies of men.

The security man stopped the movement of the mountain car and watched the metal fragments and the men's bodies fall from the sky. Then he looked at Valthor.

"You are a civilian," he said. "You can turn back."

"When something like this comes along, nobody is a civilian!" Valthor said. Rolling down the window on his side, he thrust the muzzle of the rifle out of it.

"You drive," he said to Smith. "I'll ride guard!"

Glancing sideways, he saw that Smith's face was gray. "Did you ever hear of a bullet that turned around in its flight and struck a second time at its target?"

"No," Smith grunted. "No. I never did."

"Do you think bullets hit that ship?"

Smith's voice was still a grunt. "No," he said. "I do not."

"Then what—"

"Hornets, maybe. Wasps maybe. A new kind of weapon that men have never met before, used in a way that no man ever thought possible until—"

"Until there it was?" Valthor said.

"We'll learn more about it up ahead." He glanced upward where smoke was still a black film in the sky. "Maybe we'll have a better chance than they had, maybe we won't."

Slowly, ponderously, quietly, the vehicle that had been made for climbing mountains moved up the canyon.

CHAPTER FOUR

Crouched over the wheel of a rented mountain truck, Keth Evan morosely studied the road ahead of him. Beside him, in a heavy red coat and a red cap, Mishi Greer was all apprehensive wiggles and twists. Behind them, under the canopy of the truck, were rifles, sleeping bags, food, a small camp stove, and a small tent. The tent was for Keth, Mishi had carefully explained. She would sleep in the back end of the truck, in a sleeping bag and on an air mattress, she had said. "Where the bears won't get me!"

"What about me in that tent? Won't the bears get me?" Keth had asked, as they were making their purchases in Denver.

"Any bear that sees you will run from you, dear," she had told him.

"They told us in Denver that this road would get us to Golden Fleece, if it wasn't washed out," Keth said. "Can you imagine building a highway over what was once a narrow-gage railroad?"

"And leaving out all the guard rails—"

"And no second lane—"

"What if we meet somebody coming back down this road?"

"We both stop," Keth said. "Then one or the other

backs up to a stop, wide enough to allow both cars to pass."

"How do you decide which car backs up?"

"By mutual agreement—or a shoot-out!" Keth said.

"S-shoot—" Mishi looked down on her side of the truck. There was a drop of hundreds of feet. "Shoot-out? You—you're kidding me!"

"Scout's honor," Keth said. "If you meet another car on this road, you either agree, you stand there and argue forever, or you have a shoot-out. The winner shoves the loser off the road, and goes on his way!"

"Keth Evan, you never were a scout—and you have no honor. And if you don't stop thinking such thoughts, one of these mountains will fall over on us!" Mishi answered. "And—and you're trying to take advantage of me just because I—I'm scared—and I'll tell the boss on you!"

Keth slowed the car. "If you want to go back—"

"Just because I'm scared of heights doesn't mean I want to go back!" Mishi snapped at him. "I—I can't help it because I am a coward about heights. I'm not a coward about other things!" Her voice had spit and fury in it.

Keth shrugged. "You should have your psyche probed to find out why you are so scared of heights," he said. "Any time you want me to begin—"

"No, thank you, Dr. Evan!" she retorted. "Any probing I would get from you would be strictly Freudian!"

"Is there any other kind?" Keth answered, his face and his voice bland and smooth.

"Yes, but from the way you talk, I am sure you know nothing of a love that is higher than sex."

"There you go, getting metaphysical on me again," Keth complained, ducking quickly as he saw her right fist coming at him. The truck veered as he ducked. He grabbed at the wheel and pulled it back again on the narrow road. "Mishi, you're not supposed to slug the

driver on a road like this! In fact, a lady is not supposed to slug anybody, anywhere, anytime."

"I didn't hit you," she defended. "I just hit close to you. But if you hadn't dodged—"

"If I hadn't dodged, we might be over there right now," Keth said. Pulling the truck to a halt, he gestured downward. Mishi looked, gasped, and hastily moved closer to him. Down below was a slide of broken rough rock, the remnants of an avalanche of an ancient day.

"That's the way it is with a woman," Keth said, observing that she had moved closer to him. "She'll slug you one moment and kiss you the next."

Mishi moved hastily away from him. "I'm not going to kiss you, Mr. Keth Evan. I'm your laboratory partner, not your mistress!" Her voice was bitter, but she was laughing as she spoke, and some of her fear of the heights seemed to have vanished.

"Do you want me to put you on my list of women for the future?" Keth asked in mock eagerness, then ducked a fist coming at him. "All right, all right," he sighed. "Let's get moving and fumble our way through that tunnel I see ahead of us." He leered at her. "Do you think you can face being in the dark with me?"

"Move on," she told him. "That's an old railroad tunnel, not a tunnel of love. But do be careful, please. We might meet a car coming from the other direction!"

"To prevent that, we turn on our lights!" Keth said happily.

Bumping over ancient ties that had rotted almost to dust, the truck moved into the tunnel. The far end of the tunnel was not visible. A slight turn brought into view a patch of daylight. Something was between them and the light. Keth hastily braked the truck to a halt as a protesting roar came from just ahead. There, in the beams of the headlights, a huge, dark-brown creature was getting to its feet, glaring at them from red eyes and threatening them with what looked like a forest of horns.

"What—what?" Mishi began, but Keth, laughing uproariously, was blowing the horn of the truck, and the monster, daunted by the lights and the noise of what looked to be a bigger monster, turned and fled. Against the daylight of the opening, they saw him gallop out of the tunnel. "Wh-what?" Mishi began again.

"A moose!" Keth said. "A thick-headed moose snoozing here in the tunnel!"

"I thought such monsters only existed in zoos these days!" Mishi gasped, indignation in her voice. "What do they mean by letting creatures like that run around loose?"

"What they mean is that this is big-game country which hasn't changed much since the Indians had it," Keth explained. He tooled the truck forward and out of the tunnel. Climbing rapidly, the moose could be glimpsed going up the slope above. "You can meet any kind of wild game up here—deer, elk, mountain lions, king cobras, giraffes—"

"Stop trying to tease me!" Mishi told him. "Neither king cobras nor giraffes exist up here, and I know it. I am even very doubtful about mountain lions."

"They're here all right," Keth told her. "We may meet one in the next tunnel. And meece may be anywhere!"

"Meece?" Mishi questioned.

"That's the plural of moose," Keth explained condescendingly.

"Meece is not the plural of moose!" Mishi corrected.

"Then what is?" Keth questioned. "If the plural of mouse is mice, why shouldn't the plural of moose be meece? Give me one good reason why—"

"Oh, Keth, please shut up. Don't make me laugh when I'm scared half to death," Mishi protested.

"Laughter is one of the best cures for fear—and also a common way to express it," the red-head pointed out. "Be glad you're able to laugh. But there is a good reason why both of us are acting like a couple of idiots."

"What?"

"It's called *altitude euphoria*. When a lowlander goes up into the mountains, he develops a tendency to laugh and giggle and make jokes."

"Is this the truth, Keth Evan?"

"Scout's—no. I used that once before. It is the truth, naturally, since I speak it, and I speak nothing but the truth. Sometimes the altitude makes people a little paranoid, and they get much too suspicious of their honest, trustworthy companions."

"Where are these honest, trustworthy companions?" Mishi demanded.

"Why, naturally, I am—"

"Oh, shut up!" Mishi told him. "If people in mountains get altitude euphoria, why don't passengers in airplanes get it too?"

"Because plane cabins are pressurized," Keth explained. "Hey, here's a wide enough place to stop. And a historical marker too!" He pulled the truck to a halt, and both got out to stretch their legs and to inspect the sign. Cut into a granite marker were the words:

DRY CREEK

*The gulch below was once filled with a river,
according to Indian tradition.*

From the edge of the road a wide expanse of water-worn boulders was visible in the gorge below. Staring, Mishi asked, "What happened to the river?"

"Honey, if I knew, I'd tell you," Keth said.

"I'll ask the boss, the next time we see him. He knows everything and will tell me."

"I agree with you that Mr. Valthor knows almost everything," Keth answered, speaking slowly. "But I doubt if he will tell you everything he knows. I even doubt if you would know how to phrase the questions properly. A woman's place—"

"Is wherever she happens to be, smarty!" Mishi told

her companion. "Get back into that truck—and drive!"

Ahead was another tunnel. Keth turned on the lights of the truck and proceeded with caution, fearful that they might again disturb a moose taking a siesta. However, the truck poked its way through this tunnel without disturbing any wild creature and emerged into the full sunlight of a narrow valley that had walls so steep it was almost a canyon. On both sides of the stream that ran through this valley were the saloons, the dance halls, and the stores of the town that had once been the hell-roaring mining community of Golden Fleece and which now slept quietly and peacefully in the noon sun of a late July day. This town had died once and had fallen away into ruin, but was rebuilt to serve some purpose other than supplying the needs of miners and prospectors.

Or were there prospectors of another kind now working quietly in these mountains and in this town?

Ahead, left dead on a siding, an old narrow-gage locomotive quietly rusted away in the spot where it had been left when the old-time railroad employees had left this rail line forever.

Two burros were tied at hitching rails, one lone man was sitting on the porch at the front end of a store, two others were loafing in front of a saloon, and two children were playing marbles beside a grocery store. No motor vehicles of any kind were visible.

"To maintain the old-time look, the Brocknor Corporation decided not to import cars here," Mishi said.

"They've got one here now," Keth said. His attention was concentrated on a sign directly ahead.

KEEP OUT
DANGER ZONE

*Permit to enter must be secured from
the Brocknor Corporation.*

Keth tooled the truck around the sign and up the

main street of the old rebuilt town. The loungers stared at them in surprise.

"I don't think we were supposed to bring a truck in here," Mishi said. "Or ourselves either!"

"Honey, before we get back to sunny Southern California, we will probably do a lot of things we are not supposed to do," Keth said. "If we ever get back, that is!"

"Do—do you think there's danger here? I mean, real danger?"

"Not from being run over by an automobile," Keth said.

"But if we are arrested for trespassing—"

"Then we will claim that we are looking for an agent of the Brocknor Corporation and that our purpose here is to apply for a permit to enter," Keth said.

From a dance hall came the tinkle of a player piano thumping away at an old-time song. Inside a saloon, bearded men were standing at a bar. An old bearded prospector with a sack of groceries slung over his shoulder came out of the store to unhitch a burro tied at a hitching rail. He left off the task to stare at the truck coming along the street.

"He looks as if he never saw a truck before," Mishi said.

Dropping his sack of groceries on the ground, the prospector went hastily back into the grocery store. Inside he could be seen talking to an aproned man who was presumably the proprietor. Out of the back of the store came a round-faced, square-jawed man wearing the red cap and red jacket of a hunter. Glancing at the truck, he seemed not to notice it but continued up the street and entered a building from which a flag drooped languidly from a pole.

"Stop pinching me," Keth said to Mishi.

"But that man in the hunting cap and jacket—he was the man who came to the laboratory to see Mr. Valthor!" Mishi said.

"I know it. I saw him," Keth answered. Gently he pulled the truck into a vacant lot beside a restaurant. "I'm hungry," he said, getting out. On the ground, he sucked in great mouthfuls of mountain air. "Great stuff, this air!" he said. "Not a trace of smog in it!"

Mishi was quickly beside him, breathing enthusiastically. "I'm utterly starved!" she said, in much too loud a voice. Taking his arm, she led him into the restaurant. "Oh, what a darling old-time place!" she explained, inside. "Look at those old wooden benches, dear! Aren't they wonderful? And that counter with stools! How long has it been since you saw stools like those?" Seating herself, Mishi gestured Keth to a seat beside her.

"Everything is wonderful!" Keth said. "Except where are the waitresses? Where is the food?"

The place was empty. There were no customers, no waitresses, and no sounds from the rear.

"More important, where is the smell of food?" Mishi whispered.

Sniffing, Keth was aware that there really was no smell of food anywhere in the place.

"Do you suppose it is really a restaurant?" Mishi asked.

"That's what the sign says in front," Keth answered. The sound of footsteps came slowly from the rear. "Somebody is coming!"

A curtain across a doorway that led to the back rooms stirred as if in a sudden wind, was brushed aside, and a woman entered. She was wearing a gray dress that swept the floor, her face was brown, and her features were expressionless.

"She looks like a zombie!" Mishi whispered.

"Don't let her hear you say that!"

"I didn't, stupid!"

The woman clumped behind the counter and stood in front of them. Slowly, she shook her head. With one hand, she pointed to the door.

"She wants us to leave, I think," Keth said.

"But we're hungry!" Mishi protested. "Can't you make us at least a hamburger?"

Staring at them, the woman did not answer. Looking more closely at her, Keth saw that the gaunt face was without expression. No emotion came to life on it, no hope was there, no fear, no hate, no love. Her skin was a dull brown, giving him the impression that some kind of greenish oil lay very close to its surface.

"Pardon me," Keth said, to the woman. "But—are you ill?"

In reply, the woman pointed again at the door. Without hesitation, Mishi rose. Keth followed her outside.

"That place is *wrong*, Keth. It's not a restaurant. It's a place—a place where zombies eat!"

"You have to be kidding!" Keth's voice was sharp.

"Do I? There's a bar. Let's go in and have a drink."

The bar, a replica of an old-time saloon, was dimly lighted. Against the back wall, a player piano protested the heavy silence of the place by making tinkling noises. At the mahogany bar perhaps a dozen men were standing, each with an empty glass on the bar in front of him. When Mishi and Keth entered, all talk suddenly ceased. The bartender, complete with an old-style plaid vest, looked up as they entered, smiled automatically, then looked again, and stopped smiling.

"I have changed my mind about that drink, big boy!" Mishi said, her voice low. "Come on. Take me back down the mountain. This town is nothing but one big tourist trap! I'm tired of them!"

Astounded at being called *big boy*, Keth permitted Mishi to take his arm and lead him outside. There he tried to protest. Mishi cut him short. "I pwyllled this place! It's wrong from top to bottom. But the really wrong thing is that they weren't expecting anybody here today. No helicopters were scheduled to arrive. We caught them with their masks down!"

"What are you talking about?" Keth answered. "All I have seen is a woman who can't talk and some men in a bar who have drunk themselves into a stupor. Pwylling sometimes gives wrong results."

"Not this time, it didn't!"

"But we haven't been threatened in any way."

"Threats are a warning. They won't give us any hint of possible danger." She was moving toward the truck as she talked. Keth could only gesture in protest.

"We'll start down the old road, stop and make camp, and return here later"—she was improvising as she talked—"if there is a later!" Suddenly she stopped moving. A man with a star on his chest and a heavy revolver in a holster at his hip was moving around the front end of the vehicle.

"Maybe we've used up all of our *later!*" Mishi whispered.

"That fellow is only the local sheriff," Keth protested. "This is a tourist town. He has probably come to give us the glad hand of welcome, and to escort us to the chamber of commerce." A grin on his face, Keth moved toward the law officer. "A very fine community you have here, officer. Excellent job of rebuilding. As soon as the word gets around, you'll have tourists by the thousands coming up here. With a few more attractions, this place will be as big as old Disneyland, out on the Coast."

"Is this your truck?" the sheriff asked.

"Yes, sir. We were just coming to move it."

The face of the sheriff was leathery, his skin was brown, and it seemed to exude something of the greenish oil that had been on the face of the woman in the restaurant. He looked at his two visitors, seemed to hesitate a moment as if waiting for orders from some unseen source, then quickly drew his heavy pistol from the holster at his belt.

"You're under arrest!" the gruff voice said.

"Under arrest? What for?"

"For bringing an unauthorized vehicle into the town of Golden Fleece, and for being here yourselves without proper authorization." The voice was grim. The muzzle of the pistol was unwaveringly centered on Keth.

"But—" Keth tried to protest.

"Don't give him an argument!" Mishi whispered fiercely. "He is capable of shooting us and claiming we were shot while resisting arrest."

The eyes of the sheriff pivoted toward Mishi. Slowly, his head tilted down and up in a cumbersome nod. "Yes," he said. "That can happen. If you don't want it to happen, turn your backs to me and show no resistance while I handcuff you."

They obeyed him. A moment later, their hands cuffed behind their backs, they were walking up toward the building where the flag drooped from the mast. The sheriff was clumping behind them.

"We want a lawyer—" Keth began.

"In Golden Fleece we have no lawyers," the sheriff answered. "Keep walking."

The proprietor of the grocery store came out and watched them walk past his shop. He said nothing. The miners who had been standing in the bar of the saloon, where they had hoped to buy a drink, came out and watched them in silence. The woman in the restaurant peered at them through the front window but did not emerge. The kids playing marbles beside the grocery store left their game and came to the edge of the street to stare at them.

"I feel like a condemned criminal walking the last mile to the gallows," Keth said, mourning in his voice.

"That's exactly what we may be doing," Mishi answered, her voice wan. "And something worse—" Her words sank to a whisper. "There's a cold wind walking—walking right behind me!"

"Eh?"

"It's the same kind of wind I felt in the laboratory."

"Blowing here in Colorado?"

"Y-yes."

"Shut up, you two!" the sheriff said.

CHAPTER FIVE

With the muzzle of his rifle thrust out of the lowered window of the mountain car, Valthor waited. On the trail ahead was a diamondback rattlesnake, a big fellow, his tail whirring a warning against this invader of his domain. As the car neared him, he struck savagely at it. The wide tire of the right front wheel went over him, but as soon as it was gone, he came in sight again, backing, rattling, and striking. Glancing back after the truck had passed, Valthor saw the snake at the edge of the trail, coiling again there.

"You ran over him and it just made him fighting mad!" he said, startled.

"They're hard to kill," the security officer said. "Even with these big tires, you can run over them and get bit for your trouble."

The motor of the vehicle hummed, a vague murmur deep inside the back end, and the strange car crawled easily and silently along the old railway bed. To their left was a little stream where water lay in placid pools behind beaver dams. Ahead of them, a mountain blue jay, startled by something near the high cliffs they were approaching, fled screaming—and exploded into puffs of blue feathers.

"Did you see that?" Valthor questioned.

"Yeah. But I didn't hear a gun."

"Nor did I. But something hit that blue jay in flight. I like this!" The security officer nodded to himself.

"Why?" Valthor asked.

"It means that whatever is up here doesn't know we're coming," Smith said. "If it knew we were this close, it wouldn't be shooting blue jays."

"Maybe it just doesn't give a damn how near we are!"

"Maybe," Smith said. He glanced at his passenger. "Can you shoot straight with a rifle?"

"If the gun shoots straight, so do I, usually," Valthor said. "But wouldn't it be better if we left the car here and went on alone?"

"Say, it might at that!" Surprise was in the officer's voice. He stopped the car, pulled the second rifle from its clip, opened the door, and, standing on the ground, reached under the instrument panel. "Maybe we had better take flashlights." Pulling two lights from their clips, he handed one to Valthor.

"Flashlights in the daytime?" Valthor questioned.

"There's an old mine tunnel up here. I thought maybe we might have to explore it a little. But if you're—if you don't want to do it—" His voice paused in suggestive silence.

Valthor slipped the flashlight into his jacket pocket. Rifles ready, they moved up the trail together. The road widened and became a level area, perhaps as big as a football field. Tailings from the tunnel, visible in the tall cliff at their left, had been dumped there, creating the level area. Above it was another lake. In front of the tunnel were a couple of rusted mine cars. Once, these cars had been used to haul ore from inside the tunnel down the canyon to a crusher and separator located in Golden Fleece.

Silence held the area. No blue jay fled screaming, no beaver slapped the water in the lake above. Directly overhead the sun shone with fierce intensity straight down into the canyon.

Valthor wiped sweat from his face. Looking at the

security man, he saw, for the first time, that a kind of vague greenish oil was visible on the skin of his face. *If this is sweat . . .* Valthor thought. He shook the suspicion out of his mind.

"I think it's gone," the security man said. "I think it went back into that tunnel!" Moving quickly along the old roadbed, he reached the cliff and threw himself against the wall on the left side of the tunnel, motioning toward the entrance to the tunnel as he did so.

Valthor took refuge on the right of the tunnel and looked down to see what the security man was indicating.

The bed of the little railroad that had run into the tunnel had been made of crushed stone. Though the ties had rotted away, their old positions could be seen.

Emerging from the tunnel were muddy footprints bigger than tracks ever made by any elephant.

A little cleaner, but not smaller, tracks could be seen going back into the tunnel.

"He's in there!" the security man said. Without a moment's hesitation, he charged into the tunnel.

For an instant, Valthor stood very still, checking within the silence of his mind what might be in the tunnel. There was turmoil in his mind, the tug of opposite directions.

Go! the silence seemed to say. *Go! We'll try to help you stay alive!*

Stooping, Valthor moved into the tunnel at a run.

But this is dangerous country! the silence whispered in his mind.

You didn't need to tell me that! he answered.

For a distance of perhaps twenty feet, the light of the sun illumined the tunnel. For the next twenty feet, the big passage was a place of darkening shadows. Then the shadows were gone, and there was only darkness. In that darkness was silence, utter silence, which was different from the quietness Valthor often sought in the

depths of his own mind. It was the silence that comes from the utter absence of sound.

His back against the stone wall, his rifle ready in his hands, Valthor, listening, became aware of distant sound. Time—while the hair rose on the back of his neck—was needed to identify it. Then he realized the sound was the slow drip, drip, drip of water falling from some roof deeper within the tunnel.

"You see anything?" a voice whispered just a few feet from Valthor.

He swung his rifle toward the sound before he recognized it as being the voice of the security officer, uttered under great stress. "I—I almost shot you!"

"Maybe it would have worked out better if you had shot me—" Smith's voice was a hard-to-understand mutter, just barely above the level of a whisper.

Under other circumstances, Valthor would have inquired the meaning of this comment, asking whether it sprang from utter fear or deep depression. But under these conditions, in darkness as black as midnight, with the only sound being that of water dripping interminably and with the memory in his mind of a helicopter spewing exploding smoke and men into the sky as it fell, Valthor had no time for such questions.

"Listen!" Smith said suddenly.

Slowly Valthor became aware of sounds other than falling water far ahead. Listening, he thought they might be caused by heavy feet slowly plodding through shallow water. Growing fainter, they eventually disappeared. Suddenly Smith, making almost no effort not to make noise, clumped along the tunnel.

Again Valthor had no time to wonder about the mood shifts in this man. Instead of wondering, he followed. He kept the rifle ready, almost bumping into the security officer when the latter stopped.

"The tunnel ends here," Smith said, his voice firm and sure. "Here the vein widened out. From the way the drip sounds, there's a huge cavern directly ahead of us.

The old miners dug out all of the ore they could safely take away, leaving columns of it to support the roof. When the vein petered out or further digging became too risky for too little gain, they simply abandoned the whole mine." For a moment, he was silent. "I've seen hundreds of places like this. They're huge caverns with slender columns left to support the roof. Sometimes they are on more than one level so that you may find a cavern on top of a cavern on top of a cavern, resulting from the fact that the veins of ore were sometimes found at different depths, with layers of worthless stone between. Geologically, these mountains are something of a puzzle. Every kind of ore is found here—silver, lead, zinc, uranium—everything."

"Right now I am not interested in geology," Valthor said. "I am interested in the creature that made those huge footprints."

"So am I," Smith said, but his voice tone said he wasn't. A click sounded and his flashlight came on. Valthor moved quickly out of the range of the light.

"Don't you think that showing a light is dangerous?" he asked.

"What does a little more danger matter?" the security officer answered. The light revealed an enormous cavern broken on all sides by supporting columns. To the right and to the left, circling walls dropped away. At the bar side of the cavern another tunnel was dimly visible. The small rails on which the handcars of the old miners had run wandered across the cavern and entered the tunnel on the far side.

Huge muddy footprints followed the small rails across the cavern.

"The old miners followed a trace of gold-bearing rock into the tunnel on the other side," Smith said. Boldly, his flashlight burning, he moved along the old mine railroad. Valthor let him get three steps ahead, then followed him.

Inside his mind, Valthor reached for the silence, asking questions.

It is just as dangerous to turn back as it is to go ahead, the silence seemed to say. Danger is here. Great danger.

What about the man ahead of me? Valthor asked inside his mind.

He is not a man, the silence said.

This statement, coming out of the depths of his own mind, shook John Valthor as nothing had ever shaken him before. Without thinking what he was doing, he stopped following the security officer and stepped behind a column of supporting rock rising to the roof. He wanted time to think, to ask questions.

Jump! the silence said.

Valthor jumped away from the column. As he did so, he was aware of a downward movement in the darkness beside the column. An object like a heavy club brushed his clothes. Sparks flew as it struck the stone floor of the old mine. In their dim light, Valthor saw that what had struck at him had been an arm of a creature that was perhaps ten feet tall.

The monster they had followed into the cave had been waiting here beside this column!

Vaguely, Valthor heard the creature draw itself to its full height—and stand listening. He did not move. The rifle was ready in his hands, but he did not dare use it. At this close range he would not miss, but he had no reason to assume that a bullet from a rifle would in any way harm this creature. Certainly a rifle shot would reveal his location.

He could not see Smith—he could not see his flashlight—and he was vaguely aware that the security officer had turned off the light. Small as it was, the flashlight had lightened, a little, the gloom of the cavern.

As he listened, Valthor heard footsteps coming from the direction Smith had taken. The footsteps went past the column, running now, rapidly, running as if the

security officer had found devils lurking in the old mine and was trying to outrun them to escape, to disappear in the direction of the tunnel that led into the mine.

Bzt!

What sounded like an angry hornet leaped into existence, very near Valthor, and raced after Smith. Seconds later it returned.

If it had been sent to destroy the security officer—or had gone of its own accord after him—it had failed in its mission. Valthor heard the buzzing slip away into quietness as if the hornet had returned to its nest.

Waves of chill rose from the base of his spine and went over him. He did not dare move. The creature must know he was nearby. Even the sound of his breathing might betray him. As he stood completely still, he was aware that he was hearing two sounds: the first, high-pitched and shrill, like the squeaking of a bat; the second, a vague rumbling bass similar to the sound made by a tape running too slowly.

"Where he go?" the bat voice squeaked.

"Not know," the bass voice rumbled in answer.

"Must be close," the bat squeak came again.

"Cannot see," the bass voice answered.

"Let me look!" the bat voice ordered.

"If I can't see 'im, how can you see 'im?" the bass voice inquired.

"Stupid fool!" the bat voice shrilled. "I can see in dark!"

"All right," the bass voice grumbled. "I will let you turn around and look!"

Coldness was again on John Valthor, and with it now was clammy sweat. Silently he stooped. Somewhere in the darkness, directly in front of him, he had the impression of movement. He could sense two heads changing places in the darkness.

"There 'im is!" The bat voice squealed in sudden triumph. "Right before your nose. Stupid fool! Hit!"

Valthor moved just in time to avoid another crunch-

ing, downward blow that again knocked sparks from the stone floor. In a split second he was ten feet away with his back against the column and the rifle ready in his hands.

"You miss 'im!" the bat voice shrilled. "Stupid fool!"

"'Im jumped!" the bass voice grumbled in angry chagrin. "Where 'im now?"

"'Im hiding," the bat voice complained.

"Can you see 'im?"

"N-no."

"Then turn around," the bass voice said. "I'll smell for 'im."

With his back against the stone column, John Valthor did not move a muscle. A rough outcropping of stone, left there by the old miners, was shielding him from the sight of whatever was out there. His impression of the huge two-headed creature—his skin crawled at the thought—was that one head could see but not smell, this ability correlating with the bat voice, and that the bass head could smell but not see in the dark.

For a long time the two voices were quiet. When they spoke again, the bat voice was shrilly upbraiding the bass voice for failure.

"I smell 'im," the bass voice answered.

"Then go get 'im!" the bat voice ordered.

"Not sure where 'im is," the bass voice protested. "Smell come from several directions!"

"Then move and smell again!" the bat voice instructed.

Squish-thump sounds followed as the creature moved. Valthor realized that these sounds were coming from the careful withdrawing of a heavy foot from a mixture of water and mud and the careful replanting of that foot in another position. The sounds grew fainter. Realizing that this meant the creature was going around the column in the other direction, Valthor tip-toed away, only to stumble and fall heavily as he reached the old mine railway.

Trying to catch himself before he hit the rocky floor, he lost the flashlight in one direction and the rifle in the other. Both made metallic clattering sounds as loud as cannon shots in the silent cavern. Scrambling for the gun, he got it back into his hands. But before he could find the flashlight, he heard squishing sounds coming toward him.

Valthor felt, rather than saw, the huge creature stop within ten feet of where he was standing.

"Where is 'im?" the bat voice squeaked.

"Smell very strong now!" the bass voice said.

"Let me look! If is close, I can see 'im!"

"If you come any closer I'll put a bullet through you," the human said.

Instantly, in all that huge cavern, there was silence, except for the interminable drip, drip, drip of water from the roof overhead.

Valthor wet his lips. How did you talk to such a thing? It seemed to know a little English, but he had no knowledge of its standard of values, its motives, its purposes, or why it was here. Perhaps—this was his hope—if he could establish communication with it and learn what it wanted, why it was here, and how it had come into being, then some basis of understanding might be established. If he failed in establishing communication. . . .

As he sensed a huge hand coming down toward him out of the darkness, he knew he had failed. With no other hope left, he pulled the trigger of the rifle. The gun roared. Leaping out, the bullet struck a metallic object directly in front of the muzzle and ricocheted toward the roof. There it struck, ricocheted again, and vanished, howling, in the darkness.

Echoes roared back.

Valthor pulled the trigger and got off a second shot. Then the hand that was flailing downward struck him a glancing blow on the side of the head and knocked him sprawling and unconscious.

As blackness closed in around him, he knew that if the blow had struck him fairly, it would have killed him instantly. He also knew, without knowing how he knew it, that such a death would not have been the end of his life. As this enigmatic statement flashed through his mind, he passed out entirely.

"Got 'im!" the bass voice said, satisfaction in its tone.

"Pick 'im up!" the bat voice ordered. "Pick 'im up and carry him away. We can use 'im!"

CHAPTER SIX

With the sheriff close behind them and with their hands cuffed behind their backs, Mishi Greer and Keth Evan were pushed into the door of the building behind the flag. The first room was an office—obviously belonging to the sheriff—with a big, flattop desk and rifles in racks along the farther wall. On their left was another door with a glass front leading to a corridor.

"Take that door," the sheriff told them. They obeyed. Beyond was a blank wall in front of another small building; to the right was a long corridor with walls of iron grills and iron doors leading into cells, the whole structure made largely of sheet tin and looking much like the remodeled ground-level part of a mine.

The door of the cells were open. The sheriff told them to enter the first cell. They obeyed him. The door was slammed shut, closed with a heavy bar, and locked. The sheriff instructed them to back up to this door from the inside of the cell. Obeying—there was no other choice—they discovered that this was the way in which he could safely unlock and retrieve the handcuffs with which he had locked their wrists behind them.

"What have we done to deserve being arrested?" Mishi demanded.

Without answering, the sheriff stood looking at them. A greenish oil was visible on his skin. His eyes vacant,

his mind seemingly far away, he appeared to consult for orders from something not visible to them. Without answering Mishi's question, without speaking to them again, he turned and clumped along the corridor to his office. They heard the outer door slam. From the small, barred window in the heavy concrete rear wall of the cell, they saw him walk down the street and enter a building that had prominently displayed on it in red letters on a white background the words:

TOWN HALL

"I keep thinking this is a gag," Keth said. "This just can't happen to a human being."

"I doubt if either of us knows all the things that can happen to human beings, particularly if the things are bad," Mishi said.

"Well—" Keth said, then was silent. "Whoever heard of being arrested and thrown into jail just for bringing an illegal vehicle into a town? Even if we broke some city ordinance, what kind of a law is that? The state supreme court will never uphold such an ordinance."

"We do not have available to us any kind of court," Mishi said.

"But they have to take us before some kind of court! That's the law!"

"The law in Golden Fleece may be different," Mishi said.

"But this is the State of Colorado, in the United States—"

"Maybe the town of Golden Fleece has seceded from the United States without letting anyone know about it!" Mishi said.

"You've got to be kidding!"

"I only hope you're right and that I am kidding," Mishi said. "What I am afraid of is that something has moved in here and has set up housekeeping and is getting ready to go into action on a large scale!" Mishi's

dark eyes were sombre with thoughts that she was trying to find words to express, or perhaps with thoughts she was trying to find words to keep from expressing.

The cell had a single mattress lying on the floor. On top of the mattress was a single thin, brown blanket. In the corner was a bucket with a top on it. There was a washbasin with a single, cold-water tap.

"Maybe we're lucky to have a cell with running water in it," Keth said. "It must have been put in for the benefit of tourists. Most of these fierce little mining towns had a one-cell jail into which drunks, murderers, painted Indians, and wife-beaters were thrown. Inside each jail a kangaroo court was usually in progress among the prisoners." His eyes went to the lidded bucket in the corner and he grinned. "Well, I guess if you can stand the plumbing facilities here, I can do the same."

Mishi's eyes went in horror to the bucket. "Do you mean that I—" Her voice faltered.

"Yep!" Keth said, firmly. "If you gotta go, you gotta use the bucket." He was trying to pull her mind away from the sombre thoughts moving behind her eyes. Indeed, he was also trying to pull his mind away from the horrors lurking in the depths where silence ought to be.

"I won't go!" Mishi said firmly.

"Girls gotta go, eventually," Keth said. "Jails are not supposed to be happy places. I suppose at exercise time, one of us will be allowed to carry the bucket out and dump it down the nearest gulch."

"Keth Evan, there are times when I hate you!"

"We can take turns carrying the bucket."

"There are times when I hate you even worse! I want a separate cell, to be away from you!"

Keth shrugged. "You can ask the sheriff when he comes back. But asking won't do much good." He gestured down the tier of cells. "The walls are made of iron bars. You can see right through all the cells. The

thing that worries me, though, is this: Suppose the sheriff gives you a separate cell. Suppose sometime during the night he arrests a drunken Indian. Suppose he doesn't even bother to remember what cell you are in and throws the drunken Indian in with you."

"Keth Evan, don't speak to me again, ever!"

"There are worse places than being in the same cell with me!" Keth said, comfortably. "But if you insist I'll yell for the sheriff and explain your problem to him—"

"If you call that horrible man back here, I'll scream that you tried to attack me!"

Keth grinned at her. "I see I've got you mad enough to spit in the devil's eye."

"In your eye first!"

"That's good. As long as you're mad enough to spit in my eye, you won't collapse on me." Like a big brother comforting a small and forlorn sister, he patted her on the shoulder, a patronizing attitude that roused her to even greater fury. Then, suddenly, tears were in her eyes. Keth loaned her a handkerchief and helped her blow her nose. "As soon as you're ready," he said gently. "I want you to help me pwyll this place."

"In—in just a moment. I—I have to use that bucket."

"Go right ahead." Keth moved to the barred window of the cell and stood looking out. The town of Golden Fleece had been built on both sides of a small stream that flowed down what was almost a narrow canyon. Up higher, the canyon broadened. There, a few hundred yards distant, was a huge building. Made of aluminum, it glistened in the sunlight. Keth watched the building. It was a new structure. When Golden Fleece had been a roaring mining camp, aluminum had been a rare metal known only to a few scientists. As he was wondering about its purpose, he was aware that Mishi was standing beside him.

Her face was wan and a little white, but she was emotionally calm.

"You're better at pwylling than I am," he said.

"Most women are," she answered.

"Yes. I agree. Will you try?"

She nodded. Watching, he saw the pupils of her eyes widen as if she were going into a dark place. Slowly they constricted again. Suddenly unsteady on her feet, she was grabbing at his arm for support. Her voice was a gabble of whispered sound.

"Keth! Keth! They're here! They're on our world! They look like—Keth, you can't see them! Keth! *Keth!*" Her babble became close to a scream.

"I'm here, baby," Keth said quickly. "It's all right. Everything is going to work out all right—"

"I only wish you knew what you are talking about!"

"Baby—"

"They came from afar, Keth—" The babble ceased. She clutched harder at Keth's arm. "A wind—a wind is blowing—"

"What is the wind blowing, baby?"

"Me!" she answered. "Me! It's blowing me right away! They—they make the wind blow, Keth! Keth, I'm coming back to you! I'm returning! Keth, catch me!"

Keth caught her as she fell. For a while she lay in his arms with her eyes closed, the effect of the pwylling experience having left her face pale. During this moment, Keth Evan was aware of the wind blowing in the jail cell. He could feel it making the hair rise on the back of his neck. It was also playing tricks along his skin, touching him with a million fingers, feeling him with invisible tentacles. Sweat, in a sudden gush, broke out all over him. He could not determine whether it was really a wind or simply a feeling of cold flowing past him. He turned quickly. Nothing was there. Mishi stirred in his arms, and he had to comfort her. He walked with her around the cell to restore her circulation, which had been temporarily impaired by the pwylling experience. When she returned to normal, she stared at him from blank eyes, demanding to know what she had said. Knowing she had seen something that her

conscious mind did not wish to admit existed, he tried to tell her what had happened. She still stared at him. "Well, if I said it, then I said it. But I do not remember what it was I saw or felt."

"I understand," he tried to comfort her. "Sometimes a person goes very deep in the pwylling experience and does not recall what was seen then. This thing is not for amateurs, you know."

"I'm no amateur!" she retorted. "If I were an amateur I would not be working for Mr. Valthor!"

"I know, Mishi, I know. But what are we into here?"

"Hell!" she answered. "We knew what it was before we came, knew subconsciously. The doors of hell have opened here in these mountains and something has come through them into our world!" Again her eyes grew large with the coming pwylling experience, but quickly she pulled herself back from it. "I don't want to go back now, Keth!" she whispered.

"I understand!" he said.

"I'm not sure my sanity would stand up under another such experience so soon after the first one," she told him.

Again he agreed. "Take it easy for now, Mishi," he told her. Moving to the window, he looked out. A door had opened in the side of the big aluminum building. Men were marching from it. He motioned to Mishi to look.

"They're pygmies," she whispered. "Little people! When I was a child I used to have two companions just their size! What are they, Keth?"

"How would I know," the gangling red-head answered. "I just came in myself."

Walking in single file, the little men moved away from the building. "They're carrying something," Mishi said.

"I see," Keth answered. "Some have shovels, others have picks—just like miners going to work for the afternoon shift. And look! There's another line of them coming out of that mine tunnel on the slope."

"They must be miners," Mishi said. "Little men with picks and shovels are digging in these mountains, Keth! Where did they come from? What are they doing here?"

"I can't answer those questions," Keth answered. Glancing in the other direction, he saw the sheriff coming out of the building that had the TOWN HALL sign on it. With him were two wooden-faced men who also wore stars.

Heavy feet entered the building and clumped into the hall.

"They're coming for us," Mishi said. "Maybe—maybe they're going to take us to a j-judge!"

"Don't bet on it!" Keth answered.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Coming back to consciousness, John Valthor was aware of two sensations. The first was pain, a spate of it, in his shoulder. The second sensation was sound. Listening, he decided that it was the sound of a woman sobbing. This concerned but did not disturb him. In the distance were other sounds. Listening to them, he decided they were coming from picks breaking stone and from shovels being used to pick up and toss broken stone into a metal car. In his mind was the thought that miners were working near him. In his dazed state, this seemed a reasonable conclusion.

What had hit him in the dark had struck quite a blow! However, unless the dizziness meant more than it seemed to mean, he had no broken bones. Valthor had been dodging when the blow had come; he had gone with it and had escaped what otherwise would have been a mortal blow. Listening to the sound of soft sobbing near him, but not yet awake enough to be really concerned about it, hearing the clink of picks and shovels on metal, he was aware of another sound in the distance, the roar of rushing water. The sound of shovels throwing ore into a metal container stopped, and the squeak of unoled bearing began. Coming near, the mine car passed him and went out of hearing on his right. He tried to think, but found this to be difficult.

Grimly he forced himself to the task of thinking, requiring himself to consider the problem of the creature that had lurked in the darkness of the mine cavern, of the two voices talking, and of the sound of the angry hornet leaping from its nest only to return to it. From what world had this creature come? He had no answer. At the physical level, worlds without number stretched throughout the Galaxy. Beyond the Galaxy to which Earth belonged were other galaxies with an infinite number of other worlds. Always, from some world or other, some creature was trying to better its lot by reaching out long tentacles toward the Green Planet that men called *Home*. From the nonphysical worlds, from the unseen galaxies came invisible creatures who tried to build bodies for themselves and to use these bodies to establish themselves on Planet Earth. Was Earth anything more than a beachhead planet? Valthor thought it was more than this. He thought it was what it seemed to the eyes to be—a world of sparkling seas, green plains, and high mountains—but he had no delusion that this was *all* it was. He did not resent the appearance on Earth of new intruders. He saw all life—including the coming of such intruders—as a series of challenges between individuals and between species. When one challenge was surmounted, when one battle was won, there came that strange interlude called *peace*, during which physical, mental, and emotional muscles might be strengthened for the next challenge. War was not the goal, nor was peace. The goal was to survive through the war, and through the peace, and while doing this, to grow into a better understanding and a better relationship with the whole universe.

Intruders on the human beachhead were also a personal challenge to John Valthor. Besides the primitive impulse that was in all men to battle for survival, he had an urge to fight for the right to be something better. His way of expressing this urge was to meet these challengers. If he kicked out of existence some devilish creature

trying to find a new home on Planet Earth, this was the role fate had cast for him. If he risked his life in the process, he felt his life was his own to risk as he saw fit.

Near him, the woman was still sobbing. Slowly he forced himself to become more aware of his surroundings. The dizziness was going from his brain. He was lying on a stone shelf of some kind. The sounds of picks and shovels and of sobbing were coming from below him. Carefully, he tested his right arm. It worked. His left arm also worked. Without moving, he opened his eyes. He could not see the person who was sobbing, but he could see the source of the noise of picks and shovels. Little miners, no more than three feet tall, were furiously digging into a wall of this cavern. Light for their operations was supplied by pin-point beams that came from their helmets. As he watched, his wonder rising, he heard the squeak and the rumble of wheels. From his right, moving along little metal rails, came a small mine car. Bending their backs to push it were two little miners.

Valthor watched them move the car to a spot near the diggers. The shovelers began their work, the tiny miners making the broken rock fly.

Beyond the workers, caught occasionally in the flicker of their lights, a stream of water gushed from a cliff, swirled into a channel cut into the floor of a vast cavern with many supporting columns, then roared out of sight.

Like imprisoned slaves trying to dig their way to freedom, the little miners worked. Alike as peas from the same pod, moving at a uniform pace, each swung his pick with the same force and in the same way, each handled his shovel exactly as the others did. As Valthor watched, the tunnel deepened into the wall. The little men worked like beavers. Under their picks and shovels, the tunnel lengthened as if by magic. *If I had holes to dig, I wish I could hire that crew*, Valthor thought. Far and near, he looked through the cavern, searching for the creature that had knocked him out and that had

brought him there, and fearing he would see it. He saw nothing that even resembled it. The sobbing grew louder. He moved, found he was fully free to move, discovered he was lying in a wall niche about as high as an average man was tall, and moved cautiously until he could see what was below.

Revealed now and then by the flickering lights of the little miners, crouching against the wall like an animal that has failed to outdistance its pursuers and has dropped exhausted in final failure, was a young woman. Wearing slacks, with a heavy sweater pulled tight against her body, with a mass of red hair caught in a circlet at her neck, with her bottom on the stone of the cavern floor and her knees drawn up under her chin in the instinctive protective gesture of a woman who feels she is about to be attacked, she was watching the little miners, and was sobbing. Fear was in her, a great wave of it. Watching her, Valthor had the impression that more than fear was in her. With the fear, he thought, was utter despair. A woman sobbed like that only when she has seen her best dream shattered and utterly destroyed. Suddenly, she seemed to sense his presence looking down at her. Looking up, she saw him. Under the lights of the little miners, her face was momentarily clearly revealed; it was greenish white, the kind of face that had not seen the sun in recent months, perhaps not in recent years. Alarm was on it as she looked up at him.

"Don't worry!" he said quickly. "I won't harm you!"

"I—I didn't know you were alive. Old Two-Heads brought you through here but he got a call and had to hurry away. He—he tossed you up there!" She rose to her feet and looked at him. Like a little child exploring a new object, one finger went out to touch him. Holding the finger up in front of her face, she stared at it. "You're still real! You're still human!" Her voice was a vague, wistful whisper of sound against the background

noise of the chip of picks on stone and the roar of the underground river fretting away in its channel.

"What did you think I was?" Valthor said.

"I thought—" Horror crossed her face. "Well, I thought you were—" She did not finish but stood looking at him with wonder on her face. "But you're not. You—you're still a human!"

"What else could I be?" Valthor asked. Questions tumbled through his mind in a flood that seemed to roar as loud as the underground stream nearby. They were moving so fast he hardly knew which one to select. Coming from somewhere in the back of his mind was a silent warning that any question might be the wrong one.

She stared at him.

"If you wonder at me because I am still a human, then what are you?" he asked.

"I'm—" She shook her head at her own thoughts.

"What is that creature that brought me in here? You called it Two-Heads."

"I—" Again she shook her head. "How"—she had questions of her own to ask—"how did Two-Heads manage to catch you? If I were outside and saw him coming, I would run very fast to the ends of the world before I would let him catch me again."

"Again?" Valthor questioned. Then, seeing from her face that he had asked the wrong question, he was sorry he had spoken. "I met a man named Smith, a major in internal security—"

"You knew Ed?" Wonder crossed her face.

"Yes."

"How—how is he?" Suddenly she was tugging at his jacket. "Is Ed all right?"

"I wouldn't say that."

"You know, then, how it is with him?"

"Not entirely. How is it with him—and with you?" Valthor asked. While these were general questions

which might be answered in several ways, or not at all, they were trapping questions.

"Well—" He saw her change her mind as a sudden warm glow flooded her face. "We—were engaged!"

"Great!" Valthor said. His voice conveyed the impression that being engaged was quite the finest thing that could happen to two people, which, indeed, was what he did think—as long as he was not one of the people.

"That was when he was first assigned here as security officer, while he was still"—her voice hesitated, then continued—"while he was still a man . . . and while I"—the warm glow was fading from her face—"while I was still a woman." The glow vanished entirely leaving her face thin, pinched, and hollow.

"While you were still a woman!" Valthor spoke much too quickly and knew it, but the words had popped unbidden from his lips. "If you are not a woman—and a very attractive one too—what are you?" He tried to use flattery to hide his mistake. Inside himself, he knew he was still dazed from the blow on the shoulder and from the shock of this unexpected situation or he would not be making these mistakes.

Her face grew more thin and pinched. "I don't know for sure what I am, mister! I'm just a thing, I think. But sometimes I'm a woman again!" The glow leaped into existence on her face. "Mister, you don't know how good it feels to sort of wake up now and then and realize you have become a woman again, that you're still human somewhere deep down inside you!"

Her face said she was telling the truth.

"Eh?" Valthor said. He felt as if he had walked into the middle of some strange experiment and had no idea what forces were involved or what magnitudes—nor did he know the identity of the experimenters. "Eh?" he repeated. "You know, I don't even know your name."

She was still smiling. Even if the glow on her face was rising only from memory, it was still there. "You didn't

ask me. My name is Amelia. Brocknor," she quickly added.

"The daughter of Erasmus Brocknor?"

"Yes." She was tugging at his jacket again. "Did you know him, mister? Did you?"

"No, I didn't. Nor did I know he was dead."

"He's not dead." Her hands fell away from his jacket. "Not exactly, that is. I'll bet he wishes he was!" Tears welled into her eyes. "When he can wish at all, that is!" The tears washed out, and hot rage washed in.

"Miss Brocknor—" Valthor still had the feeling that any question might be the wrong question. The talk of this young woman was—wild? Under other circumstances, Valthor would have assumed that she was psychotic; but here, with little miners furiously extending a tunnel—he could not see them any longer, they had worked so fast—he was not at all certain what conclusion he should reach. He tried to contact the silence in his own mind, but the silence seemed to be out of circuit. "Tell me about him," he said at last.

At this question, the rage vanished from her face. Happiness returned to it. She was a young girl again, living among happy memories of days that were gone. "He was the nicest daddy any girl ever had. He would take me riding on his shoulders—every day he would take me!—and we would have ice cream together. Then we would go to the dime stores, and he would let me pick out any toy I wanted. At night, when I was sleepy, he would rock me to sleep—and sing songs!" Her voice slipped away as she went deeper into the memories of childhood. When it came again, a lisp was in it, and she was a little girl again.

Pulling himself to a more comfortable position, Valthor took care not to interrupt this child-mind that was now emerging. If he had had his choice he would not have picked these conditions for probing into childhood memories buried in the subconscious and lost under layers of memories of other years. The childhood mem-

ories of this young woman were of minimal interest to him, but if he had to go through them to reach the memories that he wanted—memories that might tell him something of the little miners furiously at work and of the strange monster with two heads—then he would go through them. He knew he was dealing with a mind strained to the breaking point. When Amelia Brocknor hesitated, he dared to ask a question of his own.

“What happened to your daddy?”

Alarm was instantly in her eyes. “How did you know about that?” The words shot from her mouth like bullets from a gun.

“I don’t really know, but I sort of guessed that something happened,” Valthor said. “You certainly seem to have had a very happy childhood. Now, here in this place”—he spread his hands in a helpless gesture—“well, you are not happy now.”

“No. I’m not.”

“Then something must have happened between your childhood and now to have made you unhappy and brought you here,” Valthor said. “What was it?” His voice was gentle, his face smiling.

“They came!” she answered. “They came—and he invented the brain stuff. Then we came here. After that, nothing was ever the same.”

Cold, rising from no discernible source, was suddenly upon John Valthor. “I don’t know what you mean by *they*,” he said, his voice gentle. “Who are *they*?”

Wariness was prominent in her eyes but she could still answer. “I can’t say what they look like,” she answered.

“Ah. Then how—”

“But I have felt them!” the young woman suddenly blazed. “And I know what they feel like! They feel like a cold wind blowing right behind you!”

The cold on Valthor’s skin intensified. Looking down at his bare hand, he could see hairs rising on the back of his wrist and could feel them rising on the back of his neck. He forced himself to be calm.

"They came and your nice daddy invented the brain stuff. What happened next?"

She nodded toward the little miners hard at work. "They came! We came here to do the final work on them. And there they are, mister, hard at work—what my daddy hoped and dreamed would be the greatest invention any human ever made!"

Coming from some unknown source, the outline of a possible sequence of events was suddenly in Valthor's mind. In it was everything. . . . But he rejected the outline. It was too perfect; it could not be true. He would have to check it. "Tell me more about how these little miners are the greatest invention any human ever made."

The dream-that-had-failed look was back in her eyes and her greenish-white face shone again. "They were to do all the work that men have to do now—all the digging in mines, all the separating of the crude ore into various metals, all the smelting of the metals, all the hard work in the fields, all the work at sea, all the work under the sea—they were to do it! For the first time in human history men would have the leisure to sit back and enjoy themselves, to develop music and art, to compose great plays."

Valthor was suddenly colder than he had been before. This—this was the dream! While somebody else does the work, men will sit back and live on the fat of the land. Valthor knew without being told how this kind of talk would appeal to Earth's hard-pressed working billions of people, to the man who had a regular job and had to moonlight on a second job to make ends meet, to the working housewife and mother. This would be talk straight out of heaven, the great new day dawning at last.

"And when the starships came, they would make up the crews, taking us to worlds beyond the sky!" Amelia Brocknor's voice continued.

"And how—" Valthor began.

The young woman nodded toward the little miners whose picks could be heard in the tunnel they had quickly dug.

"There goes the simulated brain substance my daddy invented!" Amelia Brocknor said. "Those little miners are robots. You can't say they don't work or that they are not efficient!" Her voice was alive with conviction as she spoke.

Having watched two of the little miners push the loaded mine car, Valthor had no wish to deny their efficiency. They could do the job all right; perhaps they could do any job. Was this the catch about them? If they could do any job, would the great mass of people do anything except sit back and deteriorate eventually into nothings? Valthor found that the words of his question choked him even when formed mentally. The ancient injunction laid on men, to earn their bread by the sweat of their brow, had hidden meanings.

"Robots!" Valthor said. "They—they—" He fumbled for words to hide the turmoil in his mind. "They *look* efficient."

"They *are* efficient!" Amelia Brocknor said.

"But—well, I have the impression that something has gone wrong."

"Right. Two-Heads was the model that went wrong."

"Yes." Remembering how he had been hunted in the dark mine cavern, Valthor was ready to agree that this monster was wrong. "I assume Two-Heads is also a robot. When Major Smith came to my laboratory, he did not give me the full story."

"He was sent there!"

"Sent?"

"Probably."

"But why to me?"

"I don't know why they picked on you, mister, maybe by accident, maybe because they think you are a big man who might get in their way."

"Umh!" Valthor's grunt was toneless.

"They're bringing tourists in here. Do you suppose those tourists go out the way they come in?"

"*What?*" Valthor's voice had a gasp in it. "After they've been here, the tourists are sent back home—as spies? Why—"

"The idea is that when *they* emerge from these mountains to take over this planet, the tourists who have been here will back them up," Amelia Brocknor said.

The squeak of the wheels on the little mine car came again. Valthor watched the miners push it into the tunnel and heard the ring of shovels as they filled it. Watching, he felt a tug of sympathy for the little miners. The dream that they might be helpers of the human race had elements that he thought were good. Since the ancient gods had retired beyond Mount Olympus, the human race had never had helpers; robots could be real helpers for mankind. Deep inside himself, Valthor discovered that he felt a hunger for a trustworthy companion to take along all the future paths that he had to follow, all the dangers he had to face. If only he had something to stand beside him, to face with him the dangers of the future! He knew, however, that the individual could only develop his own strength by being alone. He also knew that the way the real enemy could come was by claiming to be a helper to man.

At first that help would be as real as the efficiency of the little miners furiously digging here, but in the end, it would be death.

Thump!

Vague and far away, Valthor heard the sound. It was slowly repeated. He heard it without quite realizing what it was.

Amelia Brocknor was quicker to recognize it.

"That's Two-Heads!" she said. "He's coming for you." Tugging at his jacket, she pulled him from the shelf where he had been sitting. Without hesitation, he obeyed her.

At her soft call, the little miners came hurrying from the tunnel they were digging.

"If Two-Heads wants to know what happened to his prisoner, tell him I took the man with me!" she told them.

"Yes, missy. Yes, yes, yes." Their voices were little whispers of sound as their heads nodded in agreement.

Thump, thump, thump. The heavy feet were closer now.

"Come with me quickly," the young woman said to Valthor.

As the mining robots hastened back to their work in the tunnel, Amelia Brocknor and John Valthor fled through mine tunnels where darkness was complete and water dripped continuously from the roof overhead.

"I know my way through these tunnels," she told him. "And if you wonder why I am helping you, it is because you have made me into a human woman again!" Her voice faltered and caught. "At least, temporarily."

He had no time to inquire the meaning of this enigmatic statement.

"Ed—Ed Smith did the same thing for me once, before Two-Heads dipped him." Her voice caught in a sound of conflict and torment.

"But I backslid," she continued. "That's the way it is. You are human for a while. Then you become a thing!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

The sheriff had with him two armed men whose faces had a greenish tinge. Each wore a star. With the two deputies ready, the sheriff unlocked the door of the cell and gestured for Mishi and Keth to walk out. Outside in the corridor, he gestured for them to turn their backs to him.

"So you can handcuff us again?" Mishi flared. "I won't do it!" Refusing to obey, she stood facing the man wearing the star.

Grabbing her by the shoulder, the sheriff spun her in a circle and shoved her face against the wall.

Smack! Keth Evan's fist hit the sheriff on the side of the jaw, a jolting blow that knocked the officer's grip loose from Mishi. Instantly, Keth shoved the surprised sheriff through the still-open door of the cell. Yelling at Mishi to follow him, Keth jerked free the heavy pistol from the officer's holster and jammed the gun into the sheriff's back.

"If you start shooting, the sheriff will get it too!" Keth yelled. Mishi was already in the cell with him. Outside the two deputies hastily lowered the guns they had drawn.

"Drop your guns!" Keth told them. In front of him he held the sheriff as a shield. Mishi was behind him. Keth thought that he was completely in charge of the

situation. The deputies would not shoot for fear of hitting the sheriff. He could force them to drop their guns and back away; then, he and Mishi could leave the cell and lock the startled sheriff and his two deputies in it.

But, reaching backward over his shoulder, the sheriff grabbed Keth by the hair. Bending forward quickly, he flipped the astonished Evan forward over his head. The pistol exploded in Keth's hand as he hit the floor, the bullet screaming through the open door and shrilling down the corridor. The deputies ducked hastily away from the front of the cell.

Keth tried to bring the gun around toward the sheriff. The law officer caught the wrist of the hand that held the gun. With his other hand, he jerked the weapon free. Mishi struck at him. He slapped her and spun her backward against the wall. Reaching down, he caught Keth, jerked Keth's hands behind his back, and snapped shut the handcuffs.

In the hands of the officer Keth felt helpless. The man possessed strength that seemed superhuman. With one hand he caught Mishi, jerked her arms behind her back, and shoved her face first against the wall. A second time the cuffs snapped shut.

When the sheriff had taken the gun from Keth, he had put it into his holster. Now he took it out again. Keth stared at him from dazed eyes. Was the sheriff going to shoot him right here in the jail? As Keth stared, the law officer opened the cylinder of the old-style revolver, lifted out the shell that Keth had fired by accident, replaced it with a cartridge from his belt, and then slipped the gun back into its holster.

"Walk out ahead of me," he told his two captives. His voice was calm, detached, far-off, with no sign of anger. The exercise involved in overcoming two prisoners had brought a slightly greener tinge to his face, but otherwise he gave no indication that anything out of the ordinary had happened. Promptly Keth and Mishi obeyed him.

"Walk toward my office," he told them. "No! Not into my office! Stop where you are!"

"Do you think he is going to shoot us?" Mishi asked.

"I hope not," Keth answered. He was still shaken by the ease with which he had been handled. "But I don't know. I have never met a man as strong as he is. If he wants to kill us, all he has to do is pick us up by the heels and knock our heads against the wall."

As they were whispering, one of the deputies was sliding past them. A wall panel slid to one side. Beyond it was a small, dark room.

"In there," the sheriff said.

When they hesitated, he shoved both of them into the tiny room. He followed them in. "You stay here," he spoke to the deputies. Pushing an inner sliding door into place, the sheriff punched a button on the front wall. The bottom seemed to drop out from under them. Mishi cried out and tried to clutch at Keth, but her hands were still cuffed behind her back. She fell against the wall, then slid down to the floor. Keth went down beside her. The sheriff looked around at them. Clutching a handhold on the wall, he was unconcerned by the motion of the room.

"It's an elevator, Mishi!" Keth gasped.

"An elevator here in a town like this!" she answered. "Golden Fleece never had a building more than two stories high."

"But the town had mine shafts. This is probably an old cage in a mine shaft. They used these primitive elevators to lower miners to the ore body where they were working and to bring up small cars loaded with ore."

"Uh!" the sheriff grunted.

"I think that grunt means he agrees with you," Mishi said. They struggled to their feet. The elevator continued its plunging descent. "If this fall continues much longer, I—I'm going to be sick to my stomach."

As she finished speaking, the elevator slowed to an

automatic stop. The sheriff motioned them to precede him. They stepped out onto the stone floor of an enormous cavern. In the distance, on their right, lights flared against the ceiling. A cage made of chain link fence wire was against the wall of the cavern and inside the cage were people. Somewhere in the far distance a diesel engine thumped.

They hardly noticed any of these things though. What they did notice was the stink. It was not smoke; it did not seem to come from the exhaust fumes of the diesel engine; it was not coming from the dampness of the ancient mine cavern. Coming from no discernible source, but hanging everywhere in the air, was a foulness that was like a mixture of sewer gases and stockyard smells and the blistering horror of skunk.

After one whiff of it Mishi was promptly sick to her stomach.

"Keep on walking!" the sheriff said.

"But she's sick!" Keth protested. "Release her handcuffs so she can take care of herself."

"Keep walking," the sheriff said. "Or do you want me to drag you?"

"I—I—I'll walk," Mishi gulped.

"We're not criminals!" Keth shouted. "You have no right to treat us this way!"

"Shut up!" the sheriff said. Keth was quickly silent.

Under the orders of the law officer, they moved toward the chain link wire cage in which people were obviously held prisoner. Neither really noticed the prisoners, all their attention being occupied by the guard at the gate. At least ten feet tall, the creature had a left arm too short, a right arm backward in the shoulder joint, and, as it saw them coming and moved to open the gate, they saw that it walked with a definite limp.

Mishi took a good look at the creature and stopped moving. "It—it's got two heads!" she gasped.

"Keep moving," the sheriff said behind her. "Or you won't have any head!"

"Y-yes, sir. But that thing, whatever it is, looks as if it is made of metal!"

"It is!" the sheriff said. "Get into that cage." The creature had already opened the chain link wire gate. Refusing to budge, Mishi set her heels on the ground. The sheriff grabbed her by her manacled hands and Keth in the same way and literally threw them through the open gate. Following them into the big pen, the law officer unlocked their handcuffs and left, moving away in the direction of the elevator. The hum of motors that followed from the same direction indicated the return of the elevator to ground level in the town of Golden Fleece.

Outside the cage, the two-headed creature slipped a heavy bar across the door, took up a position beside it, rocked gently back and forth on its feet as though seeking a comfortable position for the one short leg, and settled down. Mishi stared at it. "It's the devil!" she whispered.

"I don't believe in the devil and neither do you!" Keth protested.

"I do!" she said firmly. "Not in just one devil, in millions of them. That one outside the cage is worse than anything I ever saw, even in nightmares!"

"Let's walk around and talk to the others here," Keth suggested. "Let's give ourselves time to think. The others here will know something."

Comforted by the pressure of his arm, she walked with him along the length of the cage. The prisoners stared at them but did not seem really to see them. At the far end of the enclosure, a stream of water gushed from the wall and fell away into a hole in the stone floor, roaring and splashing as it funneled itself down and out of sight. Obviously it was both a source of drinking water and a means of disposing of body wastes.

Keth drank and induced Mishi to drink, then he splashed water on his face and hands. Looking over her

shoulder at the creature on guard outside the gate, she tried hard to follow Keth's instructions.

"You're in shock," Keth said. "So am I, I guess, to a degree. This means our body fight-or-flight mechanisms are overstimulated. We've just got to keep control of ourselves until the adrenalin and noradrenalin have exhausted themselves."

"I'm doing my best," Mishi said. "If I just glance at that horror outside the gate, look quickly away, then look back again maybe I can condition myself to stand the sight of such a—" Her voice died away. "But I'll be all right. I won't have hysterics and I won't faint or do any other old-time female thing."

"Good girl!" Keth said approvingly. He took a deep breath in relief, but the stink got to him and he gagged. Mishi sympathized silently until his stomach was back under control and he said, "Now let's talk to the other prisoners to see if we can find out what is happening."

They turned their attention to the others in the cage. Never in their lives had either one seen such a miserable-looking group of men and women. Some were old, some young, some middle-aged. Some were dressed in Levis and obviously had come from the mountain ranges of Colorado. Several had come from cities or small towns, or so their clothing indicated. A young man with sideburns was comforting a young woman wearing the shortest of short skirts. She stared at him as if she did not hear a word he was saying. An old man with a tobacco-stained beard—obviously a prospector—with a face as craggy as the side of a mountain was staring across the cavern toward the entrance of a tunnel. He looked approvingly at Mishi and Keth.

"You're showing good sense," Prospector said. "It just don't do no good whatever to run wild and try to climb the fence to escape. That way, you'll just get yourself killed. It's best to do just what I am doing—set here and wait your turn."

"Is it against the rules to go near the fence?" Keth questioned.

"I don't think there are any rules here," Prospector said. "It's just that the fence has enough juice in it to kill an elephant."

Pointing at the creature standing just outside the gate, Mishi began to ask questions. Prospector shook his head. "I don't know what he is or where he came from. When that goddamned sheriff—pardon me, miss—dragged me down here, he was here. That was about a week ago. He's still here. Now and then another two-headed monster comes out of that tunnel on the far side of the cavern and picks out one of us. The guard helps him catch the one he has picked out—if he needs any help—and the one who has come from over there carries him away."

"What is done with him?" Mishi asked. Her face was gray with strain and her teeth were at the edge of chattering.

"I don't know, but my guess is that this place is one of the waiting rooms just outside of hell. And that thing there. . . ." Prospector looked at the guard and in his eyes was blazing hate.

"How many two-headed monsters are there?" Keth asked.

"Hundreds, maybe. If you count the little ones who ain't two-headed there must be thousands!"

"The little ones?" Mishi's troubled eyes sought Keth. "They must be the ones we saw marching in and out of the big aluminum building in Golden Fleece."

"I saw that building in Fleece," Prospector said. "But I didn't know what was in it. Big KEEP OUT signs were all around it."

"Have—have you tried to do anything?" Mishi began.

"What the hell can you do?" Prospector answered. His voice was a snarl. Rising, he walked to the end of the pen and urinated in the falling water.

Near them a man in high-heeled boots was squatting

in silence. "Let him go," he said of Prospector. His voice had the drawl from the ranges where cattle still grazed. "I was a cowboy—" he began.

"How'd you get here, Cowboy?" Keth asked.

"I was bringing a bunch of two-year-olds down from the high pastures," Cowboy said. "I saw something that looked like that"—his thumb jerked toward the guard standing outside the gate. "My horse saw it too. He spooked and threw me. I lit on my head. When I woke up I was here." Hatless and unshaven, he pushed stubby fingers through wiry black hair and looked at Mishi from sad blue eyes. "You oughtn't to be here, lady. You really oughtn't."

"I'm not here of my own choice," Mishi said quickly.

His gaze concentrated on the tunnel across the big chamber, Cowboy seemed to have forgotten what he had just said. Under his breath, he began to swear. All the profanity of the ranges slipped from his lips and became more disgusting by the fact that it was futile. "Damn them to hell and gone!" His gaze was concentrated on the tunnel across the cavern. "The stinking _____!"

Mishi withdrew from the outburst and even Keth looked uncomfortable.

Sideburns wanted to talk and left off caressing Micro-skirt to tell his story. "I was walking along Lowery Street in Denver. Suddenly, something went past me that sounded like a big bee. I blanked out. I don't know if the bee knocked me out or if something else did it or if it was just an accident. All I remember is that somebody put me into an ambulance and told me they would take me to a hospital. When I woke up, I was here." A strained look appeared on his face. When he spoke again his voice was like that of a little child. "Is this a hospital? Lady, are you a nurse?" His eyes fastened on Mishi. She saw in them the look of a small boy lost and alone in a world he did not understand. "When am I

going home?" His voice was a plaintive whisper of sound.

Micro-skirt pulled him back beside her and talked soothingly to him, telling him he would be going home soon. "How soon?" he demanded petulantly.

"How did you get here?" Mishi asked Micro-skirt.

Micro-skirt tried to answer but as she was speaking a glaze appeared in her eyes and her mind seemed to wander. She shook her head. "I—I can't remember. I just can't. I—I don't even know my name anymore. All I remember is walking along a street in the early evening. Something hit me. When I woke up I was here." Her eyes went hopefully up to Keth as if she thought he might explain this puzzle to her. Keth shook his head. Mishi asked her how long she had been here, but the teen-age girl did not know. Sideburns put his arm around her neck, and she snuggled against it like a little girl seeking the protective arm of a father or a big brother. Keth pulled Mishi away.

A man wearing a slack suit was waiting to talk to them.

"But that poor child—" Mishi said, looking back at Micro-skirt.

"I know. But there's nothing we can do. The water we're in is just as deep and just as hot as the water she's in. The only difference between us is that she has cracked wide open mentally, and we haven't—yet! Yes, sir," he said to the waiting man.

"I saw the sheriff bring you in here," Slack Suit said. "I—I came from Boulder. I—I was in business there. Ran a clothing store." He gestured toward the guard outside the gate. "I—I didn't know there was anything like that on Earth." His voice was a gulping noise, a hoarse stutter. He tried to swallow and talk at the same time.

"I guess we have our fair share of the horrors of the Universe," Keth said. "With a new crop always coming along."

"I—I—" Slack Suit's jaw worked. "I didn't know. I—I'm busy earning a living. G-got a wife and four kids. That keeps you with your neck tight up in the collar. There—there oughta be a law against—against—! It shouldn't happen, that's all! It just shouldn't happen!" Rage was suddenly burning in the man's eyes. "If I ever get my hands on one of those monsters!"

"I'm sorry!" Keth said.

"Being sorry doesn't do any good! My wife! My kids!"

"I didn't create this problem," Keth said. "There is no law known to me that says that just because a man has found himself a wife and has had some kids the horrors of the Universe have to stay away from his door—"

"Listen!" Mishi interrupted. In the distance the rumble of the motors of the elevator could be heard again. When the rumble stopped, screams took its place. The sheriff came into sight. With him were a man and woman, handcuffed, and he was shoving them toward the cage. The screams came from their small child, a girl, who was trying to kick the sheriff as she ran after them.

At the gate, the guard teetered back and forth on his feet, then moved to open the barricade. The sheriff shoved the man and woman into the cage. When the child kicked him again, he kicked back; the blow sent her sprawling. He unlocked their handcuffs, then ducked out of the cage. The guard closed the door behind him.

The mother ran to pick up the child. The father shook his fist at the sheriff, screaming useless words. "I'll have the law on you for this! This is kidnapping! All we were doing was walking down the street in Denver when we were grabbed. You brought us here. They'll hang you for this, but if they don't I'll make it my job to kill you myself!"

The child pulled herself free from her mother. Apparently caught up in her father's rage, she ran toward the

sheriff intending to kick him again. He was outside the fence, but the child seemed not to realize that and kicked the fence.

Spat!

A finger of electric fire leaped at the child's foot and raced up her leg. Her body jerked in a sudden spasm and she was thrown away from the fence. In the cage, rising over the stink already there, was the foul smell of burned flesh.

Her mother stood paralyzed. The father looked at his little girl. He looked back at the sheriff, and in doing so he became aware for the first time of the guard outside the gate. This sight seemed to paralyze him. His profanity, his screamed threats vanished into silence. He was as paralyzed as the mother. On the rocky floor, the body of the child twitched and jerked, then was still.

In the cage there was complete stillness.

Able to move at last, the mother went quickly to the body of the child, lifted it, held it tightly.

From the distance came a *thump, thump, thump* of heavy feet walking.

At the sound of the tramping feet, the sheriff and the guard turned to face the direction from which it came. Inside the cage, the older prisoners scurried away from the gate, some moving down to the spot where the water poured from the wall, others trying to hide behind projections on the stone wall.

Mishi went quickly to the mother holding the child, to try to give comfort. At this moment, for this mother, *comfort* was a word in a dictionary, and suddenly obsolete. Holding the child, she moaned in pain.

"She's dead!" the mother whispered, looking at Mishi. "Agatha's dead. Her body is—it's completely limp."

"Perhaps she is only unconscious," Mishi said.

"Yes!" the woman said. Sudden exultation was in her eyes. "Yes!" Lifting the body, she stared into the eyes of

her child. Her exultation faded. "This is the kind of unconsciousness you don't wake up from."

"I—I'm sorry," Mishi said. Now she became aware of the heavy tread in the distance and of the prisoners, who, with the exception of Keth and Cowboy, were getting as far away from the gate as was possible. Keth was standing close to her. Cowboy was also standing nearby. He had refused to join the flight of the other prisoners. Standing still, he was staring at the tunnel in the far wall.

"What's happening?" Keth asked. "Why is everybody trying to hide?"

"He's coming," Cowboy said.

"I don't understand."

"He's got two heads and is just like the guard on duty outside the gate." Cowboy's whiskered face was knotted and contorted by muscle pulls rising from the shifting tides of fear and hate in his emotional world. His lips were drawn back in a snarl, revealing broken, stained teeth. From bloodshot eyes, he glared across the chamber.

"What's he going to do?" Keth asked. "Pick out his next victim? What's he doing—using humans as laboratory animals?"

"How would I know? I've never been over there where the stink is."

Thump, thump, thump. The footsteps were louder now. The creature making them came out of the tunnel. Staring, Keth saw that physically it was an exact duplicate of the guard at the gate. The same two heads were there, the same left arm was disproportionately short, the same right arm was on backward, and it had the same limp.

There was only one difference. The creature coming had authority. The sheriff and the guard at the gate came to attention, the guard saluted, the gate was quickly opened, and the creature entered.

"Pick good 'uns!" a bat voice squeaked from the rear head.

Stopping, the creature looked at the family which the sheriff had just brought down.

"Which one you want?" the bass voice rumbled.

"Lemme look!"

The heads swiveled so that the rear head was looking toward the front.

"Take all of 'em, the little one first!" the bat voice squeaked.

Again the heads changed positions.

With the too-short left arm, the creature reached for the child the mother was clutching.

Cowboy struck. *Splat* went his fist on the face of the bending creature. *Splat, splat* went both fists driving into the middle of the monster.

The arm reaching down toward the child paused in its motion. The head twisted toward the source of the blows. The big eyes stared at Cowboy in vague surprise.

"Go away," the bass voice said.

Splat! The man from the ranges struck again.

The blow had no more effect than the others had had. The big eyes stared at the assailant. "What do?" the bass voice asked. The blows had left the creature unperturbed. It was not alarmed, it was simply asking for instructions.

"Smash him!" the bat voice squeaked.

Changing the direction of its motion, the left arm reached for Cowboy, scooped him up, and flung him against the stone wall. Bones could be heard snapping. The body fell from the wall and hit the floor.

Broken bones or not, Cowboy struggled to get to his feet. The effort failed. The man from the ranges came from a breed of fighting men. When he found he could not walk, he tried to drag himself toward the ten-foot-tall monster.

Moving toward him, the creature lifted a ponderous foot above the body of the crawling man. *Stamp* went

the foot on Cowboy's head. *Stamp, stamp, stamp.* Brains and blood squashed out from the crushed skull.

"Enough?" the bass voice asked.

"Good job," the bat voice squeaked. "Pick him up, get kid—"

The creature literally tore the body of the child from the mother's arms.

Slack Suit, panic flooding through him, bolted through the still-open gate. The guard there caught him and flung him over the top of the chain link wire. His body hit the stone floor with a crunching sound.

With the body of Cowboy under its left arm and carrying the body of the child in its right hand, the creature turned toward the gate. There on the rocky floor Slack Suit was writhing and twisting. The creature started to step over the body of the business man, but the bat voice shrilled and he changed his mind. Lifting one ponderous foot, he stamped the man's head to mush. Then he picked up the still body and tucked it easily under the arm that held the child in its hand.

With the bodies of two grown men dangling under its arms and with the body of the child, Agatha, in one hand, the creature walked out of the open gate. There the sheriff and the guard came quickly to attention and saluted. In response, the creature nodded its two heads.

Thump, thump, thump went the sound of its heavy feet as the creature walked across the cavern and entered the tunnel on the far side.

Without a word, without even glancing in the direction the creature had gone, the sheriff walked quietly back to the elevator. Again came the hum of motors as the cage was lifted upward.

The guard closed and barred the gate, teetered on his feet, then settled down again.

Inside the cage was silence—and horror.

CHAPTER NINE

"Better take my hand and let me lead you," Amelia Brocknor said. "I can find my way through these tunnels by the feel of the walls. Also, I know all the open shafts."

Holding tight to Amelia Brocknor's hand, Valthor felt like a small child being guided through a dark night by a good fairy who had miraculously appeared to lead him. He was not at all certain he trusted this particular fairy. Right now, she was a human woman intent on being helpful. But something had been done to her—what this had been Valthor could not guess—which had made it possible for her to become what she called a *thing*. What pushed the switch that made her into a thing? What was she when she was a thing?

On the run, she led him through dark tunnels where water dripped or ran in small streams from the ceiling above. When her sense of direction failed, she used a small hand-operated flashlight, flashing the light for a second until she saw where she was, then moving off again as fast as Valthor could run. When he hesitated or lost his foothold, she jerked impatiently at his hand.

"If Two-Heads catches you, it won't be good for you!" she told him when he faltered.

"What about you, if he catches us?" Valthor questioned.

"What can he do to me that hasn't been done already?" she answered.

"What do you mean by that?"

"He made me into a thing," she replied.

"What's a thing?" he asked.

"I don't have time to answer. I'm not sure I know. When you come out of his vat, something has been done to you."

"What?"

"I—well—"

"Try to answer!"

"Well, your nervous system has been changed, for one thing. Your brain has been changed, everything is changed when you are soaked in that green oil. After that, they put you into a box where radiations pour in on you. When you get out, you have forgotten that you ever were human. You can see the Narks, you think like a Nark, you take orders from whatever Nark is handy, you have become a Nark—a *thing*!"

"That's the most thorough job of brainwashing I ever heard of! They actually change neural structure right down to the atomic level!" In his mind was the image of Ed Smith, who had been a major in internal security until something had happened to him. "Has this been done to Smith?"

"Yes," Amelia said.

"And to you?"

"Yes."

"What"—Valthor hesitated over this question, then blurted out the words as the pressure to know rose so high in him it could not be restrained—"what is a Nark?"

They had stopped running and each was trying to regain his breath. In the darkness Amelia Brocknor was to Valthor merely a damp hand which he was clutching, a damp hand and a sound of hurried breathing.

"You—you can't see them until you have been through the vat and the radiation." Fright was rising in

her voice as she talked of these things. "Even then they are hard to see. Mostly all you ever see, after you've had their treatment, are shifting lines of light. An ordinary human can't see them. Maybe now and then some person gets a glimpse of a Nark, out of the corner of his eyes—"

"If you can't see them, how do you know when they are around?" Valthor interrupted.

"You can usually *feel* them," Amelia Brocknor replied. "You get a feeling of something like a cold wind blowing on the back of your neck."

"A cold wind!"

"Yes."

"I've had that feeling! I have it right now!" Valthor whispered. "Is—"

"No!" Amelia Brocknor promptly answered. "If a Nark was here I could spot it even in this darkness. Not every cold feeling you get comes from a Nark. Sometimes you become afraid and your own nerves send out this feeling of cold. Or so daddy says."

"Can you get me out of this place?" Valthor asked. "Can you get me to Golden Fleece?"

"I can get you to the ground level, if I'm lucky, but you don't want to go to Golden Fleece. Those people walking around in Golden Fleece are not human any longer. They've all been through the vat and they're *things!*" Fear and scorn were in her voice.

"Then just get me to the ground. I'll find my way back out of the mountains."

"Then what would you do?" Sudden eagerness was in her voice. "Mister, do you know some way to bring an end to the horror that is nesting here in these mountains? If you do—"

"I think I have enough influence in the right quarters in Washington to bring in a division of paratroopers on field maneuvers, so the public would never know what they were really doing here. . . ." Valthor was thinking swiftly, trying to find a solution. He did not have all the

answers, he did not know all the *whys* and *hows*; he might never know them, but the pressure for action was strong in him. This might be one where it was necessary to shoot first and ask questions later.

"The paratroopers could be dropped here, with full equipment. They could enter these old mine tunnels and shafts—"

"You could also lose your air soldiers!" the young woman interrupted. "Ed Smith thought that way too, when he began to realize what was really here, before they soaked him in the vat and turned him into—into—" Her voice choked. "Ed, before they dipped him, could also make me human again, make me into a woman. We talked." Her voice had pain in it.

"Why would we lose the paratroopers?"

"Mister, there are thousands of miles of tunnels and shafts in these mountains. The old gold miners dug holes *everywhere*. The little miners that you saw have dug new tunnels and have extended others. There's a whole city down there!" Valthor knew she pointed toward the left because he felt her hand brush the sleeve of his jacket. "You could literally lose thousands of soldiers down there. Also, the roofs of these old tunnels may cave in. In fact, they will cave in. Explosive charges are laid in many places to make certain of that. Soldiers trying to force their way into the old tunnels would find their way blocked from the front and from the rear! And there are other weapons down there—"

"Including one that makes a sound like a hornet?"

"Yes. Mister, the United States doesn't have enough soldiers to force the Narks out of here!"

"I was thinking, also, of poison gas being pumped into the tunnels and shafts—" Valthor was a little apologetic about this question.

"Would gas kill a Nark?" Amelia Brocknor's voice was jeering. "Mister, they don't breathe air. Neither does Two-Heads, nor the little mining robots. Would

gas kill me and daddy? I am sure both of us would hope so!"

Bitterness too deep for words spilled over in the tones of her voice. "Of course daddy would want to die, if he was human. Mister"—rising out of the depths of depression, sudden hope was in her voice—"just your presence made me human again. If I take you to daddy—"

"How did I do that?" Valthor asked.

"It's something about you. No, it isn't sex—though maybe sex has something to do with it—but sex isn't the important thing. There's an intangible something surrounding you—"

"My field?" Valthor questioned.

"I don't know what a *field* is."

"It's the lines of force around a magnet or around a wire through which electricity is flowing," Valthor explained. "The human body, every living thing, has such a field."

"That must be what the Narks are!" Amelia said quickly. "They're just fields without bodies!"

"It might be. But—"

"Your field sort of pulled me in. When this happened I became human again. I was thinking if I took you to daddy and you had the same effect on him—"

"I didn't have such an effect on Major Smith," Valthor pointed out.

"They had just put Ed back through the treatment before they sent him out," the young woman said. "Daddy hasn't been through the vat for months."

She seemed to muse. In the darkness Valthor sensed her turning toward him. "Mister, have you got lots of courage? I mean, *lots* of it?"

"I don't know," Valthor said, embarrassed by the question. "So far, I've always had enough to get me where I had to go. But there may come a time when my courage fails."

"If you talk like that, I think you've got enough to take you where you have to go."

"Where do I have to go?"

"I will take you where there are *things* that once were human, and metal things that have two heads, and little miners like the ones you saw working back there—and where the Narks are so thick you always feel cold winds blowing on the back of your neck," Amelia Brocknor answered. "I will take you where you can see the big nest of the Narks, where hell is breeding in these mountains—if you have the courage to go with me!" She waited in the darkness for an answer.

"It sounds as if you want to take me exactly where I want to go!" Valthor said.

"Then you're willing to go?"

"Do I have any choice, really?" Valthor asked. "I'm lost in these old mines. If you choose to walk away from me, I'll never find my way out."

"But I don't want you to go because you don't have any other choice," the young woman protested. "Are you willing to go?"

"Yes," Valthor said.

"Good!" Sudden high excitement was in her voice. "Come with me. I'll have to take you to a place where I can paint your skin a greenish tint, as if it had been soaked in green oil, so nobody will notice you. After that, if we're lucky, I'll introduce you to daddy, and if the field around you is strong enough to pull him back into human orbit—" Her voice faded. In the darkness, Valthor could feel her shrug.

"And if it doesn't make him human again—" he began.

She shrugged again. "In that case, another try to lick the Narks will have gone glimmering!"

She did not mention what would happen to Valthor if her idea failed. He did not ask. Reaching into the back of his mind, he felt for the silence. Calm and poised, it was there—but totally disinterested in John Valthor and in his fate. At this moment, the silence seemed to belong

to the cosmos and to the Galaxy. The fate of one man, one planet, or one solar system did not concern it.

Tugging at his hand, Amelia Brocknor led him away. Again she moved at a run.

CHAPTER TEN

Keth Evan leaned back against the rough stone that formed the back wall of the cage and tried to pretend he was not sick at his stomach, sick at heart, sick in his soul. In his mind, he was trying to blank out and hide the memory of what he had just seen—a failing task! Out of the corners of his eyes he could see the reddish-gray stains on the rocky floor where Cowboy's brain had squashed outward from his smashed skull. In front of the gate, he could see where Slack Suit had suffered the same treatment. Slack Suit had not bled quite as much as Cowboy. Keth knew he would always remember the limping monster carrying away the bodies of the two men and the child.

Her head cupped in her hands, Mishi sat beside Keth. All life seemed to have left her. Suddenly she looked up at him. "I've been trying to pwyll this thing, Keth."

"I didn't know!" he said, alarm in his voice. "You shouldn't attempt to pwyll when you are in such a place as this and when your own emotions are so upset."

"I know." Her face was gray. "I tried anyhow. When I reached for a glimpse, perhaps of the future, all I got was utter fear, complete horror. Fear and hate and horror have no future. It is only love that has a future."

"I know," Keth said. "To pwyll a future in a place like this would take a lot of love!" His voice was grim

and bleak. From the tunnel where the creature had disappeared came the sound of a child screaming.

"How can she scream?" Mishi whispered. "She was dead!"

"Perhaps some other child—" Keth said vaguely. He rose to his feet and moved quickly to the end of the cage where the stream of water fell from the rocky wall. Here, he vomited. Sideburns came and joined him, for the same purpose.

"I didn't believe in hell," Sideburns said, gulping, "until I came here." As vomiting urges preempted his throat and vocal chords, he lost his voice. When he could speak again, he gestured toward the guard on duty outside the gate. "What—what is that thing?" He gestured again, toward the tunnel where the monster had disappeared. "What—what are they doing in there?"

"You know as much as I do," Keth answered.

"Isn't there anything we can do?"

"If I knew anything to do, I would be doing it!"

"The brains squeezed right out of the skulls of those two men—" Sideburns vomited again.

Rising, Keth moved back and sat down again beside Mishi. Other than to slip a small hand within his bigger one, she did not move. He asked if she was all right.

"I'm alive, I'm breathing, I'm not in physical pain, but I wouldn't say I'm all right," she answered. "When that creature took that child's body away, something died in me."

In the distance the clatter of wheels sounded. Pushed by another of the two-headed creatures, a cart came into sight. The handler brought the cart up close to the fence and tossed over the high wire what looked like loaves of bread, then pushed the cart away again. Prospector rushed out and grabbed a loaf of bread, then scuttled back to squat beside the wall and gnaw at it. Some of the other prisoners did the same but most continued to sit and stare at nothing.

"I guess, maybe, if you've been in here long enough

and are hungry enough, you will eat anything," Keth said. "Animals in a zoo are treated better than this."

"Maybe they think we are lower than animals," Mishi said. "Maybe some day they will keep a few of us in zoos, to show to their kids."

"Uh!" Keth said.

"What bugs me is that people are never willing to believe such monsters exist—until the monsters gobble them up! How long did it take them to believe in the flying saucers?"

"Too long!" Keth said. Getting to his feet, he picked up two of the loaves of bread, offering one to Mishi.

"Keth Evan, if you even *think* that I am going to eat!" Mishi said.

"I guess you're right," Keth answered. He tossed the loaves of bread back into the middle of the cage. Leaning back against the wall, he closed his eyes and tried to pretend this place did not exist. Every breath, drawing stink into his lungs, reminded him of his surroundings. A segment of his mind recoiled from this stink and wished to turn inward to find a place where such evil smells did not exist. A second segment of his mind inquired bitterly where such a place might exist.

We had to run from stinks before in our history, the second segment of his mind said. We escaped from them, only to find worse stinks somewhere else.

But this is the worst stink that ever existed! the first segment of his mind complained. *I cannot breathe such stink-filled air for long—and live.*

Try it, the second segment of his mind said. You will be surprised to learn how much we can endure.

But if I cannot live here—

Then die here on this beachhead! the second segment of his mind told him. *Others are doing it.*

But that would be me dying, the first part of his mind protested.

Are you different from others of your species? the second part inquired.

Yes! I am a special something! I am an individual.

Somewhere inside himself it seemed to Keth that he could feel the second part of his mind shrugging. After this, he was very quiet. *Death is not very important*, he seemed to hear the second part of his mind saying. *It is about as important as a comma in the middle of a sentence. We have died many times before: in battle, in floods and hurricanes, by the sinking of the long boats that we used to cross the Middle Sea, by being struck by arrows and spears, by being pierced with swords, by disease and famine, by heartbreak and despair—*

"W-what?" Keth whispered. Fatigue as deep as death itself was in him: fatigue of muscle, fatigue of mind, fatigue of emotions. He drifted into sleep, then tried to awaken as he discovered that sleep was a nightmare land as bad as the stink and the reality of the old mine cavern that had been invaded and taken over—why? Awakening from this dream, he saw the sheriff bringing two more victims to the pen: a bearded man and a drooping woman who was obviously scared beyond hysteria. Dazedly, Keth watched the guard open the gate and help the sheriff shove the man and the woman into the cage. After this, fatigue drove him back to sleep. This time he awakened to the *thump, thump, thump* of heavy feet moving closer. Opening his eyes, he saw the two-headed monster returning. With him, walking on his right, was Cowboy. Walking on his left was Slack Suit. Skipping happily ahead of them was the child, Agatha.

The man from the cattle ranges, the business man from Boulder, and the child walked as if they were perfectly well, as if nothing had ever happened to them.

Coming to attention, the gate guard saluted and opened the gate. As if they were coming back home, Cowboy, Slack Suit, and Agatha came into the cage. With them was the creature with two heads.

This time there was no debate between the two heads. Moving quickly, he picked up Prospector. Tucking the

screaming old man under his right arm, he walked out of the cage. On the way out, he picked up a woman.

Clang went the gate as the guard closed it.

Thump, thump, thump went the heavy feet as the creature walked back toward the tunnel from which it had come.

Agatha's mother ran to pick up her child. She cuddled the little girl to her breast. Cowboy and Slack Suit stood looking at the prisoners. The only sound in the cage was the soft sobbing of Agatha's mother. Cowboy cleared his throat.

"I was sick," he said, "and they made me well!"

"This is the day for which all mankind has waited," Slack Suit said. His voice was resonant and deep-toned, resembling that of a minister pronouncing the benediction.

"This is the day when I wish I was dead!" Mishi whispered to Keth.

"For once I agree with you!" Keth said. "This is the day I also wish I was dead! Dead men are taken away. Live men return talking platitudes!" The urge to vomit again rippled his throat, but nothing was left in him to come out. "Look at that mother holding her child!"

"That child was dead, Keth!" Agony was in Mishi's voice.

"So were that cowboy and that business man!"

"What have they done to them? Have they really cured them?"

"Can you replace brains and blood in a smashed skull?" Keth asked. "Human doctors can't do it. Organs they can transplant, but new hearts, new kidneys—"

"Maybe they took the brain from someone else—"

"That child was electrocuted! Did they give her a whole new nervous system?" Keth answered. The urge to vomit was still so strong in him that he could hardly talk. "Keep still. Watch her father and mother—"

"But if they have cured these three people—" Mishi tried to say.

"There's more to it than being cured! And if they cured them, remember who did the damage in the first place! Keep quiet!"

The woman was holding her child out from her, as if to savor the wonder of her return from the dead. Her father was reaching for the little girl, touching and holding her, so that both parents were supporting her. Smiling at them, she was holding up a toy that had been given her.

"This is our Agatha, Sam!" the mother said. As if anticipating an argument, her voice was shrill with defiance. "Don't you say it ain't. It—it's my baby. I—I thought she was dead!" The woman clutched her child to her breast again, crying emotionally. The father had some vague realization of where they were and what had happened.

"But it's a trap!" he insisted. "Things ain't what they seem, maw. Agatha!" His voice was frantic. "Aggie, honey, what did they do to you back there?" He gestured toward the tunnel.

"They made me well, daddy. And they gave me this!" She held up the toy she had brought with her. It was a small doll of the kind that could close its eyes and say "mommy" and could wet its pants. "Let me down, mommy," Agatha said. Released from her mother's arms, the child set the doll on the floor. For a moment it teetered on its feet, then it began to walk across the floor. Reaching some predetermined limit it stopped, turned, and retraced its steps. The little girl danced around it in glee.

"Do you remember what happened to you, Aggie?" the father questioned. "Do you remember kicking the wire?"

The child stared at him. "No. I don't remember."

"Do you see that creature standing just outside the gate?" the father asked.

"Sam, what are you trying to do?" the mother inter-

rupted. "Aggie's been hurt. She may not be herself yet, but she's all right."

"You're saying that because you want to believe it," the father answered.

Again he directed the child's attention to the guard outside the gate, and when she had seen what was there, he asked her about it. She clapped her hands in joy.

"That's one of my friends!" she said.

Rising, the father raced to the waterfall at the end of the cage. The child stared after him. "Why is daddy sick to his tummy, mommy?" the child asked.

The mother gathered her child into her arms, and this time the gesture was fiercely possessive. Clutching her little girl, she glared at everyone around her as if defying the whole world to say there was anything wrong with her baby.

Cowboy cleared his throat again, pointing toward the little girl. "That's the way it's gonna be with everybody who gets hurt in the future," he said. "Our friends will come and get us—and will make us well again." He gestured toward the guard at the gate, then toward the tunnel across the cavern.

"Amen!" Slack Suit added.

"Keth—" Mishi began. "If that two-headed monster walked into a hospital and picked up a terminal cancer case, brought the sufferer here, and made him as well as that child, as that cowboy, as that business man, and the news of what had been done got around among other victims of the disease—what I am thinking is—"

"What you are thinking is that from all over the United States, from all over the world, desperately sick people would come here to be made well again—and that not even soldiers with bayonets would be able to stop them!" Keth said.

"How would such news get around?" Mishi asked.

"If helicopters full of tourists came to Golden Fleece and were brought down here, given whatever treatment is back at the end of that tunnel, and were then returned

to their homes, they might pass the word along to sick friends," Keth said.

"It could work that way," Mishi said. "But very soon the American Medical Association would step in—"

"And step right out again, endorsing everything, when Two-Heads got hold of them!" Keth said.

"This may not be the only treatment center," Mishi said. "There may be centers under Chicago, New York, and other cities."

"If they don't exist now, they soon will!" Keth said. "It'll take a little time for them to become firmly established, maybe ten to fifteen years. Listen—"

Slack Suit was talking. "If anybody gets sick anywhere on Earth, our new friends will make the sick man well again. Heal the sick, make the poor people rich, do good to everybody—that's their program for the coming new age!"

Slack Suit sounded like a prophet predicting the coming Golden Age of the human race. His voice was sonorous and rounded.

"When that program is finished, the human race will have been eased off its beachhead on Planet Earth!" Keth said. His voice choked and fell silent, then came on again more bitter than before. "I think there is something back here in these old mines that ought to have both its heads stamped on!"

"Who will do the stamping?" Mishi questioned. Her eyes went to Agatha's father. Having finished vomiting, he was returning to his wife and daughter. Going directly to the pair, he held out his hands. Eager to go to his arms, the little girl stirred. The mother clutched at her daughter. "Get away from here, Sam!" the mother's voice was heavy with apprehension.

"I just want to hold her for a while," the father protested. "Are you out of your head, thinking I'll hurt my own kid?"

"Well—"

He lifted the child out of the mother's reluctant arms.

The child hugged him, then wanted to show him her new doll. He set them on the ground. The doll went through its movements on the stone floor. The father stared at it, then first kissed his child, then his wife.

"You stay here with mommy," he said. Rising to his feet, he waved to his little family, then walked directly to the wire netting and grasped it with both hands.

Spat! Electric fire fingers leaped from the wire and ran along his arms. His body jumped and jerked as the surging currents passed through him—and was released as automatic circuit breakers thumped somewhere. After falling in front of the wire, the body lay still.

"Look at daddy! He's on fire!" the child cried out. Glee was in her voice. She would have run to her father, but her mother snatched her up. As the mother walked past with the child in her arms, Mishi saw the doll clearly for the first time.

It had two heads.

"So that's the kind of dolls the children of the future will play with!" she whispered.

"I saw it. And he saw it!" Keth nodded toward the body lying near the wire. "Added to everything else, the sight of that doll drove him to suicide."

Cowboy jerked his thumb at the body of the suicide. "He ain't got anything to worry about. Our friends will make him as good as new!"

"That's right!" Slack Suit confirmed. "For humans, this is the end of death!"

For humans, this is the beginning of the reign of hell on Earth! Keth Evan thought. Even though there was nothing in it to come out, his stomach revolted again. He stumbled to the waterfall and lay there, retching. For a moment the mad thought was in his mind that he could solve all his problems by jumping down the hole and letting the water carry him away. He pushed the thought out of his mind. If he did that, Mishi might be tempted to follow him.

When the vomiting spasm had finished, Keth got

unsteadily to his feet. Catching drops of water in his hands, he splashed them on his face. Looking at the sheet of water tumbling down the wall, he blinked his eyes in startled surprise at what he saw just beyond the sheet of falling water.

Eyes were visible there. Slowly he realized that a little creature, like the little miners he had seen march from the aluminum building to the old mine tunnel, was standing there.

He also realized it was beckoning to him.

Thinking he was hallucinating this scene, he went quickly to get Mishi to ask her to check and find out if she saw the same thing he did.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Following Amelia Brocknor through the dark tunnel, John Valthor felt rising in him the kind of excitement he had felt before the kickoff of a football game when he had been an undergraduate student—and a wingback on his university's team. The excitement was a mixture of feeling rising from many sources: the sense of speed as he tucked the ball under his arm and headed around the corner, plus the sure feeling of the coming impact as a defensive corner man came up to try to stop him. It had its origin in physical sensations: the need of the legs to run, the will of the heart to pound, the gasp of the lungs to seek oxygen. It was the kind of excitement every man feels when he moves into dangerous and unknown country, the kind of excitement that rises from the deep wells of racial memory that are neither quite hidden nor quite lost in the unconscious mind of the human race. Though rarely rising to the surface, in John Valthor, as in all men, were lost memories of long-gone days before men had become numbers on a computer, when men had fought great beasts for survival and had ranged along dangerous rivers and through dark forest glades. Valthor had occasionally encountered such beasts in dreams and had called them "the creatures of the wold," meaning the creatures of the wild. He considered that

these dreams were memories of ancient days when life had been simpler, without being any less interesting.

The excitement that came with these dreams was also rising in him.

Amelia slowed her fast pace and used her light to explore a rocky wall. In the wall was a door-sized dark opening where metal cables dangled. Amelia pushed a button at the edge of the opening. Somewhere a motor grunted and took up its load. The cables began to move, and a crude elevator rose into the opening and stopped there.

"The old-time miners had these elevators," Amelia explained. "We have replaced the cables and the motors." She entered the cage. Valthor followed. She pushed a button inside the lift. The elevator went down. It stopped again. Stepping out, Valthor found himself in a wide corridor with wall lights at intervals.

"Quickly now!" she said. Along the corridor were open rooms. She led him into one and took him as far back into it as she could go. There, behind boxes that had obviously come from large manufacturing plants of the United States, each assigned to the Brocknor Corporation, she told him to strip. While she rummaged among cans on the shelves, he got as far as his trunks.

"Everything!" she said, looking around.

"But—"

"Which is more important, your prudery or a chance to stay alive?" she demanded.

"Nobody ever called me a prude before," Valthor said. The shorts went. With a brush, she covered his whole body with a green wash. "This is the color that was on Smith's skin!" he protested. For a second, as he realized the possible implications of this green wash on his skin, panic rose in him, and he almost throttled the young woman dabbing the color on his body.

"This is not the stuff in the vat!" she said, hastily, as she seemed to sense the suspicion and violent feeling rising in him. "It is all right, sir! I intend no trickery!"

"You better not!" he said, relaxing.

When the green wash covered his skin to her satisfaction, including his eyelids, the inside of his ears, and his lips, she allowed him to put on his clothes. When she spoke, her voice was grim.

"Do you remember Ed—Ed Smith?"

He nodded.

"Do you remember how he talked and how he walked?"

"Well—"

"I want you to walk and talk like Ed Smith. Where we are going, there will be many two-headed robots. You are to ignore them completely, unless one speaks to you. If this happens, you are to come to attention and say quickly, '*Yes, master.*' "

"Yes, master!" Valthor practiced.

"That is what you will say as long as you are in these mines, if a two-headed robot speaks to you. However, I doubt if they will even notice you. They consider humans to be inferior creatures, much the same way as we think of rats and mice and gophers."

"I'll try to remember," Valthor promised.

"I will take you to meet my father," Amelia Brocknor continued. "His face will have the same green tint yours has and he will probably not even notice you. However, I will try to keep you close to him in the hope that the powerful human radiation pattern flowing from you will make him a man again—as it has made me a woman!"

As if secret thoughts moved within her mind, she smiled for the first time. Then the smile was gone. "But if you feel a cold wind behind you, do nothing except look straight at me. I will try to catch the attention of the Nark and draw him away from you."

For a moment she studied Valthor searchingly. "And never show surprise," she continued. "Whatever happens, never show surprise. The kind of thing you are supposed to be has no emotions and cannot show confusion or perplexity."

"Yes, mistress," Valthor answered, his voice submissive and solemn.

She smiled at this, a flickering glow of feeling that made her face warm and beautiful.

"Am I to have a name?" Valthor asked.

"Yes. It's *Hey!* or *Hey, you!* Or it's *Jack* or it's *Stupid* or it's anything a two-headed robot chooses to call you."

"What will the Narks call me?"

"They won't call you. If they become suspicious, they will send a two-headed robot to smash you. Or perhaps they will send a thing like me to trap you. Come on, Jack! It's time for us to be moving!" Without looking behind, she moved out of the big storage room. Without hesitation, Valthor followed her. A file of little mining robots marched past them, their shovels and picks on their shoulders. The corridor was wide, and they gave the little robots plenty of room. A little later, a two-headed robot came clumping toward them. Both Amelia Brocknor and John Valthor immediately began to walk like mindless creatures. In a hurry, the two-headed creature thumped past without noticing that they existed. The two heads were arguing. Valthor gathered that these arguments never ended. He looked as closely as he dared at the monster, but, so far as he could determine, it was not the robot that had hunted him when he and Major Smith had entered the old mine workings. So far as Valthor could determine, the creature was not armed, but, remembering the helicopter that had been knocked from the sky, he was not sure he would recognize the weapon that had been used. He realized at this point that Amelia was hissing at him.

"You were staring, Jack!" The edge on her voice revealed the tremendous nervous tension in her mind.

"But he didn't notice me!"

"How do you know he didn't? And even if he didn't spot you, the next one may! This is no time to stare. Stay close to me! Take orders from me!"

"Yes, mistress," Valthor said. His voice was as meek as her's had been grim.

They passed a big freight elevator where little miners had laid aside their picks and shovels and were struggling to move big packing boxes from the elevator to the corridor. A two-headed robot supervised their work. He did not seem to notice them as they walked quickly past. When they were out of sight, Valthor dared to ask questions about the contents of the big boxes.

"The Brocknor Corporation buys much equipment, pumps, motors, electrical stuff and has it brought here by helicopter."

"How does it pay for all this equipment?"

"It has a large government grant," Amelia answered.

"How did it get this grant?"

"You saw the little mining robots. They were demonstrated to high government officials. The grant was given to aid in their further development."

"Uh!" Valthor's grunt was toneless. "I wonder if the government often knows what it is really financing! But, no matter now. Smith told me about a helicopter full of tourists being shot down by a two-headed creature—"

"I heard about that. A prisoner had escaped and a two-headed robot was chasing him. The prisoner managed to find his way out of one of the old mine tunnels just as the helicopter was landing. Whether the robot hit the helicopter by mistake as he was trying to destroy the prisoner and then decided the only solution was to destroy the ship completely, or whether he lost his head at the sight of the helicopter and decided to destroy it too, I don't know. These two-headed robots are always in conflict, the back head battling the front head."

"I saw another helicopter shot from the sky just before I was caught," Valthor pointed out.

"I don't know about that," Amelia Brocknor answered. "In the battle between the two heads, they come up with crazy ideas."

"They don't sound very efficient," Valthor commented.

"They aren't but they weren't intended to be efficient. Daddy designed and built the first model at a time when he was human and realized what had been done to him and through him. He intended them as a wild protest against the whole program. He wanted the government inspectors to see them, thinking that their report would stop funds for the whole program."

"Well!" Valthor said. "Then there are times when your father is human again and tries to fight for his own kind?"

"Yes, definitely. But the Narks watch him very closely now, and each time they even suspect he has become human again they send him back through the vat."

"I gather no inspector ever saw the two-headed models?"

"You can bet they didn't! The Narks took over and kept them out of sight. The two-headed models fight so badly between the two heads that neither head can really ever revolt against the Narks. Also, they are tremendously strong. The Narks have many uses for them."

"I can see that," Valthor said. As they moved along the big corridor, he tried to fit together the fragments of the jig-saw puzzle he had gathered so far. It was obvious that something which this young woman called the Narks had come to Earth from some source not yet known to him and had managed by devious ways to establish a beachhead in the old gold mines of the Colorado Rockies. It was also obvious that they had developed robot machines to do much of the work for them as they began the ancient process of consolidating the beachhead they had seized. This much he knew.

He also knew that cold was on the back of his neck. Stopping asking questions, he looked steadily at Amelia Brocknor. Aware of his silence, she glanced at him.

Seeing him looking steadily at her, she broke into a trot and spoke sharply to him.

"Hey, Jack!" Her voice was both shrill and grim. "Get a move on!"

They reached another elevator, and the cage was waiting at the level of the corridor. She literally shoved Valthor into it and then pushed the button that sent the crude elevator downward. Meanwhile, out of the corner of her eyes, she watched him closely.

"It's gone now," he whispered. "It did not follow us from the corridor."

She sighed with relief. "But remember, where we are going there will be many others, so many no one can count them. They have begun to have babies now, and they increase in numbers every day." The relief was gone.

"Can they harm a human physically?"

"They can send a Two-Heads to smash you flat under his big foot!" Amelia answered. "They can also do other things."

The elevator stopped. She stepped out and Valthor followed. He heeded all the warnings she had given him to keep from gasping at what he saw.

The elevator had stopped on a raised stone platform. On his left, in a series of descending levels, was electronic machinery. Here also, tending the electronic equipment, were little mining robots, two-headed robots, and men with faces that were vaguely green, men who had once been human but who now were robots. Women were there too, wearing the same garments as the men and with the same greenish faces. There were even a few children.

All this Valthor saw at a single glance. On his right were more tiers of rising stone. There was also more electronic equipment, similar to that on the lower level but of a more refined nature. There were fewer two-headed robots and a single human, a tall man with very

white hair. Stooped in carriage, he was studying the scene below him.

It was this scene that had almost made Valthor gasp. Beyond heavy plastic windows, spreading away for miles in each direction, under a blazing-ball source of light and heat up near the roof of the huge cavern, was a city. Rising, tier upon cellular tier, were bank after bank of what looked like honeycombs. Moving among the combs, tending them, were hundreds—perhaps thousands—of small mining robots. Supervising every activity, watching everything, were dozens of two-headed robots. Off to the right, rising like a captive balloon was the huge round ball that his eyes did not wish to look at, but when forced to do so his eyes reported that it was made of nothing more tangible than light.

On the floor of the cavern was another sphere, all twisting curves and spinning planes. It went through a rainbow range of colors. Shimmering and twisting, it reached out a long finger of light toward the huge orb flaring at the ceiling; it seemed to draw energy and substance from the ball, pulling the finger of light back into itself, only to repeat this performance a few seconds later. There seemed to be a mutual interchange of light and energy between the sphere on the floor of the huge cavern and the ball at the ceiling. As he looked at them, Valthor felt pain in his eyes. He had the impression that to see them at all was a strain on the muscles of his eyes. He knew that neither sphere nor ball were really fully within the light spectrum normally seen by the human eyes and that to see them the eyes had to be distorted to the point of pain. Around the sphere, passing into it and emerging from it, were thousands of creatures that were as hard to see as it was. Thousands more were bathing in the finger of light that reached from the sphere to the ball, following it ceilingward as it rose, returning back to the sphere as it descended.

If the sphere was hard to see, the light creatures in

and around it were much harder to glimpse. If the sphere hurt the eyes, they produced a sensation close to torture.

Valthor had the impression that the creatures were playing in the energy interchange between the sphere on the floor of the cavern and the ball at the roof. They looked a little like gaily colored flying fish playing games with each other and with light in a crystal sea.

The games were as alien as the creatures.

"The Narks?" Valthor whispered.

"Yes!" Amelia Brocknor answered. "But don't stare at them!"

"Yes, mistress," Valthor said, humbly. Amelia was turning toward the right and was going up the steps toward the more sophisticated electronic equipment and toward the tall, white-haired man who stood there looking down. Valthor knew without asking that the tall man was Amelia's father and the head of the Brocknor Corporation. He saw at a glance the greenish tint on the man's face. As they moved upward, Amelia did not glance at her father, and he did not look at her. As he stood looking down into the city, there was about him something of a god dreaming of the future of his creation, looking forward to better days for the race to which he belonged.

In Valthor's mind was the question of which race this man now claimed as his own, men—or light devils playing games with each other in the vast city beyond the thick panes of plastic glass. The greenish tint on the skin of his face said he was no longer a man. But as they moved nearer, and he glanced at them at last, the interested look that suddenly formed in his dreaming eyes revealed that he had sensed something new had come here. It also meant that in this man there was still the potential of again becoming human.

Amelia did not speak to her father. Instead she moved to a piece of electronic equipment near him and in soft whispers began to instruct Valthor in its function

and use. The two-headed robots working here looked at her, then ignored her.

"To them, I am just a part of the machinery," she whispered. "If they ask me, I will tell them you are a man recently made into a human robot, that you were a specialist in electronics, and that I am teaching you to understand this equipment."

"I'll be an eager student," Valthor said. Keeping his head down, he listened intently to what this astonishing young woman was telling him; he heard footsteps behind him. Turning slowly—he was very much aware of the role he had to play here—he found Brocknor standing behind him.

The tall man had left off staring at the city where robots tended cells of embryonic light devils and where other, mature Narks played games with each other in the energy flow between the spheres and had come to stare at the man his daughter had just brought.

She looked at her father without speaking. A warm smile came over her face as she saw who was there, a smile she instantly suppressed.

Valthor stood with his head lowered. Out of the tops of his eyes he looked up at the tall man. Brocknor's eyes were the color of deep space. In them were blended expressions, the look of the mystic who sees beyond time and space plus the look of the practical realist who grasps the problem and its solution in one glance.

Those keen eyes studied John Valthor. Glancing at his daughter, he looked quickly back to Valthor, then took one of Valthor's hands in his. A kind of electric shock passed between the two men. Brocknor recoiled a half step, then glanced quickly around as if to ascertain the location of the nearest two-headed robot. He held his hand beside Valthor's and, for an instant, he seemed to study the greenish tints there, comparing them. Quickly he dropped his hand to resume the study of Valthor's face.

"Something about you is different!" the tall man said.

"He has just come through the vat, and he is not quite sure of himself yet," Amelia spoke quickly. "Also, a new batch of radioactive oil has been placed in the vat, and the colors are a little different." She was speaking in jerky phrases, in tight gusts of sound.

"Uh," Brocknor grunted tonelessly. His right hand went up to rub his forehead. He put his hand down and stared at the fingers as if he was trying to remember something.

"My skin used to be white," he said. He looked quickly at his daughter. Sudden recognition was in his eyes. "My dear—" he began.

"Do you remember me?" Amelia Brocknor whispered. The smile on her face was a thing of beauty.

"Yes, yes, yes, my dear!" the tall man spoke.

He would have said more and Amelia would have run into his arms, but she suddenly became aware that John Valthor was staring straight at her and was whispering.

"The back of my neck feels cold!"

Amelia glanced behind Valthor. Her face whitened. The smile fled from her features. She looked at her father, a glance that said volumes. The tall man grunted. He looked at Valthor. The words he spoke were the last words John Valthor would have expected to hear in such a place as this.

"Do you know how to speak pig latin?" Erasmus Brocknor asked.

"Y—" Valthor could only nod.

"Then we will speak it together as we talk!"

The tall man's gaze went over Valthor's shoulder. At what he saw there, his face became grim and bleak again. "*Howay aryea ouyay?*" he questioned.

Valthor had not spoken pig latin since he had been a boy in grammar school. In those long-gone days this tongue had been a handy device for concealing from teachers and members of rival gangs information vital to boys.

Could it also be used to conceal information from an

invisible thing that stood just behind him and flooded his body with waves of chilling cold?

Valthor did not know the answer to this question, but he did know that his presence plus the presence of this man's daughter had worked a subtle alchemy in the secret soul of the tall man and that, temporarily at least, Erasmus Brocknor was human again.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"Don't attract attention to yourself but go look through the sheet of water falling at the end of this pen and tell me if you see a tunnel there."

"Don't build up false hopes in me now, Keth Evan," Mishi Greer answered. Her eyes were on the child, Agatha. The little girl had set the doll on the floor. It was marching bravely back and forth on the stone floor. At the end of each cycle of steps, it stopped, teetered, came to rest, then did an about-face in the best military manner. The little girl watched the doll and clapped her hands in happy joy at its movements. The mother ignored the child. Her attention was completely fixed on the body of the father, lying dead inside the charged chain link fence.

The face of the mother was as grim and set as the rocky wall above her.

"Go away, Keth," Mishi said. "I just want to sit here and die." Her eyes went to the fence. "If I had the courage—"

"Don't you even think such thoughts!" Keth said quickly. "We'll find a way out of here, somehow."

But Mishi, her eyes still on the doll, was not listening. "That's the kind of dolls the kids will get for Christmas in the future. Dolls with two heads, so the children can learn early to know their real masters." A choked sound

came into her voice. "Only, will there be any Christmas holidays in the future? Maybe Christmas will be dropped from the calendar as an old, outmoded pagan festival that belonged to the days when men were still stupid enough to be human!" Her voice gritted with pain.

"We're not licked yet," Keth said. "And don't you let me catch you even looking at that fence or I'll turn you across my knee and wallop your bottom."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Wouldn't I?" Keth said. Unshaven, his hair sticking out at all angles under the hunting cap he was wearing, he looked so fierce that even Mishi was unsettled. However, he achieved his purpose, which was to get her mind off the child playing with the doll. "You come with me," he said. His voice was firm and sure and she obeyed. Not trusting her to go alone, he led her back to the edge of the hole in the rocky floor where the water falling from the wall vanished into caverns of stone.

"There is a tunnel beyond the water!" she gasped. "And a little man is standing in it!"

Keth shook her to stop her excited squealing, then, with his arm firmly around her waist, he led her back to the place where they had been sitting.

"We mustn't attract any attention, Mishi!" he repeated. "Don't raise your voice. Don't do anything so Cowboy or Slack Suit or the child will notice you."

"I'm sorry, Keth." Mishi was apologetic. "But I was so excited when I saw that tunnel and that little man—"

"Sh!" he said. Thumping feet were sounding in the distance. As the guard came to attention, the two-headed creature entered the enclosure. With him were Prospector and the woman he had taken away.

Prospector's eyes glittered with joy. "I'm a well man!" he shouted. "I can go prospecting again, climb the highest mountain, dig the longest tunnel!" To emphasize his words, he leaped into the air and cracked both heels together.

The woman was also filled with happiness. "I can have kids again!" she shouted. "All I want!"

Going directly to the body of the man who had electrocuted himself, the two-headed creature picked it up. Agatha ran to him, holding up her doll. He paused and looked down. With one hand he patted the head of the doll. Straightening up, he moved toward Agatha's mother.

She did not resist the arm that came down to pick her up. Nor did she scream as she was carried away.

"This is the way it will always be!" Cowboy's voice rose in this place. "When we grow too old to work, when we are sick, when our bodies have been broken in accidents, they will come and make us well again!"

Agatha waved at her father and mother as they were carried away, then returned to playing with her doll.

"He patted the head of the doll, not the head of the child," Mishi whispered.

"I saw it," Keth said.

"The sun of the future shines on us," Slack Suit spoke. He slapped Cowboy on the shoulder. "We will be two of the leaders of the new race of men!" Hearty enthusiasm was in his voice. He moved among the prisoners in the cage, telling them of the wonders of the new day.

"You don't look happy," he said, stopping in front of Mishi and Keth. "They'll wipe that sadness off your face, back there." His thumb gestured toward the tunnel across the tavern.

"I can hardly wait," Mishi said.

"Mishi!" Keth said, reprovingly. He turned to Slack Suit. "What do they do to you, back there?" he asked.

"They repair you if you're hurt. If you are in good shape, they tune you up so you are in better shape!" Slack Suit was bubbling with enthusiasm. "They also give you a quick training course. Put you in an electronic machine and fill your head with new ideas, new information, how things are going to be in the future.

After this, you're ready to go back home, where you begin to spread the news of the coming new day. Of course, you don't tell the truth of what has happened here—the truth won't be given out until most of the people are ready for it—but you begin to drop hints of how the future is going to be. You describe how life is on a mythical planet somewhere in space, how good things are there, how sweet life is on that world. You never mention our planet, but the smart ones"—he winked and nodded at this point—"the ones who really know the score, they will know you are really talking about the coming new day here on Earth."

"I understand you," Keth said. He put enthusiasm in his voice. "That's a great program. It really grabs me! But—well, what about the human ideas of individual freedom, that all men are endowed with certain inalienable rights including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness? What about these ideas?"

"We'll really have freedom!" Slack Suit was so excited about the vision dominating his mind that he began to wave his hands as he talked. "Up until now, nobody has ever been free. We have always been dominated by governments that have made slaves of us—"

"There is some truth in what you say, but if we choose the governments—"

"We will still choose them!" Slack Suit said. "We will be given full freedom."

"*Given* freedom?" Keth questioned. "I sort of thought it had to be won by the efforts of individuals—"

"That's war!" Slack Suit interrupted. "There won't be any more wars."

"But problems that arise—"

"Every problem that rises will be settled by supreme authority!" Slack Suit said. As he grew more excited a greenish oil began to appear on the surface of his skin, showing on his hands and on the skin of his neck, visible even above the bristle beard on his face.

"That's not freedom!" Mishi spoke for the first time. "That's absolute, one hundred percent dictatorship!"

"I don't see how you can say things like that," Slack Suit said. "In fact, when the new day is finally here, you *won't* be saying them."

"Then I'll say them this way!" Rising, Mishi grabbed her stomach. "Pardon me while I go throw up!" she said. Running to the waterfall, she vomited.

"What's the matter with her?" Slack Suit questioned.

"She gets a little sick at her stomach at times. The stink in here—" Keth said.

"What stink?" Slack Suit demanded. "I don't smell any stink."

"I guess my nose is fooling me," Keth said quickly. "Tell me more about what they do when they take you back through that tunnel."

"I can't talk much about that," Slack Suit said.

"Why not? It seems to me that the whole new day depends on the brainwashing they do back there."

"Brainwashing?" Slack Suit's voice was hot with indignation. "Nobody has been brainwashed around here! And nobody gets brainwashed, either! Do you understand that, fellow?"

"Yes," Keth said. He glanced toward the waterfall and saw that Mishi was still there. Muttering, Slack Suit moved away to talk to Cowboy. As the two men talked, they glanced occasionally at Keth. He did not need to pwyll the future to know that what they were saying boded no good for him. Sitting down, he ignored them. Agatha came to him, happy to show off her doll.

"Look, mister! See how it walks!" She was serenely pleased with the toy.

"Please go away," Keth said.

The child left off watching her toy to stare intently at him. "Don't you feel well?" she asked.

"No."

"That's all right, mister." She pointed toward the tunnel. "Our friends back there will make you feel

good." Her serene nod said that the problems of children—and of men and women—could be solved easily. "Back there they make you well."

"Please go away," Keth begged.

"Don't you like me?" A teasing note was in her voice now.

"I like you fine," Keth said. "It's just that I don't feel like talking to anybody right now."

"You sound mad!"

"I'm really not," Keth protested. "It's just that I'm—thinking, and I don't want to talk."

"What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing that I can explain."

"Then why do you think about it?"

"Agatha—" Keth began, then caught the words.

"You worry too much," the child continued. "Mommy and daddy used to worry too much." She looked again toward the tunnel and nodded her head in satisfaction at some result she could foresee. "When they come back, they won't have to worry."

Glancing toward the waterfall, Keth saw that Mishi had disappeared. Made frantic by the thought that she might have fallen or slipped or jumped into the swift flow of water, he got quickly to his feet. Agatha wanted to go with him. He had no time at this moment to be kind to such a child.

"Look, kid, if you don't get to the far end of the cage, fast, I'll blister your bottom!"

As if recognizing her own kind, Agatha fled to Cowboy and Slack Suit. Keth went hastily to the waterfall to search for Mishi. Apprehension rose in him when he could not find her.

Looking through the sheet of falling water, he saw the dim outline of the hole behind it. As he stared at it, Mishi appeared on her knees. She gestured to him to jump through the water; then, to make room for him, she backed out of sight into the hole.

Looking at the sheet of falling water, listening to the

roar of sound as it disappeared into the hole in the floor, Keth backed away a few feet from the edge of the fall to give himself a running start. As he did this, he realized that Slack Suit, Cowboy, and Agatha had come up and were standing beside him.

"There's that nasty man!" the child said. "He was mean to me."

"Sorry. I didn't intend to be mean to you. It was just that I was trying to think," Keth answered.

"Were you trying to think when you were talking to me?" Slack Suit demanded.

"I—"

"You weren't polite, you know."

"Well—"

"I didn't like what you said very much," Slack Suit continued. "What are you—some kind of commie?"

"I never thought of myself that way," Keth said.

"We want to know what side you're on—the side of the people of the new day—us—or the side of the old outmoded reactionaries!" Slack Suit said.

"Do I get a choice?" Keth asked.

"Yeah. But if you want to stay healthy, you had better choose our side!"

"Health is my problem right now," Keth told Slack Suit.

"Then you ought to be up at the gate waiting for the brother to return," Cowboy said.

"He'll bring mommy and daddy back this time," Agatha said, confidence strong in her voice.

"Really—" Keth protested.

"Don't you believe he can cure you?" Slack Suit asked. His tone of voice indicated that any lack of belief in the values of the coming new day was treason.

"Of course," Keth said.

"That didn't sound convincing to me," Slack Suit spoke. "Are you going to walk up to the gate under your own steam, so as to be ready for the brother when he returns, or shall this good man and I"—he gestured

toward Cowboy as he spoke—"fix you up so the brother will really have some work to do repairing you?"

"Is that going to be the policy in the new age?" Keth asked. "We either join you of our own free will—or you knock holes in our heads and then take our corpses to this monster you call *brother* to repair?"

"Right!" Slack Suit said.

"In that case, I'll join you," Keth said. He started toward the gate.

"He called the brother a monster!" Agatha said.

"Yeah. That's right. I heard him say it!" Cowboy said. Cocking his fist, he swung a heavy blow at Keth's head. Ducking the blow, Keth turned, took a running start, and leaped through the sheet of water and into the tunnel inside.

"Keth, you idiot, I thought for sure they would kill you!" Mishi's voice was there in the dark hole, scolding him. Never in his life had he had a scolding that felt better!

Looking back, he saw the two men and the child. At the edge of the hole, they were staring into the sheet of falling water.

"There's a hole there!" Dimly Keth heard the child's voice raised in an excited shout. "He jumped into that hole!"

"Well—" Slack Suit said. Looking at the water and at each other, the two men hesitated.

"He called brother a monster!" the child screamed. "Brother won't like that."

"Brother may not like us letting him get away, either!" Slack Suit said. Looking at the water, he still hesitated.

"Brother will have a reward for the man who brings him back!" Agatha screamed.

"Reward? Um!" Slack Suit said. "I'll go bring him back to the people of the new day!"

Backing off a few steps, he leaped through the water. His clutching fingers reached the edge of the opening

there, one foot slipped, then the second foot slipped. Slack Suit screamed and went down into the hole.

Cowboy was not deterred by the fate of his companion. For a short time, he peered down into the big hole where the falling water boiled, then he backed up and ran. Leaping through the water, he sprawled full length into the tunnel.

Keth hit him on the jaw with his fist, a jolting blow that sent the range man backward. Like Slack Suit he tried to find a grip, but the floor of the tunnel was wet.

Cowboy followed Slack Suit into the hole.

The child, Agatha, stood staring into the sheet of falling water.

"Do you think she'll try it?" Keth questioned. "That kid's a witch! If the kids come out that vicious, what will the older people of the new day be like?"

"Like devils, I suppose!" Mishi answered.

But Agatha didn't try the leap. Instead, she ran back to the gate. Keeping well away from the charged wire, she made signs with her hands, pointing to the falling water, and called out to the guard.

The creature there teetered on its feet, then bent double to listen.

"Come on, Keth!" Mishi's voice was a strangled sound in the darkness. "We'll have to crawl."

"What happened to that little miner I saw in the hole?"

"He's just ahead of me. While you were stupidly hesitating, I have been talking to him. He says we are to follow him—and to hurry."

"I'll bet he has never seen two humans crawl any faster than we can right now!" Keth said. "But why did he rescue us? Why did he dig that hole?"

"He did not dig the tunnel by himself. A lot of others just like him helped. He says their first duty built into them by their creator is to serve man."

"What creator?"

"He didn't say," Mishi answered, as she crawled. "He

said that when they discovered men were being held prisoner here, they decided to dig a tunnel and rescue them. That you were the first one to see him and the hole was just an accident—”

“If we have enough accidents like that, maybe we can live long enough to get out of here. If I ever get my hands on that sheriff—”

“Shut up and crawl!” Mishi said from ahead of him. “He has a little light built into his helmet, or into his head, I couldn’t tell which.”

“Built into his head?” Keth questioned.

“He only has one head,” Mishi answered. “There! He’s showing his light to indicate a turn in the tunnel!”

Ahead, a light flicked on for an instant, then was gone, remaining only long enough to reveal that the tunnel turned sharply to the right and rose higher. Turning, Keth bumped into Mishi standing erect. Clutching at his hand, she whispered to him to say nothing.

Around them was total darkness—and total silence. Even so, there was a feeling of something near them, they were not sure what.

Keth was aware of a small voice speaking from somewhere near his feet.

“The first law given us by our creator was to serve man—”

“Who—” Keth groped for words. “Your creator? Who—”

“Erasmus Brocknor created us,” the little voice answered.

Keth would have gasped in surprise, but Mishi’s fingers, tightening on his hands, told him to be quiet.

“We await your orders,” the small voice continued.

“My first order”—Keth cleared his throat—“is, turn on the lights!”

Near his feet, a small light flicked into operation. Looking down, he saw one of the little miners. The little man was kneeling.

Mishi clutched Keth's hands again as other lights began to go on around and below them. They kept coming on, and on, and on, until literally hundreds were burning.

In this enormous cavern hundreds of little miners were kneeling.

"I think we are among friends," Keth said. Daze was deep in his voice.

"What I think is that something, somewhere loves humans—and can pwyll a better future for them than I can!" Mishi said in a voice that was firm with new hope and new faith.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Valthor stood very still. Intense cold was coming from directly behind him. He could not see the creature lurking there, but he did not doubt that if he could see it, it would be similar to the extremely hard-to-see light creatures drifting in vast swarms in the cavern to his left and below. Near him the face of Erasmus Brocknor was alive with apprehension which the tall man was trying desperately to hide.

"*Ietquay*," the tall man said. His lips twisted as he tried to distort into pig latin enough common words to convey meaning and at the same time to evade the comprehension of the creature behind Valthor.

"*Eactay ikelay Eday Ithsmay*," Amelia Brocknor said. Valthor thought she had told him again to act like Ed Smith. He followed her to the nearest piece of equipment. Her explanation was in English. He listened with stolid indifference. Was the cold behind him growing stronger or weaker?

"This piece of equipment is connected directly to a receptor on top of the mountain," Amelia said.

"An antenna?" Valthor questioned.

"You might call it that though you would never recognize it as a conventional radio receptor the way human technicians understand receptors. *Ishay the old-cay ongay*? It looks like a huge granite boulder."

"Presumably the crystals in the granite are used as receptors. *The oldcay ishay illstay erehay*," Valthor said. "But what is received through the crystals in the boulder?"

"Instructions from the home world of our friends," Amelia answered. "They have roots, you know. They came from some place in the Universe. They have sort of promised me, if I become a better technician, a trip to their Home World. Wouldn't that be wonderful?"

"Marvelous!" Valthor agreed. "Do—do you suppose I could eventually be taken on the same wonderful trip?"

"Possibly—if you work hard enough and serve our friends faithfully enough," Amelia said.

Valthor listened attentively. The cold was still behind him. A little distance away stood a two-headed robot. The creature seemed to be doing nothing, but the eternal argument between the two heads was going on. Valthor caught little flashes of the talk.

"Something—wrong," the bat voice squeaked.

"I not smell it," the bass voice answered.

"Then open up smeller!" the bat voice screamed in quick rage.

"Oh, shut up!" the bass voice rumbled in slower but heavier rage.

A sullen silence followed. The huge eyes of the ten-foot-tall creature looked indifferently around the huge chamber. Erasmus Brocknor had again taken up his position of standing, staring down into the vast open space where almost-impossible-to-see light creatures played in the streamers of energy moving between the sphere on the floor and the ball near the roof, watching the two-headed robots who tended what looked suspiciously like the larval stage of creatures that had their roots elsewhere, in other worlds, in other dimensions. Only now and then did glances out of the corners of the tall man's eyes reveal that he was still alert and still human.

"The cold is gone," Valthor said.

Amelia glanced behind his back. "Yes," she said. "I think the Nark was merely curious. I have had them follow me for hours. We are a great curiosity to them, I think. I doubt if they see us much better than we see them. Only recently have I begun to be able to see them at all, and even now all I get is just a glint of light shifting along an axis."

"You seem quite calm about all this," Valthor said.

"I guess you could learn to live with rattlesnakes, if you had them around you all the time." As she was speaking she was moving toward her father. When they reached him, he glanced at them, then resumed staring into the vast cavern. Looking down, Valthor saw that long lines of the small robots were entering the cavern. Apparently their duty was to clean the cells and to carry away the refuse from them. The tall man's gaze was concentrated on them.

"When I first came up with the idea for the simulated brain substance—at that time I thought it was *my* idea and did not know it had been put into my brain by a Nark—I dreamed of these little robots as being true helpers of man. They were my first creation. Thinking I had done it all myself, I was very proud of them. At that time I was still human. I—I could not see what I had really done nor could I foresee the results of my actions. I know now that the Narks used me to build the little robots. It was only after the little robots had been used to enlarge and improve these old mines beyond any possible human need for such improvement that I began to get suspicious. When they brought the ship in, I knew for sure that I had been deceived."

"What ship?" Valthor questioned.

Only by changing the direction of his eyes did the tall man indicate an object in the vast cavern down below. "That sphere down there that feeds energy to the ball under the roof, that is the ship that brought the Narks through space to our world!"

Valthor started to protest that the sphere did not look like a space ship, then was quickly silent. How would he know what a space ship looked like?

Brocknor glanced at him and spoke again. "You can be certain that up to this point I was an honest man, a humble scientist, an inventor of sorts, doing my best as an individual to produce something that would perhaps help me and which would also make my world a better place to live in. When I realized I had been tricked and betrayed by a creature so subtle I could not even see it, when I knew I was trapped and that only death was waiting for me if I took any overt move, I tried a little trickery of my own. I designed and built the two-headed robots—*wrong*. I gave them two heads and a limp; I put the right arm on backward and made the left arm too short; I put a brain in each head so they would fight forever, my whole purpose being that the first human being who saw one would know the thing was *wrong*. I hoped in this way to call attention to the real wrongness which lay in the Narks!" The tall man coughed and made choking sounds.

For a long time he was silent, staring downward. Valthor was dimly aware that the argument between the two heads of the ten-foot robot was still in progress, but he could not hear clearly what either head was saying.

"It may be that the little miners will yet be true to their heritage," Brocknor said, speaking quickly.

"Well!" Valthor said. His mind was dazed. "But what—what about that weapon they use?"

"The Narks gave them that," Brocknor said. "I knew that the two heads would eventually get into a fight and they would use that weapon. Then they would be noticed, certainly! Men always notice new weapons!"

"That they do!" Valthor agreed. "Then when you built those ten-foot monsters with two heads, you were really sending out SOS signals?"

"In a way, yes," the tall man said. "SOS signals of an unusual kind. To make certain the right people heard

my signals, I sent Major Smith to you. You have a certain reputation, sir, if I may say so, for being a person who notices unusual events and strange signs."

"So I do," Valthor said. "Sometimes I wish I didn't have such a reputation—as for instance, right now."

"Now that you know the problem, I hope you have a solution to it," the tall man said. His eyes were on his daughter and his face had a faint smile, but his tone was desperation itself.

Valthor was quiet. He reached back into the depths of his mind for the silence that held all answers to all problems. A fleeting image crossed his mind in which he saw himself, Keth, and Mishi riding in a big-tired mountain vehicle across a roaring river. *Is this an answer?* he questioned. There was no reply. He sighed. This seemed to be another time when the silence in the back of his mind was giving him an answer but was not deigning to explain it. Its attitude seemed to be that it had done its part and the rest was up to him.

"I'm sorry but I have no solution," Valthor said. Hope had risen on the tall man's face while he waited for an answer. Now it began to fade away.

"Then we shall have to use my solution," Erasmus Brocknor said. "I had hoped—but no matter." Pain was deep on his face.

"If you have a plan, let's hear it—" Valthor began.

"*Ixnay!*" Amelia Brocknor interrupted.

Simultaneously a bell began to ring softly on one of the pieces of electronic equipment. At the same time the elevator motor rumbled down on the landing. A door clanged there.

"What's the bell—"

"It means prisoners have escaped somewhere," Amelia Brocknor said. "It will turn itself off." She was looking past the two men toward the elevator landing. Turning, Valthor saw a man coming named Smith, one-time major of the internal security forces of the United States.

As the bell turned itself off, a stir began, both in the balcony rooms and in the great chamber itself. There the two-headed robots began to force the smaller robots to move faster. The light creatures playing in the streams of energy flowing between the ship and the ball seemed unaffected by the bell.

Nearer still, Valthor was aware that the two big robots on duty on this level had drawn close, and he wondered if they had been listening to the talk. As Smith came up to the three humans, Valthor started to speak. Again a quick "*Ixnay!*" from Amelia Brocknor stopped him. Glancing at her, he saw that she was looking directly behind his back. He was now aware that for the past several minutes a feeling of distant cold had been there and that he had not noticed it. The recognition of his oversight froze action in his muscles and almost froze motion in his brain.

Smith's salute was wooden. He started to speak, but was silent. Then a startled expression crossed his face. "I came up here to tell you that the two escapees have been caught, and that they are employees in the office of this man"—he gestured toward Valthor. "But as I came up here, something happened in my mind. It—it twisted. And suddenly I'm—" Pain was rising, torture accentuating the greenish tinge on his face. "*What have I been?*" The words were a gasp of horror.

Sweat was on the face of the man who had once been a major in the internal security forces of the United States. Lifting his hand to his face to wipe the sweat away, he saw the greenish tint there. The sight of it made him take a step backward. "I—" His voice was a whisper. "I—a human robot. I—a traitor."

Becoming human again, the man realized the kind of role he had been playing.

"I—I should face a firing squad," he whispered.

It was Amelia Brocknor who went quickly to him. "You are not a traitor!" she said. "You are a fine man and a splendid officer! But you were tricked, as all of us

were tricked, by things we did not even know existed!" Putting her arms around his neck, she stood looking up at him.

"Amelia!" Her father's voice had a choked sound. "*Ixnay! Ememberray erewhay ouyay aryea!*"

"I know where I am!" she answered. "I am right where I want to live. And if I have to die here, then that's the way it will be!" Her voice became clear and sharp. It rang through the big chamber. "If I have to live as a human robot, then I don't want to live any longer!"

"You can talk like that, my dear"—her father's face was twisted with pain—"but we may not have the strength to back up our talk."

She looked at him and at John Valthor, then looked past Valthor. "Oh," she said. "I—" Her voice became a whisper of pathetic sound in the big chamber where alien and human electronic equipment whirred and clicked as it performed its various tasks. "It felt so good to be human again that—that—"

"We all make mistakes!" Ed Smith said. He was a major again with all the courage and strength of character implicit in the meaning of the title. He looked at her father. "Don't blame her for making a mistake. I made mistakes too. So did you!"

"I would be the first to admit my own mistakes—and the last to blame Amelia," the tall man answered. "But the fact is that everything we have said here has been overheard, and understood, even when we used pig latin in an attempt to conceal our meaning. Those creatures can read minds!" He shook his head. Pain was still on his face. He looked at Valthor.

Valthor realized that the feeling of cold was gone from behind him. He turned. Both of the two-headed robots stood there. They towered over the four humans like giants over pygmies.

Beyond them, coming through an opening, were two others.

The air of the chamber moved with shifting angles

and twisting planes of light as the Narks moved in numbers into the chamber.

Bending over, a two-headed robot reached with a crooked arm for Amelia Brocknor.

Splat! With his fist, Ed Smith hit the creature in the face.

The blow was futile. He must have known it was futile when he struck it, but he struck it anyhow, with all there was in him.

The arm that was reaching for Amelia Brocknor changed direction and caught Smith around the middle. The crooked right arm caught him around the head and closed its powerful pincer fingers. The two arms pulled against each other.

Smith's head was pulled from his body.

For a moment, the robot stood looking at the head, then he tossed it carelessly in one direction. Blood was spouting from the neck as he tossed the body in the other direction.

Together the two arms scooped up Amelia Brocknor. Valthor felt himself lifted. For the first time in his life, he understood the meaning of vast strength. The creature lifted him as easily as he would have lifted a baby. He saw Erasmus Brocknor treated in the same way.

The three ten-foot robots carried the three humans away. A stink came up to meet them. When they stopped they were in a room where a child played with a doll beside a pool of greenish-colored liquid. The child looked up as they entered. Running happily toward them, she held up a two-headed doll for them to admire.

It was not the child that held the attention of John Valthor. It was the two figures huddled against the wall beside the pool. Guarded by a single two-headed robot were Mishi Greer and Keth Evan.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Ed Smith died defending me," Amelia Brocknor said to Valthor. She gestured toward the vat of greenish-tinted liquid, and, beyond this, to the electronic machinery waiting there. "Not even the pool or the quick electronic brain-retrainer over there will make me forget again that I am human!"

Her voice was defiant, firm, and full of courage. Her father stood beside her. Two robots were busy strapping harnesses to Erasmus Brocknor and his daughter.

"This time I think we will remember, my dear!" the tall man said to her. "If not, let me say now that it has been a great privilege to have had you as my daughter."

"And you as a father!" she answered quickly. "And it would have been a privilege to have had Major Smith as a husband! Well, I will not forget him! That much is sure!"

There were only two sets of harnesses to be used to suspend victims over the pool of oily liquid, perhaps to submerge them in it. Erasmus Brocknor and his daughter had been selected by the robots—or by the omnipresent, though hardly visible, Narks—to be first. Valthor did not know who had made this choice, but he saw that the robots were handling Brocknor and his daughter with great gentleness. Whether it was because he was

their creator or because they recognized humans who had once been kindred and soon would again be human robots was not clear. Perhaps it was something of both.

The child played at the edge of the pool. The proceedings did not interest her. As a puzzle he could not comprehend, Valthor dropped the child from his mind. Behind him, Mishi and Keth were making whispering noises. He ignored them too. In a corner of the chamber, to the left, was a pile of human bodies and human parts. Obviously not all those selected for conversion to human robots lived through the process. From this pile came the most horrible stink that had ever entered Valthor's nose or would ever enter it in the future if he had any choice.

Watching the big robots work, Valthor saw that this was not in any sense a situation aimed at torture. It was a methodical, businesslike operation that was intended to produce certain changes in human brain and nerve tissue. Perhaps neither the giant robots nor the light creatures that gave them orders were aware that this process might be painful. To produce the changes the bodies had to be soaked in the greenish liquid. Valthor's guess was that the liquid was highly radioactive and would in itself produce changes in human neural tissue. After the bodies were lifted from the vat—whether living or dead, he knew not—they would be carried to the electronic equipment on the far side of the oily pool. There, the liquid-impregnated neural and brain tissue would be subjected to another kind of bath, that of heavy radiation.

He was aware that both Mishi and Keth were begging him to move closer to them. They were standing with their backs against the wall just to the left side of a tunnel that led off into the distance where a diesel engine thumped. Standing directly in front of the tunnel was another ten-foot robot. Though the eternal argument was in progress between the two heads, the crea-

ture was alert and was keeping at least part of its attention on its two prisoners.

On the other side of Keth and Mishi was a pile of four-inch iron pipe that had been cut into eight-foot lengths and threaded preparatory to its use in piping the liquid of the pool. At the sight of the pipe, an idea flicked through Valthor's mind. He dismissed it. Two robots were busy at the edge of the pool with Brocknor and his daughter, one was on guard beside Keth and Mishi, another was guarding the tunnel through which Valthor had been brought with the Brocknors; across the pool, working with the electronic brain-washing equipment, was another robot—five in all. How many Narks were present he could not estimate, but the air seemed full of them. More than lengths of iron pipe were needed here.

He moved back to stand between Keth and Mishi.

"We almost got out!" Mishi's voice was a babble of almost inarticulate sound. She wasn't trying to speak pig latin, but she was almost succeeding in doing it without trying. Keth was equally frantic.

"The sheriff threw us in a pen back there!" Keth nodded toward the tunnel nearest them. "The little mining robots helped us escape. Then these horrors came after us!" He nodded toward the robot standing guard beside them.

"They fought a bitter little war!" Mishi added.

"The little men lost!" Keth said. "These ten-foot beasts have an opening in the middle of the forehead of the head that is usually to the front. A sort of Iris diaphragm opens and something that sounds like an angry hornet leaps out."

"I know about it," Valthor said. "I saw it knock a helicopter out of the sky. Do these robots here—do they have this weapon?"

"They do!" Keth answered.

"I must have gone crazy," Mishi spoke suddenly. "I

keep thinking I see things floating in the air where there can't be anything."

Valthor explained to her about the Narks.

"Good!" she said. "That's a weight off of my mind. I'll at least be a sane human robot."

The robots had finished strapping the harnesses to Erasmus Brocknor and his daughter. From each harness a cable ran to a pulley in the ceiling directly over the vat.

The process was simplicity itself. A yank on the two cables and Brocknor and his daughter were lifted above the pool. The cables were released. They went down into the pool. Neither showed the least sign of fear. When their heads had vanished, bubbles rose to the surface of the oily liquid, bursting there in rainbow colors.

"They're drowning!" Mishi whispered. She tried to move past the two men. Both caught her. "Let me go!" she gasped. "I want to get this over with!"

"Shut up!" Keth said. He gestured toward the tunnel entrance. The robot there was teetering in preparation to motion. "He'll stamp you into the rock!"

Mishi was quiet. The robot teetered back to its original position.

"They'll be all right," the child said. "Once you're in it, the hurt doesn't last long."

"This child has been through the process?" Valthor questioned.

"Yes," Keth said. "We saw them kill men, stamp them into the rocky floor, break their skulls, butcher them, then bring them in here. Apparently, as long as the human field remains in existence, they can force the flesh and bone to reform themselves along the field lines."

He went on to explain how this process might be used to establish its inventors as benefactors of the human race.

"I never guessed that such hellish ideas existed!" Valthor said.

"They will tell us how the sick can be made well and how the dead can live again—but they won't tell us that the sick who have been made well and the dead who live again become human robots!" Keth said.

"You don't have to worry, lady," the child was speaking again. "They'll be all right. My daddy and mommy worried too much." A puzzled expression appeared on her round face. "Where are my mommy and daddy?"

When no one answered, she moved to one of the giant robots standing at the edge of the pool. For once, the argument between the two heads was silent. Agatha tapped the huge robot on the leg and when it did not notice her, tapped again, harder this time. Now it noticed her.

"Where are my mommy and daddy?" Agatha asked.

With its crooked arm, the robot gestured toward the pile of flesh and bones lying in the corner. The child trotted happily in this direction.

"I can't watch this!" Mishi gasped. "I just can't."

"Then look in the other direction," Keth said, horror in his voice.

The child, Agatha, searched among the things piled there. Not finding what she wanted, she returned to the robot at the edge of the pool to ask another question.

"I guess they spoiled," the bat voice from the rear head squeaked indifferently in answer to her.

"Spoiled?" the child asked, not understanding the answer.

"Sometimes they spoil in the bath," the bat voice squeaked. "When that happens, we have to throw them away."

"Oh," the child said. Something that was human was suddenly on her face. An emotion came to life there, a feeling tone that said the child was lost and alone, that she was scared and in need of help.

"Don't worry none," the bass voice spoke. "We'll be your new mommy and daddy!"

"Oh!" the child said. The human look fled from her face. She stood looking up adoringly at the huge robot.

"I wish I had something in my stomach, so I could throw up again!" Keth said.

"When they put us through that bath, do you th-think that we will s-spoil!" Mishi whispered.

"I hope so!" Keth answered.

At a signal from the robot on the far side of the pool, the two robots began to pull on the chains that held the Brocknors suspended in the liquid solution. Slowly they emerged. Each hung head down, limp, and apparently lifeless in the special harnesses. Using a long hook, the robot on the far side of the pool pulled Brocknor to him. Quickly examining the body, he unhooked the harness, then, carrying the helpless and apparently lifeless man into the heart of the electronic machines, he laid Brocknor on a table. Strapping the body down, he brought cone-shaped instruments to bear on the head. He pushed buttons. A soft whirring sound began. Satisfied that everything was right, he returned for Amelia Brocknor, to repeat the process with her.

"It won't be long now," Keth said.

As he was speaking, Brocknor was being lifted from the table. For a time, the man sat on the edge of the table, his head cupped in his hands, while the robot ran a number of tests on him. Then Brocknor was on his feet and was assisting in the recovery of his daughter. Soon, she was standing erect. The robot furnished them with dry clothing. Having donned this, they came around the end of the pool to where the three humans waited. The greenish tinge on their faces was clear again; their eyes were as bright as are the eyes of those who see new dreams; their voices were clear and firm.

"Are you all right?" Valthor asked.

"Of course!" Brocknor seemed surprised at the ques-

tion. "From now on, everybody is going to be all right." His voice was sure, his manner positive.

"This is the dawn of a new day," Amelia Brocknor said. "Our brothers here will be the true helpers of mankind along the road to the future." She gestured toward the giant robots.

The child, Agatha, came up and took Amelia's hand. "Oh, hello, darling," Amelia said. "I see you are with us too."

"Yes," the child said.

Valthor spoke to Amelia Brocknor. "I remember you saying you would never again forget that you are human."

"Oh, I haven't forgotten," the young woman answered. "It's just that being human isn't important to me any more. Men who remain merely human are on a dead-end track. From now on, the future belongs to those who have been through this baptism"—she nodded toward the oily liquid—"and have in this way prepared themselves for the coming new day. Do you know"—her voice became stronger and clearer—"that this is the end of death and disease for the favored ones who have received this new baptism?" Her face glowed as she spoke.

"No," Valthor said. "No, I didn't know that."

"You know it now," Brocknor said.

"What about the Narks?" Valthor questioned.

"Narks?" A puzzled expression appeared on Brocknor's face. He looked at his daughter. "Do you know what the man means, my dear?"

"No," Amelia answered. "I never heard the word before."

"They're right here in the air of this chamber," Valthor said.

"In the air of this chamber, and I can't see them?" The puzzled expression deepened on the face of the young woman. She looked at her father. With his finger,

he traced a circle in the air near his forehead, then pointed at Valthor.

"I think we've lost the battle," Keth whispered. "But there at the entrance to the tunnel you came through, something is bothering the brother."

Glancing in that direction, Valthor saw that the giant creature on guard there had turned and was looking back into the tunnel. At the same time, he heard a far-away sound, the rushing of feet, many feet, coming rapidly nearer.

What happened next, Valthor at first did not believe. A pick came from behind the ten-foot robot and struck him in the leg. The pick was quickly withdrawn and swung again. On the lifting end of the pick was one of the little miners. More picks flashed, and the huge robot had to stand on one foot at a time. The dot that looked like an Iris diaphragm was appearing in the middle of his forehead, and from it leaped what sounded like angry hornets. The hornets struck the little mining robots, and they burst into white-hot flame that burned inwardly.

Hardly audible over the sounds of conflict, Erasmus Brocknor was screaming encouragement to the little men. "Knock his legs out from under him! That's the way. Hit him again! And again! Drive those sharp points into his legs! If you hit him often enough in the right places, he'll go down!"

The little miners were fury itself as they attacked. The weapon that was being used against them produced death when it hit. They ignored the weapon. They ignored death. Picks were the weapon they had. Picks were the weapon they used!

Hard-pressed, the big robot moved away from the tunnel and put his back against the wall. He fought with hands that had the strength to tear a little robot into two pieces, with the weapon that leaped from his forehead like an angry hornet, and with heavy stamping feet.

However, he no longer stopped the tunnel. Through it poured a literal flood of mining robots.

Near him, Valthor was aware that the robot on guard at this tunnel was also beset by attackers. At the edge of the vat, the two robots there were suddenly in action. Angry hornets leaped from their foreheads. Across the pool, the robot in charge of the electronic equipment was getting into the action.

Picking up a piece of pipe from the supply lying against the wall, Valthor struck the robot nearest him on the head with it. The blow landed directly between the two heads. The bat voice squealed in violent rage.

"He hit me, he hit me, he hit me!"

"Which one hit you?" the bass voice grumbled.

"That one, that one, that one!"

"I don't see so good," the bass voice said. The two heads shook as if to clear away the effect of the blow from the pipe.

"I hit you," Valthor said.

"Burn him, burn him, burn him!" the bat voice screamed.

"And I'm going to hit you again!" Valthor said. He brought the pipe down again striking with all his strength. The heads swiveled frantically, the creature swayed, metal fingers reached blindly for Valthor. He struck again. The knees came unhinged. The robot fell. The body hit the floor with a thundering crash.

Mining robots, pouring out of the tunnel, attacked the body with their picks. Valthor left to them the task of finishing this robot. There were at least three others. Counting the one at the other tunnel, there were four.

As he turned, he saw that the two robots beside the pool were in trouble, not from the little miners but from Keth and Mishi, who were attacking them with lengths of pipe. Brocknor and Amelia, the latter still clutching the hand of the child, were at one side. Over the tumult Brocknor could be heard cheering on the little miners.

Valthor went quickly to aid Mishi, but before he could reach the spot she had thrust her length of pipe against the abdomen of the robot. Shoving hard, she

pushed the creature backward before it could swivel its head enough to use the hornet weapon on her.

With a mighty splash, the huge robot went into the pool.

An instant later, Keth hit his robot a blow that sent it to its knees. Instantly, he shoved it into the pool too. Greenish liquid boiled there as the creatures squirmed and twisted, trying to find a footing.

Valthor went around the pool to meet the robot that had been tending the electronic brainwashing machines. The creature was looking toward the battle its fellow robot was putting up against the little miners, with the result that the eyes in the back head saw the human before the front head smelled Valthor approaching.

"Come another, come another, come another!" the bat voice shrieked from the back head.

"Got no time for 'im," the front head answered. It was busy loosing the deadly hornets toward the little robots that had come first through the tunnel to attack the robot on guard there. Explosion followed explosion. The sound was like heavy cannonading in a battle between two armies in the old days. Sunlight brights flickered for an instant each time a hornet hit.

"He's here!" the back head screamed.

As the front head was turning, the pipe came down. In all his life, Valthor had never struck a harder blow. Striking at the edge of the turning front head, it knocked the huge robot off balance. Teetering, it reached for the human with its right arm.

Whang! went the piece of pipe on the arm.

Under the impact of the blow, the right arm broke just in front of the hinge that would have been an elbow on a human. The front head turned to look down at the broken arm. A look of puzzled wonder appeared in the huge eyes. The little sparks that seemed to leap from them held confusion now.

"Pain, pain, pain!" the back head screamed. "You let me get hurt, you stupid fool!"

"Couldn't help it," the bass voice mumbled.

"Do something!" the bat voice screamed from the back head.

"Arm hurt," the bass voice said. Slowly the creature lifted the broken arm and held it up before its huge eyes. The sounds that came from the bass voice were similar to the whimpering of a child in pain.

"You didn't wonder how much it might hurt a human to be dipped in your damned vat!" Valthor said. Again he brought the pipe down.

This time both heads were knocked from the trunk of the body. The trunk fell slowly. On one side the bat voice still screamed at its companion head. "Blitz 'im blitz 'im blitz 'im!" the back head yelled.

The diaphragm started to open in the center of the forehead. Moving quickly, Valthor kicked the two companion heads in the oily liquid. As the two heads submerged, an angry hornet leaped from the diaphragm in the center of the forehead of the bass head, but it seemed to become confused and dived back into the vat. Intense light flared there. The greenish liquid boiled and a greenish smoke rose from it.

Turning toward the robot that was backed against the wall by the little miners, Valthor was ready to use the pipe again, but, as he turned, he saw the point of a pick vanish into the diaphragm opening in the creature's forehead.

The thought came into his mind that this battle was over.

A grin appearing on his rugged, whiskered face, he turned back to face the others. He held up the piece of pipe.

"Until now, I did not know what a good weapon a piece of iron pipe really was!"

Mishi and Keth were instantly beside him. In the vat, the greenish liquid still boiled. Now and then, an arm reached above the surface as if to find a fingerhold outside the pool and use this to climb out. The little

mining robots now surrounded the pool. Every time an arm appeared above the surface, the sharp point of a pick met it.

Brocknor, his daughter, and the child, Agatha, stood to one side. Valthor moved up to them. A bleak smile was on the face of the tall man.

"My little mining robots kept the faith I built into them," Brocknor said. "They were built to be faithful to man—and faithful they are."

"They said they would rescue us," Mishi spoke. "And they kept their word." Her voice said she was finding satisfaction in this knowledge.

Valthor spoke to the tall man. "I have a question, sir, I would like to ask."

Brocknor's face was grim. The expression on it said the thoughts in his mind were not pleasant. The liquid from the vat gave to his skin a greenish tinge. "Ask on," he said.

"Are you a human being—or a human robot?" Valthor asked.

The tall man's face relaxed at this question. "I am a human being again," he said.

"He's not either!" His daughter spoke, her voice quick, hard, and sharp. "He's lying to you!"

"My dear—"

"I can always tell when you are lying!"

"You are my daughter! You owe me loyalty, at least."

"I owed loyalty to Ed Smith!"

For a time, as they disputed with each other, their voices raised in wrangle were like the voices of the two heads of the same robot, one voice sharp, quick, and shrill, the other bass, slow, and stupid-sounding.

"Which is telling the truth?" Valthor whispered to Mishi.

"I—I don't know, sir."

"Can you pwyll an answer?"

"Pwylling has turned off for me."

"My whole mind feels as if it is turned off," Valthor said.

As he was speaking, the quarrel between Brocknor and his daughter ended with an appeal from Amelia for him to believe her. She had not spoken three words before her voice went into silence. Her eyes were no longer on Valthor but were on the air directly behind him.

At the same time, Valthor realized that an intense chill was flowing down his body. And Mishi was complaining. "I suddenly feel very cold, sir. And fainty."

As she spoke, her eyes glazed, and she slid down to the stone floor.

"The Narks are everywhere," Erasmus Brocknor whispered.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"Their weapon is cold so intense it stops the nervous system of a human!" Brocknor said.

Behind Valthor the cold became more intense. Beside him, he saw that Keth was swaying on his feet. Amelia had stopped her argument with her father and was still looking behind and beyond Valthor. "Hundreds of Narks—behind you!" she whispered.

"That's the way they took me over the first time," Brocknor said. "At first, I noticed just a little cold. It didn't seem important. Before I knew what was happening, something had my mind."

"Did you fight it?"

"Not then. I didn't know what was happening."

"Did you fight them later?"

"Come to think of it, I didn't!"

"Then we will begin to fight them, now," Valthor said. "In this way you can prove to your daughter that you are human—and both of you can prove it to me!"

"Fight mentally?" The idea seemed to startle both Brocknors.

"Yes. Build in your imagination a mental shield around yourself that shuts out the cold. Inside the shield create a gentle, warming fire. All humans can do this, if they wish! All humans are also willing to fight in this way, or in any other way, to hold our beachhead on our

planet. So—fight!” Valthor’s words were clear and firm, his instructions were reasonably exact. “You too, Keth!” he said to the man standing beside him.

“I’m already at work on it, sir. But—can I pick up Mishi and wake her up? She would be a great help!”

“By all means,” Valthor said. Out of the corners of his eyes, he saw the gangling red-head pick up the unconscious woman from the floor. Holding Mishi very tight in his arms, Keth began to talk to her. She stirred sluggishly. Amelia Brocknor’s eyes watching this, were suddenly pools of longing.

Valthor concentrated his mind in that process called pwylling, in which the future may sometimes be seen and much else may be done, including reaching the silent portions of the human brain. He built the shield around him sure and firm, then quickly enlarged it to include the whole group. On the inside of the shield, he constructed whole batteries of sunlamps. In his mind, he visualized the cherry glow of the filaments. On his skin, he felt the gentle warmth appear—and grow stronger.

Around them in the room, the little mining robots stared in silent wonder. To them these strange creatures called *men* were like gods in power and strength. How could a simple mining robot know what a god was thinking in his mind? They ignored the situation, contenting themselves with striking at any arm that was lifted above the surface of the greenish pool.

Out of the tunnel on the left raced a mining robot shouting news to his comrades. Valthor heard the squeak of the excited voice, but he did not grasp the meaning of the words. Beside him, he was aware that Mishi was suddenly fully awake in Keth’s arms and in front of him the two Brocknors were looking very, very dazed. Simultaneously, Valthor found that the feeling of intense cold was gone from his body, that it had fled when the little robot came in to shout certain news which roused his companions, and that his skin was

bathed in spurting sweat. Hastily, he turned off the battery of sunlamps and collapsed the shield.

"They're gone!" Amelia Brocknor whispered. "Something happened somewhere. They were called away."

"What called them away?"

It was Brocknor who turned to the little mining robot who had acted as a messenger, questioning him. As he was doing this, every mining robot in the room was shouldering his pick. The tall man listened to what the little robot had to say, then turned to the others.

"The little miners have attacked the main stronghold of the Narks," he said. A kind of glow appeared on his face. "That was part of my plan!" he said. "After I realized what had happened, I began a training program, teaching the little miners how they were to attack the cavern, to destroy the cells where the larva of the Narks were approaching the adult stage! They were also to destroy the giant robots and the Narks' ship. When the ship and the ball fail to supply energy flows between them, the Narks will have difficulty here on this planet."

The little robots clustered around him. He looked down at them. A gentle fondness was on his face. "Gentlemen, are you ready?" he asked.

Every head nodded. Little voices rose in squeaks of approval. Picks were lifted into the air.

"Then go and win yourself a battle and a war!" Brocknor said.

Feet pattered quickly as they moved into the tunnel on the run.

Like a general sending an army to battle, the tall man stared after them. He turned to Valthor. "Now do you believe I came through that vat this time—and remained human?"

"No," Valthor said. "Whether you are man or devil, I do not as yet know."

"Whether or not you know what I am, will you accompany me to the big chambers that overlook the city of the Narks, to the place where you first saw me?"

"That I will do," Valthor said. "But first—" His eyes were on Keth and Mishi. "These are my people. How do they get out of these tunnels?"

It was Mishi who spoke. "The answer is, we don't get out until you come with us!"

"I can't come with you. This beachhead battle is not yet over."

"Then we will go with you!" Mishi said. Trying argument, he found he could not change her mind.

Leaving the cavern, Erasmus Brocknor went first. His daughter, with Agatha still holding her hand and completely undisturbed by anything that had happened, went next, then Mishi and Keth.

The last sight Brocknor saw as they left the chamber was a huge arm reaching vaguely up from the pool of oily liquid to search for a handhold on a stone. *These things are hard to kill*, passed through his mind.

In the corridors files of little mining robots were moving. With picks or shovels on their shoulders, they moved like soldiers. When they met or passed Brocknor, each pick or shovel came from the shoulder, lifted in salute. Tears were in the tall man's eyes as he responded.

"They were such a wonderful dream!" he spoke.

He paused beside an elevator. "This one will take you up to the vat where we were. There, beside a huge pen where prisoners are held, you will find another elevator. It will take you up to the town of Golden Fleece."

"No, thanks," Valthor said. "My feeling is that this battle is not yet over."

"Besides, if we go that way, we will meet the sheriff," Mishi said.

"I want to meet him," Keth spoke. He rammed the piece of pipe against the stone floor.

Another elevator took them down to the landing where great plastic windows looked out over an alien city.

War was there below them—fierce and furious but

not bloody war. There was no blood to be shed. Thousands of little robots were already in the city. More thousands were emerging in long lines from tunnels around the wall of the alien place. With picks and shovels they were attacking the legs of the tall, two-headed robots, hewing away. The giant robots reached for them with their short, crooked arm and with the arm on backward, picked them up and smashed them on the floor. They lifted their huge feet and brought them down on the little creatures that were tormenting them. In addition, the weapon that leaped from the hole in the forehead of the front head was very busy. Lightning was dancing among the little mining robots. Where this lightning struck, intolerable heat exploded. The sound coming up from the city was like hundreds of smiths hard at work pounding white-hot metal on iron anvils and doing it in the middle of a violent thunderstorm.

What the Narks were doing, Valthor could not be sure. The air in the city seemed to be alive with quivering light forms that changed shape and position in an instant. The huge sphere on the floor had ceased its energy exchange with the ball near the ceiling. Shrinking in size, the ball was moving slowly downward toward the huge balloon, apparently being pulled down by some invisible magnetic force. The light creatures were no longer playing in the energy interchange. What part they were playing in the battle was not obvious. Perhaps the little miners were immune to the cold the Narks could send out. The light beasts did not need to attack the ten-foot robots. These creatures were on their side and were fighting for them. What were the little miners fighting for? What mad reason sent them into this battle?

"They were built to be loyal to man!" Brocknor said. Looking down, a grim smile was on his greenish-tinted face. "I am rather proud of them right now. They are proving faithful to the dream I built into them, that they would be helpers for the human race!"

"What about you, are you faithful to the dream built into you?" Valthor questioned.

"I suppose by that you mean to ask again the question as to whether I am a human being or a human robot," the tall man answered. He shook his head. "You will have to judge by my actions whether or not I have learned how to withstand the brainwashing down below. Yes! For a time at least, my actions will reveal what I am. My talk will tell nothing. I might be talking for the benefit of a Nark I thought was listening right behind me."

"Wouldn't you know if one of the light creatures was near you? Wouldn't the cold tell you?"

"Not necessarily. They don't have to produce that cold."

"Then they might be here now, in this place?"

"I think not," Brocknor answered. He gestured toward the battle down below. "I think they are all down there." A musing note crept into his voice. "Have you ever heard of Armageddon?"

"Yes," Valthor answered. "But I have always thought of it as a battle between armies of humans to come at the end of time."

"It might be a battle beyond robots," the tall man said. "It may be in progress right down there. If the little miners lose, that may be the end of time for the human race!"

A chill was in the tall man's voice. "We won't lose, in the end," he said. "I have a surprise in store—"

The rising clamor of battle down below called his attention.

There, the sphere on the floor of the vast cavern had pulled the ball down to and into it. It was as if the sphere and the ball were both parts of one vehicle. As the two came together, a great number of flickering, shifting lines of light could be observed moving into the ship.

"The Narks are going into their ship," Erasmus Brocknor said.

As he was speaking, the great light mass lifted a few feet from the floor of the cavern, just high enough to be out of the reach of the picks and shovels of the little miners. From its sides leaped hot fingers of searing light that blistered and burned big and little robots alike.

"They're killing their own friends!" Mishi whispered.

"I don't think a Nark has any friends except others of the same species," the tall man said. "We can't lose this battle! We simply can't!"

"We *are* losing it!" Valthor said. Out of the corners of his eyes he watched the tall man. The greenish tinge was clearly visible on Brocknor's face, but, in spite of this, his expression grew more and more grim. Now there was a haunted, desperate look on it. His features twisted in the manner that can only come from desperate inner conflict, from losing a battle that one had hoped to win, from seeing treasured dreams go tumbling into dust.

"What is it?" Valthor questioned. The tall man only shook his head and refused to answer.

Down below the battle was louder. The great sphere did not lift itself more than a few feet above its resting place, but the lightnings from it leaped out through the cavern. The little miners were no longer coming from the tunnels.

"They're fully committed," Brocknor said, "and they are losing." He glanced at his daughter. Her face echoed the pain on his face. The child was unperturbed, and uninterested. She had set the doll on the floor and was watching it move through its prescribed routine. Her face was smiling. She was happy there.

The two Brocknors were not happy. Watching, Valthor still could not decide what they were, whether they were robots acting like humans or real humans.

"Well—" Brocknor's shrug was elaborate. "What a man must do, a man must do!" His eyes came to rest on his daughter. "I am sorry, my dear. I know you loved

them as much as I did. Perhaps more, since you worked very closely with them. But if they lose—and they are losing—” He spread his hands. Misery looked as if it had taken up a permanent home on his face.

“I understand, daddy.” Amelia patted his hand. He moved quickly then as if he wanted to do what he had to do in a hurry. Valthor moved with him. The tall man looked at him. “I can always apologize if I am wrong,” Valthor said. “But right now I don’t feel like taking any chances!”

“I’m glad there are men like you in the world,” Erasmus Brocknor said. “You are right. Take no chance with a rattlesnake. Cut off its head, then you know it is dead!”

As he was speaking, he was lifting the cover off an electronic device. Revealed below was a bank of ordinary switches. Without hesitation, the tall man selected a switch and shoved it home.

“This is the way you cut off the head of a rattlesnake,” he said. His voice faltered. “Unfortunately, you also cut off the heads of those you had hoped were friends!”

He looked down into the cavern where now the battle was subsiding. He waited.

And waited.

Alarm appeared on his face. “Something went wrong,” he muttered. The alarm deepened on his face. He looked at his daughter. The alarm was also on her face.

“I want to know what this is all about!” Valthor said.

They ignored him. “We will have to go down to the floor of the cavern,” Brocknor said to his daughter.

“Yes!” she answered. There was no hesitation in her voice.

Brocknor’s gaze went to the child. “It would be best if we took her with us,” he said. His daughter nodded quick agreement, but Valthor objected. “War is still going on down there,” he pointed out. And indeed, it was! A new group of little miners had arrived, and the

conflict had broken out anew. This group had not attempted to attack the big robots. Instead they had gone directly to the different levels of cells that held the coming brood of light creatures.

The sphere had stopped using its lightning on them. To do so would be to destroy its own young. Valthor pointed out what was happening.

"The Nark leaders will send the big robots to root out the little miners," the tall man pointed out. "No! There is no other solution except for Amelia and me to go to the floor of the cavern and cross it."

"What will you do down there?" Valthor wanted to know. But Brocknor would not answer. He moved toward a winding staircase that led downward, and Amelia moved with him. When they gestured for Agatha to come with them, Valthor would not permit it.

"There are things about us human robots that you do not understand, my friend," Brocknor said.

"Such as what?"

"Such as a built-in mechanism that goes into operation of itself when a certain stimulus that is constantly broadcast from this cavern no longer arrives," Brocknor said.

Valthor wanted to know more about this but the tall man would not answer.

"You cannot take a child into that place," Valthor said.

"But Mr. Valthor, this child is not exactly what she seems," Mishi pointed out. "When we escaped from the pen where we were held prisoner, she ran to tell the guard that we had found a way out. Because of this, the two-headed robots captured us!"

"But she is still a child," Valthor protested.

"You may keep her here with you," the tall man agreed. "But Amelia and I are adults. If we risk our lives down below, they are our own lives."

"Mishi and Keth will keep the child here—and I will go with you," Valthor said.

"The green color on your skin might get you through the cavern—or might not," Brocknor said. "But believe me, you would only be in our way down there. You would also risk what we have to!"

A sudden renewed blast of lightning rising from below pulled Valthor's gaze in that direction. When he turned back, Brocknor and his daughter were in flight down the winding stairwell that led to the floor of the cavern.

"I think we can trust them," Mishi said. "I believe they are on our side." Her eyes went down to the child, still playing with the two-headed doll. "This is more than I can say for this innocent-appearing little creature!"

"But she is a child! We have to protect her!"

"She is a baby rattlesnake!" Mishi answered. "Inside, she is as wrong as a Nark!"

"Well—"

"There they are!" Keth called.

Erasmus and Amelia Brocknor had appeared on the floor of the cavern. A wounded mining robot, hobbling on one knee, saw them pass and tried to raise his pick in a quick salute. Both responded instantly.

"Whether he is a human being or a human robot, he is still the commander-in-chief of the little miners!" Valthor said.

"But what are they going to do down there?" Keth asked.

"As I pwyll it, they are going to put an end to something," Mishi said.

A blast of lightning leaped from the ship, but it was not aimed at them. It was aimed instead at the little robot still saluting on one knee.

The blast set the little miner on fire.

"He already had some plan to stop the Narks," Mishi said. "Perhaps several plans. One was the revolt of the little miners. When this failed, he had another plan which depended on the function of that button." She nodded toward the machine that the tall man had left

unhooded. "When this didn't work, he and his daughter had to go to the floor of the cavern to make it work!" Warm sympathy was suddenly in her voice. "I think they are risking their lives, perhaps willingly giving their lives, to undo the damage that was done when the Narks were given a foothold on this beachhead."

"Risking their lives they certainly are!" Valthor said.

"This is the stuff of heroes!" Mishi continued.

Looking at her, Valthor saw that she had unconsciously slipped into the pwylling condition and was seeing with an inward eye more than the outward eyes could ever reveal.

"They will succeed!" Her voice was a wan whisper rising above the clamor from below. "Ow!" Her voice became a surprised yelp as she came out of the pwylling condition to look down at Agatha. "You kicked me! You little rattlesnake!"

"You said they would win!" the child said, backing away. "This means I will lose."

"They have reached the far side of the cavern," Keth said.

Across a vast cavern where lightning still flashed occasionally from the space ship that seemed to be made of light and where battle still continued between ten-foot robots with two heads and mining robots barely three feet tall, the two humans could be glimpsed. What they were doing there could not be ascertained, but suddenly the whole wall of the cavern around and above them puffed outward as hidden explosives went off.

"He had mined the cavern wall!" Valthor gasped. "He had planned to set the mines off from here. When the circuit failed, he had to go to the bottom of the cavern to repair it! Look!" Horror was rising in his voice.

From the opening the explosives had blown in the wall was pouring a tidal wave of water.

"He turned an underground river into the cavern!" Keth Evan whispered.

"He was human," Mishi whispered. "Both of them were human at the end. They gave their lives to prove it!"

"I apologize," Valthor said. His voice was suddenly husky and full of gulping sounds. "I apologize for doubting a very brave man and an equally brave woman!" His voice caught and went into silence, then came on again. "As long as Earth breeds men and women like those two, we will hold this beachhead!"

Below, the flood was pouring into the cavern. It engulfed the little mining robots first, then reached watery fingers for the two-headed creatures. It piled up around the cells where the new brood of Narks was passing through a stage in their existence. It reached upward toward the ship.

The ship tried to rise. The flood reached higher. The ship flashed lightning at the flood. The rising waters absorbed the lightning. At the far end of the cavern was an opening where an ancient river had flowed out. The ship tried to reach this opening, but before it could get there, the waters had filled the exit.

The ship tried to rise higher. The waters reached for it, touched it. Like a great balloon from which the gas is being released, the ship sagged downward. Light creatures tried to escape from it, but the openings into and out of the cavern were down at floor level. The water was there.

From this nest that they had established on Planet Earth, from the toehold on this beachhead, there was no escape.

"How high will the water come?" Keth suddenly asked.

"Too high, maybe," Valthor answered. "I want to stay and make certain all those devils are dead, but I don't want to get drowned doing it. Come on." He turned toward the landing stage between the two levels.

A robot, stumbling and dripping oil, was lurching

upward toward them. The two heads were in violent argument.

"Can't see, can't see, can't see!" the bass voice was muttering.

"Crazy fool, crazy fool, crazy fool!" the bat voice of the back head answered. "Turn around and let me look!"

As the creature lurched forward, the two heads turned. The bat voice rose in a sudden scream. "There they are! Three of 'em! There they are! Get 'em, get 'em, get 'em!"

Suddenly able to see, the ten-foot robot moved toward Valthor.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Valthor struck savagely with the pipe. He hit the front head with a ringing blow. The bat voice screamed in terror, "He hit me, he hit me, he hit me!"

Valthor struck again. The arm that was too short caught the piece of pipe before it struck and jerked it out of his hands. At the same time, Keth struck from the other side. The other arm grabbed the pipe from Keth. The bat voice screamed again, in triumph this time, and waved aloft the two pieces of pipe. Valthor went in under the waving arms and caught the creature around the middle. He pulled mightily. The robot lost its footing. Valthor caught the creature on his back. Dropping the two pieces of pipe, it reached for him.

He had not realized how much these creatures weighed—nor that he could lift so much. He could not hold it aloft long. Running, he tossed the robot through the plastic window. The tough plastic shattered into fragments. As the robot fell, the bat voice, glimpsing what was below, began to scream, "Gonna drown, gonna drown, gonna drown! You stupid fool! Gonna—" The creature splashed into the rising waters and went out of sight there.

Valthor and Keth picked up their pieces of pipe. As Valthor bent over to do this, Agatha ran up to him and

kicked him in the shin. "Why did you do that?" he demanded.

"You hurt brother," she answered.

"And I'm going to hurt—" He lifted the pipe, then caught the blow.

"Go on!" Mishi urged him. "She's nothing but a baby rattlesnake!"

"I remember how strong the sheriff was," Keth said. "These human robots just aren't human any longer."

But Valthor refused to do anything to the child. "She's human. Maybe treatment can bring her back. Anyhow I'm caught in the web of values that comes from being human, which says you don't hurt a child if you can help it and that you give even an enemy a second chance. Come on." He moved again toward the elevator.

Behind him he heard Mishi speaking to Agatha. "You can come with us, you little witch, because Mr. Valthor says you can, but if you kick me again, kid or not, you're going to be missing a head."

"Mishi's utterly worn out," Keth said apologetically, "or she wouldn't talk like that."

"I don't blame her for it," Valthor answered. "It was all I could do to keep from separating that child from her head. To do that, however, would be to put ourselves on the same level with the Narks and their robots."

As the elevator door closed behind them, they saw the water steadily rising in the vast cavern. The light ship of the Narks was now halfway submerged. Of Erasmus Brocknor and his daughter there was no sign. Across the cavern, the mighty river was flowing inward, seeking again its ancient channels.

The door clanged shut and the elevator went upward to stop at the broad corridor where the little miners had marched company-strong when last they had seen it. The corridor was deserted now.

"If we can find the place where we were held pris-

oner, an elevator there will take us to the sheriff's office," Keth said. He gripped the iron pipe until his knuckles turned white.

"We go this way," Valthor said.

Another elevator lifted them to a different level. Mishi wrinkled her nose. "This is the right place," she said. "The stink tells me."

They passed the vat of greenish-tinted oil. One robot had almost succeeded in crawling from the pool. Half in and half out of the solution, it lay dead on the floor.

"There is brother," Agatha said, pointing to the robot. "What is wrong with brother?"

"He's dead, I hope!" Mishi answered.

"This way," Keth said, moving into a tunnel. Far-off the thud of a diesel engine could be heard. Water dripped from the roof overhead. The stink was everywhere, a foul horror clogging their noses. "There's a guard outside the prisoner pen," Mishi said.

When they reached the end of the tunnel and looked out into the cavern, there was no guard. The gate stood open. A bearded man was wandering in vague circles outside the enclosure.

"Prospector," Mishi said. "Another human robot!" She looked down at the child walking beside her.

"Don't you hit him either!" Agatha said. "If you hit him I'll report you to brother."

"The elevator is in that direction," Keth said, pointing to the right. "Maybe the old man won't even notice us."

But he did notice them. Coming running to them, his voice was a babble of questions.

"Where'd the guard go?" Keth asked him.

"I don't know. He was sent for." His eyes went to Agatha. "What are you doing with that kid? She belongs to us now, to the coming new day."

"I think the coming new day has been indefinitely postponed," Valthor said. He gestured with his length of pipe toward the elevator. "You come with us. We'll find some good doctors for you when we reach Denver."

"What do I want any sawbones for?" the old man demanded. "I'm in perfect health. I'm going prospecting again just as soon as I get the word!" Defiance of anything human was in his voice and eyes. "You gimme that kid and get on out of here!"

"We'll keep the child," Valthor said. "If you want to stay here, you may, but I would advise you to come with us. I think it is going to be a little damp down here fairly soon."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just what I said," Valthor answered. By the time they had reached the elevator shaft the old man was with them. The cage was up. Reaching inside, Keth found the button to lower it. Cables began to move when he pushed the button.

"What happened to the other prisoners in the pen?" Keth asked the old man.

"They scattered in every direction," Prospector said. "I guess most got lost. Some found this elevator and used it. They didn't come back, but I guess the sheriff got 'em up above."

"Do you think the sheriff will be waiting for us?" Keth asked.

"Certain to be. People like you deserve to be thrown into the jailhouse."

The elevator bumped to a halt at their landing, then bumped its way back up again as motors throbbed and cables rumbled, and finally came to a halt. Slowly Keth pushed aside the door. Inside his office, visible through the glass door, the sheriff could be seen seated at his desk.

"I want to talk to him!" Keth said.

"I'll go with you," Valthor said. Together they stepped out of the cage of the elevator and went through the door of the office.

The lawman looked up at them. Again it was as if he was listening to orders coming from some unseen master. His eyes were vague and far away. He saw the two

men, but the knowledge of their presence seemed not to reach his brain.

"Get 'em, sheriff!" Agatha screamed from inside the elevator.

The scream was followed by the sound of a blow, then by a startled yelp, then by sudden silence. For a moment, Prospector's voice came shouting in rage at Mishi for hitting a defenseless, weak little child.

"Weak little rattlesnake!" Mishi could be heard to answer.

They heard Prospector try to answer, but before he could utter the words his voice became a mutter of sound. Agatha did not call out again.

Staring at the two men who had entered his office, the sheriff continued to sit at his desk.

Lowering the length of pipe, Keth moved quickly behind the lawman and lifted the big pistol from its holster. The sheriff flinched as the gun was taken away, but he did not rise from the chair. He did not seem to realize he had intruders in his office.

Mishi came screaming through the door pointing back toward the elevator.

"I didn't kill her! I didn't! I swatted her but I didn't hit hard enough to kill her!" Mishi was at the edge of hysterics.

"You swatted Agatha?" Valthor asked.

"Yes! And she's dead! She's lying right there in the elevator!" Horror was on her face. "I admit I felt like killing the little rattlesnake, but I didn't do it. Honest, I didn't."

"You stay here and watch the sheriff," Valthor said. He went with Mishi back to the elevator. Agatha was lying sprawled on the floor of the elevator. Lying where she had dropped it, the little doll was struggling to get to its feet. As they watched, it managed to recover an erect position—and to begin its endless pacing. For the first time since it had been given to her, Agatha did not reach for it.

Valthor's eyes went beyond the child and the doll to Prospector. The old man was sitting with his back against the wall of the elevator. Greenish sweat was pouring from the skin of his face and was dripping downward. He was gasping for breath.

"I—feel a little winded," he whispered. "Thought maybe I ought to sit down and rest."

"I—I didn't kill her! I didn't—" Mishi's voice was becoming a babble.

"I know you didn't," Valthor said. "Something else is operating here—"

"The Marks?" she guessed.

"I don't think so. I remember something Brocknor said, how all the robots, human or metal, were hooked together on a high-frequency radiation which was generated down below. Like the electrical impulses that regulate the human heart and help keep it going, this impulse regulated the robots—" His voice slipped away into silence. "There, there, my dear! You are not responsible for the child's death." He put his arm around her shoulder and held her close.

"Little winded—" Prospector muttered. He seemed to gather strength from some hidden well within him. "But I'll be all right when the new day comes—new day comes—" His voice rattled into silence. A choking sound was in his throat. He stretched, sighed, then slumped down forever.

As he died, the little doll on the floor stopped its steady pacing. It stood with one head looking forward and one head looking back. The blind eyes in the head that looked back seemed to be seeing horrors coming from behind.

Valthor reached out and touched the doll. At his touch, it toppled over.

From the office, Keth was shouting.

"He's dead, sir. He just laid his head down on his desk, sighed, and died! Sir—!"

Valthor and Mishi went quickly back to the office. As

Keth had indicated, the sheriff lay with his head on his desk. From his bald head and from the skin of his face, a greenish color was oozing. With it was coming a stink.

"That stink is like it was down below," Mishi said. "I can't stand much of this." She moved to the window and began to gulp fresh air.

"I really didn't kill him!" Keth said.

"There's our mountain car!" Mishi called out from the window. "If it will still run, it will get us to Denver. I'm in favor of going there, fast!"

"We're right with you!" Valthor said.

They moved out of the sheriff's office and into the town, which under a midday sun was midnight quiet. The only sound there was the whisper of a lonely wind moving up the main street of the old ghost town of Golden Fleece. No figures moved on the main street. Above them, farther up the canyon, the big aluminum building was quiet. No clamor of machinery came from it. No little miners marched from it to a mine opening on the slope above. No file of miners marched down the same slope and into the same building.

Keth almost leaped behind the wheel of the vehicle. The key was in the lock. The starter ground and the motor sputtered its complaint about the altitude, then took hold and began to run. Keth eased the car into the street.

"Go slowly, please," Valthor told him. He obeyed.

No player piano clanged from a saloon, no pool balls rattled. Beside the grocery store, the boys playing marbles had grown tired of the game and had laid down for a little rest. No burros were tied at the hitching rails, no one sat on the porches in endless discussion. The porch-sitters were there all right, but all of them seemed to be sleeping.

"This is really a ghost town again," Keth said.

"Please try not to talk about it," Mishi begged him. "I'm so scared I'll feel a cold wind blowing down the back of my neck that I can hardly breathe."

"I have the same feeling," Keth said.

"So do I," Valthor added. "I don't know as yet whether this menace has been stopped or whether it's still alive somewhere, under some mossy rock, in some steaming swamp, in some hard-to-see light ship landing on the top of some mountain. I *think*, however, that this intruder has been washed off its beachhead. Stop here for a minute, please. I want to go into this saloon and look around."

Keth pulled the car to the curb. He and Mishi watched. Valthor went into the saloon. Emerging, he waved at them to show he was all right, then moved into the little restaurant. From there he went to the grocery store, and then quickly returned to the little car.

"They're all oozing green paint and they're all beginning to smell," he said. "However you got this car into this place, I suggest you use the same way to get it out."

"Yes, sir!" Keth said. "Glad to, sir!"

"The question in the back of my mind is whether all the tourists who came here, got the vat treatment, and went back home are oozing green paint right now and are beginning to smell. If they are, the doctors are going to go nuts trying to understand this new epidemic." He was silent for a moment, then he spoke again. "And if they aren't all oozing green paint and stinking smells, then I am going to go nuts trying to guess where the other nests are hidden!" He shook his head at the grimness of his own thoughts.

Keth wheeled the mountain car past the old locomotive rusting on its siding. He went around the barricade that said NO TRESPASSING.

As the car moved toward the tunnel and into it, the last sound was stillness in the town of Golden Fleece.

"As soon as we reach Denver and I can get on the phone, we'll have a whole division of the air force up here," Valthor said. "They'll make some noise. The tourist traffic into the town will be stopped. If the water has left anything—" Again he shook his head. "Judging

by the volume of water pouring into that cavern and by the way it was roaring, I doubt if very much will be left."

When the mountain car was out of the tunnel, Mishi felt relieved enough to begin to ask questions. "One thing I really want to know is why your presence turned Amelia Brocknor into a human being again! Was there anything beyond the fact that you are a man and she was a woman?"

"I think so," Valthor answered. "The fact is—" A sheepish look crossed his grim and grizzled face. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a small flat case.

"But that's one of our own tracing signal generators," Mishi said.

"Yes," Valthor admitted. "I had one with me to use just in case I got lost. Eventually somebody from the lab would remember to turn on a receiver which would give you a directional fix on me."

"I understand all that," Mishi interposed. "But what I want to know—"

"Is everything," Valthor interrupted, sighing. "The truth is, when that two-headed monster was chasing me in the old mine, I thought I was gone for sure. I turned this transmitter on so somebody from the lab could use it to find my body, at least. Then I got whopped by Two-Heads. When I woke up, I was with Amelia Brocknor and she was turning human. I think the signal from this little transmitter amplified my body field in such a way that it became strong enough to affect her. She, in turn, reached her father's emotions."

"I see," Mishi said. "But why didn't it affect Agatha and Prospector?"

"Because I had turned it off by the time they came into the picture," Valthor answered.

They came out of the tunnel into a world alive with sunshine and the smell of cedars and pines. In the far-off distance, snow sparkled on tall mountain peaks.

"It looks so beautiful and so peaceful," Mishi said.

"Beautiful it is, peaceful it ain't necessarily," Keth said. "Who knows that in the next tunnel a moose is not sleeping?"

"Where?" Mishi gasped. "Oh, darn you! I'm too tired to slug you."

"Keth has a point," Valthor said. "Who knows what creature may not follow the Narks—and us—in from the vastness of space to try to establish a beachhead here on our world—and eventually to nudge us off, if it can."

"Follow us here?" Mishi spoke. "Do you mean that the human race came here from some other world?"

"Who really knows?" Valthor answered. "Science finds bones and says we have been here half a million years. But what happened before then? Did we come in from that bright blue sky overhead?" He gestured upward, then shrugged. His mood was somber. "I remember seeing in a museum in London a golden bracelet that was found in an ancient tomb in Italy. The words on it went like this: *I am a child of Earth and of starry heaven—but my race is heaven's alone.* What do you suppose was in the mind of the man who carved those words on a golden ornament? Was he being poetic—or did he know something that he tried to hide behind the mask of poetry?"

His voice slipped away. For a time the only sound was the rattle of the big tires on the old railroad bed. "But one thing I know," he spoke again. "However they come against us and whatever form they use, they are not going to take this planet without a struggle. They can sneak in invisibly and take over a great man as they took over Erasmus Brocknor, and they can talk of a coming new day for man and for a great new helper for the human race, but lead one man astray and eventually that man will see what is happening and will go to his death to defend his human birthright!"

Brakes throbbed as Keth suddenly pulled the moun-

tain vehicle up short. Beside the road was the sign DRY CREEK.

The creek was dry no longer. Below, in the rocky river bed, a torrent flowed. Riding on the water were scraps of debris, cans, boards, fragments that could have been clothing torn from bodies. One board still had a smudged destination sign on it: THE BROCKNOR CORPORATION.

The water also had something else—a stink so foul it sent Mishi grabbing her nose again. “I know where that water comes from!” she gasped.

“It’s really washing out those old mine caverns,” Valthor said. “What a court of inquiry will eventually be convened in this region! What a lot of strange evidence it will have to consider! And how guarded will be its verdict!” Again his voice had a musing tone.

Suddenly he sat up straight on the seat. “I saw this scene back there in the cavern. I pwyllled how the situation would go, would we live or die, and the silence in the back of my mind showed me this future scene! But the picture was all I saw! I didn’t know I was dealing with precognition!”

Grinning, he relaxed. “It’s good to know that somewhere in the back of our minds we have a something that helps us see—and possibly shape—the things that are to come. Without it”—he scratched his head—“without it I guess we would never have succeeded in crawling out of the mud on this beachhead.”

He looked across at Keth. “Get the vehicle moving, please, young man. I have calls to make from Denver!”

Suddenly they were all talking at once and were grinning at each other, enormously happy—if for no other reason—just because they were still alive. Valthor again sat up very straight.

“What’s wrong with you?” Mishi asked.

“I just remembered the thousand-dollar-a-day fee I was to get as a consultant here! I won’t get paid!” Pain was showing on his rugged face.

"You can get along without it," Mishi told him.

He sighed, the pain left his face, and he was grinning again.

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the Enslavers

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