

HOME THERE'S NO RETURNING

by Henry Kuttner & C. L. Moore

If the last story was uncomfortably close to home, be warned that this is even closer. But don't quit now. It's the last one in the book, so you may be certain it will have a happy ending—of sorts. And, being the work of science-fantasy's foremost collaborators, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Kuttner, you may be equally certain that the background of the fable will be painted in clear glowing colors; that the action of the story will move at a pulse-beat pace; and that the moral, when it comes, will be stated with an appropriate question mark.

The General opened the door and came softly into the big, bright underground room. There by the wall under the winking control panels lay the insulated box, nine feet long, four feet wide, just as it always lay, just as he always saw it—day or night, waking or sleeping, eyes open or closed. The box shaped like a tomb. But out of it, if they were lucky, something would be born.

The General was tall and gaunt. He had stopped looking at himself in the mirror because his own face had begun to frighten him with its exhaustion, and he hated to meet the look of his own sunken eyes. He stood there feeling the beat of unseen machinery throb through the rock all around him. His nerves secretly changed each rhythmic pulse into some vast explosion, some new missile against which all defenses would be useless.

He called sharply in the empty laboratory, "Broome!" No answer. The General walked forward and stood above the box. Over it on the control panel lights winked softly on and off, and now and then a needle quivered. Suddenly the General folded up his fist and smashed the knuckles down hard on the reverberent metal of the box. A sound like hollow thunder boomed out of it.

"Easy, easy," somebody said. Abraham Broome was standing in the doorway, a very old man, small and wrinkled, with bright, doubtful eyes. He shuffled hastily to the box and laid a soothing hand on it, as if the box might be sentient for all he knew.

"Where the hell were you?" the General asked.

Broome said, "Resting. Letting some ideas incubate. Why?"

"You were resting?" The General sounded like a man who had never heard the word before. Even to himself he sounded strange. He pressed his eyelids with finger and thumb, because the room seemed to be dwindling all around him, and the face of Broome receded thinly into gray distances. But even with shut eyes he could still see the box and the sleeping steel giant inside, waiting patiently to be born. Without opening his eyes, he said, "Wake it up, Broome."

Broome's voice cracked a little. "But I haven't fin—"

"Wake it up."

"Something's gone wrong, General?"

General Conway pressed his eyelids until the darkness inside reddened—as all this darkness underground would redden when the last explosions came. Perhaps tomorrow. Not later than the day after. He was almost sure of that. He opened his eyes quickly. Broome was looking at him with a bright, dubious gaze, his lids sagging at the outer corners with the weight of unregarded years.

"I can't wait any longer," Conway said carefully. "None of us can wait. This war is too much for human beings to handle any more." He paused and let the rest of his breath go out in a sigh, not caring—perhaps not daring—to say the thing aloud that kept reverberating in his head like steadily approaching thunder. Tomorrow, or the day after—that was the deadline. The enemy was going to launch an all-out attack on the Pacific Front Sector within the next forty-eight hours.

The computers said so. The computers had ingested every available factor from the state of the weather to the conditions of the opposing general's childhood years, and this was what they said. They could be wrong. Now and then they were wrong, when the data they received was incomplete. But you couldn't go on the assumption that they would be. You had to assume an attack would come before day after tomorrow.

General Conway had not—he thought—slept since the last attack a week ago, and that was a minor thing -compared to what the computers predicted now. He was amazed in a remote, unwondering way, that the general who preceded him had lasted so long. He felt a sort of gray malice toward the man who would come after him. But there wasn't much satisfaction in that thought, either. His next in command was an incompetent fool. Conway had taken up responsibility a long time ago, and he could no more lay it down now than he would detach his painfully swimming head for a while and set it gently aside on some quiet shelf to rest. No, he would have to carry his head on his shoulders and his responsibilities on his back until—

"Either the robot can take over the job or it can't" he said. "But we can't wait any longer to find out."

He stooped suddenly and with a single powerful heave tore the box-lid open and sent it crashing back. Broome stepped up beside him and the two of them looked down on the thing that lay placidly inside, face up, passionless, its single eye unlit and as blank as Adam's before he tasted the fruit. The front panel of its chest was open upon a maze of transistors, infinitely miniature components, thin silver lines of printed circuits. A maze of fine wiring nested around the robot, but most of it was disconnected by now. The robot was almost ready to be born.

"What are we waiting for?" Conway demanded harshly. "I said wake it up!"

"Not yet, General. It isn't safe—yet. I can't predict what might happen—"

"Won't it work?"

Broome looked down at the steel mask winking with reflected lights from

the panel boards above it. His face wrinkled up with hesitation. He bent to touch one finger to a wire that led into the massive opened chest at a circuit labeled "In-Put."

"It's programed," he said very doubtfully. "And yet—"

"Then it's ready," Conway's voice was flat. "You heard me, Broome. I can't wait any longer. Wake it up."

"I'm afraid to wake it up," Broome said...

The General's ears played a familiar trick on him. I'm afraid—I'm afraid . . . He couldn't make the voice stop echoing. But fear is what all flesh is heir to, he thought. Flesh knows its limitations. It was time for steel to take over.

Pushbutton warfare used to look like the easy way to fight. Now man knows better. Man knows what the weakest link is—himself. Flesh and blood. Man has the hardest job of all, the job of making decisions on incomplete data. Until now, no machine could do that. The computers were the very heartbeat and brain-pulse of pushbutton war, but they were limited thinkers. And they could shrug off responsibility with an easy, "No answer—insufficient data." After which it was up to man to give them what more they needed. The right information, the right questions, the right commands. No wonder the turnover in generals was so high.

So the Electronic Guidance Operator was conceived. The General looked down at it, lying quietly waiting for birth. Ego was its name. And it would have free will, after a fashion. The real complexity of the fabulous computers lies not in the machines themselves, but in the programing fed into them. The memory banks are no good at all without instructions about how to use the data. And instructions are extremely complex to work out.

That was going to be Ego's job from now on. Ego had been designed to act like the human brain, on only partial knowledge, as no machine before had ever done. Flesh and blood had reached their limits, Conway thought. Now was the hour for steel to take over. So Ego lay ready to taste the first bite of the apple Adam bit. Tireless like steel, resourceful like flesh, munching the apple mankind was so tired of munching...

"What do you mean, afraid?" Conway asked.

"It's got free will," Broome said. "Don't you see? I can't set up free will and controls. I can only give it one basic order—win the war. But I can't tell it how. I don't know how? I can't even tell it what not to do. Ego will simply wake like—well, like a man educated and matured in his sleep, waking for the first time. It will feel needs, and act on its wants. I can't control it. And that scares me, General."

Conway stood still, blinking, feeling exhaustion vibrate shrilly in his nerve ends. He sighed and touched the switch on his lapel microphone. "Conway here. Send Colonel Garden to Operation Christmas. And a couple of MPs."

Broome burst into very rapid speech. "No, General! Give me another week. Give me just a few days—"

"You've got about two minutes," Conway said. He thought, See how you like quick decisions. And this is only one. I've had five years of it. How long since I slept last? Well, never mind, never mind that. Make Broome decide. Push him. Resting!

Broome said, "I won't do it. No. I can't take the responsibility. I need more time to test—"

"You'll go on testing till doomsday. You'll never activate it," Conway said.

The door opened. The two MPs followed Colonel Garden into the room. Garden's uniform looked sloppy, as usual. The man wasn't built for a uniform. But the dark pouches under his eyes tempered Conway's contempt. Garden hadn't slept much lately, either. It was past time for all of them now—Ego must pick up the burden and justify its name.

"Arrest Broome," Conway said. He ignored their startled looks. "Colonel, can you wake up this robot?"

"Wake it up, sir?"

Conway gestured impatiently. "Activate it, start it going."

"Well, yes, sir, I do know how, but—"

Conway didn't bother to listen. He pointed to the robot, and whatever else Garden was saying became a meaningless yammer in his ears. Forty-eight hours, he thought—time enough to test it before the attack comes, if we're lucky. And it had better work. He pressed thumb and finger to his eyes again to keep the room from swinging in slow, balancing circles around him.

Broome from the far end of nowhere said, "Wait, General! Give me just one day more! It isn't—"

Conway waved his hand, not opening his eyes. He heard one of the MPs say something, and there was a brief scuffle. Then the door closed. The General sighed and opened his eyes.

Garden was looking at him with the same doubt Broome had shown. Conway scowled and the other man turned quickly to the box where the robot lay. He stooped as Broome had done and touched with one finger the wire cord still leading into the spot marked "In-Put."

"Once this is detached, sir, he's on his own," he said.

"The thing has its orders," the General said briefly. "Go on, do something."

There was a little pinging noise as Garden neatly detached the cord. He closed the steel plate that sealed Ego's inwards. He ran his hands around the steel limbs to make sure all the nest of wires was clear. Then he got up and crossed to the instrument panel.

"Sir," he said.

Conway didn't answer for a moment. He was rocking just perceptibly to and fro, heel and toe, like a tower beginning to totter. He said, "Don't tell me

anything I don't want to hear."

Garden said composedly, "I don't know just what to expect, sir. Will you tell me as soon as the robot starts to respond? Even the slightest—"

"I'll tell you." Conway looked down at the placid blind face. Wake up, he thought. Or else don't. It doesn't really matter. Because we can't go on like this. Wake up. Then I can sleep. Or don't wake up. Then I can die.

The round, flat cyclopean lens of the robot's eye began to glow softly. In the same moment a rising hum of power from the instrument panel made the lights dim, and all the reflections shimmering from Ego's steel surfaces paled and then burned strong again as auxiliary switches kicked in. One by one the lights on the panel went out. The quivering needles rocked to and fro at zero and quieted.

The robot stared blankly up at the ceiling, not moving.

Conway, looking down, thought, Now it's your turn. I've gone as far as a man can go. Take over, robot. Move!

The robot's whole body shivered very, very slightly. The eye brightened until it sent a cone of light straight up at the ceiling. Without the slightest warning it lifted both arms at once out of the box and smashed its metal hands together with a clang that made both men jump. Conway gasped with surprise and released tension. Uselessly he said, "Garden!"

Garden opened a switch and the singing whine of power died. The robot was motionless again, but this time, like an effigy on a tomb, it lay with palms pressed together hard. The shivering began again and rhythmic clicking sounds like many clocks ticking out of phase could be heard faintly from deep inside the big steel cylinder of the body.

"What's happening?" Conway asked, whispering without knowing why. "What made it do that?"

"Activation," Garden said, also whispering. "It—" He paused, cleared his throat self-consciously, and spoke aloud. "I'm not too familiar with this, Sir. I suppose the basic tensions are setting up. They'll be relieved through energy transformation of some kind or other, depending on the homeostatic principle that Broome—"

From the box and the supine robot a strange, hollow voice spoke in a kind of howl. "Want. . . ." it said painfully, and then seemed to stop itself short. "Want..." it said again, and ceased abruptly.

"What is it?" Conway wasn't sure whether he was addressing Ego or Garden. The sound of the voice frightened him. It was so mindless, like a ghost's, flat and hollow.

"There's a speaker in its chest," Garden said, his own voice a little shaken. "I'd forgotten. But it ought to communicate better than this. It—he—Ego—" Garden gestured helplessly. "Some kind of block, I should think." He stepped forward and bent over the box, looking down. "You—want something?" he asked awkwardly, sounding foolish. Conway thought what

an ineffectual man he was. But at least the robot was awake now. Surely in a little while it would be adjusted, ready to take over...

Well, maybe they could all relax a little, after that. Maybe Conway could even sleep. A sudden panic shook him briefly as he thought, What if I've forgotten how to sleep? And exhaustion rolled up over him like water washing over a man of sand, relaxing and crumbling away the very components of his limbs. In just a moment I'll be free, Conway thought. When Ego takes over. I've made it. I haven't gone mad or killed myself. And now I won't have to think any more. I'll just stand here, without moving. I won't even lie down. If gravity wants to pull me down, that's up to gravity...

Garden, bending over the box, said again, "What is it you want?"

"Want..." Ego said. And suddenly the prayerful hands flashed apart, the four-foot arms flung wide like shining flails. Then it lay motionless again, but Colonel Garden was no longer leaning over the box. Conway saw, with hazy detachment, that Garden was crumpling down against the wall. The flail had caught him across the side of the neck, and he lay with his head at an angle like a jointed doll, more motionless now than the robot.

Moving slowly, Conway touched the switch of his lapel microphone. The silence hummed receptively. There was a long interval while he couldn't quite remember his name. But presently he spoke.

"General Conway here. Bring Broome back to Operation Christmas."

He looked down at the robot. "Wait a while," he said. "Broome will know."

The robot's arms bent. The steel hands closed upon the sides of the box, and with a shriek of metal parting from metal it ripped the box apart.

Now it was born. Born? Untimely ripped, Conway thought. Untimely ripped... I suppose I was wrong. What next?

Ego rose upright, eight feet tall, solid as a tower, and like a walking tower it moved. It moved straight forward until the wall stopped it. Slowly it turned, its cone of vision sweeping the room, its motions at first jerky and uneven, but becoming smoother and surer with the warming-up process of the newly activated machine. It was still trembling just perceptibly, and the ticking rose and fell inside it, drew out in slow series, quickened, burst into rapid chatter, slowed again. Sorting, accepting, rejecting, evaluating the new-found world which was now the robot's burden...

It saw the wall of control panels which had activated it. The beam of its sight swept the panels briefly, and then with a burst of surprising speed it rushed across the room toward the panels. Its hands danced over the plugboard, the switches, the dials.

Nothing happened. The panels were dead.

"Want..." said the hollow, inhuman cry from Ego's reverberating chest. And with two sweeps of the steel hands it sheared cleanly off the board all the projecting globes and dials and switches. It sank steel fingers into the

sockets and ripped the plating off. It wound both hands deep into the colored wiring inside and ripped great handfuls out in a sort of measured frenzy.

"Ego!" Conway said.

It heard him. It turned, very fast. The bright gaze bathed him for a moment. He felt cold as it held him in its focus, as if a mind the temperature of steel were locked with his. He could almost feel the touch of the newfledged, infinitely resourceful brain.

The light of its gaze passed him and saw the door. It dismissed Conway. It surged forward like a tank and hit the door flatly with its chest, cracking the panels in two. With a single motion it swept the wreckage away on both sides and rolled forward through the splintered frame.

By the time Conway reached the door the robot was a long way off down the underground corridor, moving faster and faster, dwindling toward the vanishing point like a shrinking drop of quicksilver. Going—somewhere.

"General Conway, sir," somebody said.

He turned. The two MPs flanked Abraham Broome who was craning forward trying to see the wrecked instrument panel from between them.

"Dismissed," Conway said. "Come in, Broome."

The old man went past him obliviously, stooped over Garden's body, shook his head.

"I was afraid of something like this," he said.

Conway felt a moment of intense envy for the motionless Garden. He said, "Yes. I'm sorry. One casualty. We'll all be casualties if Ego doesn't work. How do we know what the other side's doing now? Maybe they've got an Ego too. I made a mistake, Broome. I should have looked ahead a little further. What do we do now?"

"What happened?" Broome was looking incredulously at the shattered wall where the instrument panels had been. "Where's the robot now? I've got to know the details."

A communicator high on the wall coughed and then called Conway's name. Slowly and heavily Conway's mind tried to accept the new demands. But what the communicator said was a jumble of meaningless sounds until one word sprang out at him. Emergency.

Attack? An alarm rang shrilly deep in his head. "Repeat," he said wearily.

"General Conway? A robot is destroying equipment in Sector Sub-Five. Attempts to immobilize it are failing. General Conway? A robot is destroying—"

"All right," Conway said. At least, this wasn't an attack, then. Or anyway, not an attack from the enemy. "Conway here. Orders. Don't harm the robot. Instructions follow. Stand by."

He looked at Broome inquiringly, realizing that the old man had been buzzing at him anxiously in meaningless words. "General, General, I've got to know exactly what happened—"

"Shut up and I'll tell you," Conway said. "Wait."

He walked over to a hand basin at the wall, drew a glass of chemical-tasting water and found the tube of benzedrine pills in his pocket. It wouldn't help much. He had been living on the stuff too long. But this ought to be the last push—had to be the last—and every extra ounce of stimulus helped. He could let go soon, but not yet.

He gave Broome a concise, thirty-second summary in a falsely brisk voice. The old man stood silent, pinching his lip and gazing at Conway with a blank face, his mind obviously ranging around the abstract regions inside his head.

"Well?" Conway asked. "What do you think? Is it running wild or isn't it?" He wanted to reach out and shake Broome awake, but he pushed the impulse down. Once already he had forced the issue over Broome's protest, and he had been wrong. Perhaps fatally wrong. Now he must let the old man think.

"I believe it's on the job," Broome said with maddening deliberation. "I was afraid of something like this—uncontrolled reaction. But the program's built into it and I think it's operating toward the goal we set it. One thing's wrong, of course. It ought to communicate better. There shouldn't be that speech block. We'll have to find out what it wants and why it can't tell us." He paused and blinked up at the corn-box on the wall. "Sub-Five, didn't they say? What's in Sub-Five?"

"The library," Conway said, and they looked at each other in silence for a second. Then Conway sighed another of his deep, collapsing sighs and said, "Well, we've got to stop it, somehow, and fast. Ego's the most important thing we've got, but if it tears the whole base up—"

"Not quite the most important," Broome said. "Have you thought what it may do next? Since the library was its first goal?"

"What? Don't make me guess."

"It seems to be hunting information. The next stop after the library might be the computers, don't you think?"

Conway said, "Good God," in a flat, exhausted tone. Then he laughed a little without making a sound. He would have to jump into action in the next few moments, and he wasn't sure he could do it. He'd been a fool, of course, pushing action on the robot too soon. Without precautions. He'd gambled, and maybe he had lost. But he knew he'd still do the same if he had it to do over. The gamble wasn't lost yet. And what alternative had he?

"Yes," he said. "The computers. You're right. If it goes after them we'll have to smash it."

"If we can," Broome said soberly. "It thinks fast."

Wearily Conway straightened his shoulders, wondering whether the benzedrine was going to take hold this time. He didn't feel it yet, but he couldn't wait.

"All right," he said. "Let's get going. We know our jobs. Mine's to immobilize Ego, unless he goes for the computers. Yours—find out what he wants. Get it from him before he smashes himself and us. Come on. We've wasted enough time." He gripped Broome's thin arm and hurried him toward the door. On the way he touched his lapel switch and said into the receptive hum at his shoulder, "Conway here. I'm on my way in. Where's the robot?"

The thin little voice of the mike started to say, "Just leaving Sub-Five, sir—through the wall. We—" But then the com-box in the laboratory behind them coughed loudly and shouted out in a metallic bellow, "Robot broke through the wall into Sub-Seventeen!" There was a tinny astonishment in its voice. "Destroying equipment in storage files—" All of this was funneled through the Communications Room, and the echoes of the complaint from Sub-Seventeen could be heard mingling confusedly through the lapel mike. Conway clicked it on and off several times.

"Com Room!" he said into the noisy turmoil. "Find out which way the robot's heading."

There was a brief pause, during which the com box behind them roared out its diminishing report of damage. Then, "It's heading inward, sir," the mike said thinly. "Toward Sub-Thirty."

Conway glanced down at Broome, who nodded and shaped a silent word with his lips. "Computers." Conway set his jaw.

"Start sending up heavy-duty robots to head it off." he told the mike crisply. "Immobilize the robot if you can but don't damage him without my orders." He laid his hand over the lapel mike to deafen it, hearing a small, distant uproar filtering out from under his palm as he urged Broome to a trot down the long corridor where the robot had dwindled to a shining dot such a short time ago. But he was hearing his own last words repeating over and over in undiminishing echoes inside his head, "My orders—my orders—my orders—"

He thought he could go on giving orders—up to a point. Just long enough to get Ego under control. No longer.

"Broome," he said abruptly, "can the robot take over?" And he held his breath waiting for the answer, wondering what he would do if it was no.

"I never doubted it," Broome said. Conway let his breath out with a feeling of luxury in the sigh. But Broome went on, "If we can find out why he went wrong, of course. I have an idea, but I don't see how I can test it—"

"What?"

"Maybe an iteration loop. A closed series of steps that repeat themselves over and over. But I don't know what's involved. He says 'want' and then blocks completely. I don't know why. Some compulsion is driving him so

powerfully he doesn't even bother to open doors to get at what it is he wants. I don't know what. My job's to find out."

Conway thought to himself, "Maybe I know what." But he didn't explore the thought. It was too chilly in the mind, and yet so simple he wondered why Broome hadn't thought of it. Or maybe he had...

Ego's goal was winning the war. But suppose it was not possible to win the war?...

Conway shook his head sharply and put that idea firmly away.

"Okay, you know your job," he said. "Now about mine —how can we stop him without harming him?" With a small fraction of his mind he noticed that he was personalizing the robot now. Ego had begun to assume an identity.

Broome shook his head unhappily as he trotted beside Conway. "That's one reason I was afraid to activate him." Broome was doing it too. "He's complex, General. I've got him pretty well cushioned against normal jolts, but an artificial brain isn't like a human brain. One little injury means malfunction. And besides, he's so fast I'm not sure what would stop him even if we didn't have to worry about damage."

"There's a limit to what I can bring up in time, anyhow," Conway said. "What about ultrasonics? We could cripple him, maybe—"

"Let me think about it. Ultrasonics that close might scramble something." Broome was panting heavily from their rapid pace.

Conway uncovered the mike. "Com Room? Get a supersonic squad in the computer room corridor fast. But wait orders. If the robot shows up don't open fire until—"

He broke off abruptly, having overshot the usefulness of the mike without realizing it. He was at the Com Room door and his own voice was crackling at him out of a box hanging low in the greenish gloom over the communications officer's chair about ten feet away.

He let the door swing shut behind him and was engulfed in noise and darkness. The big glass information panels and the colored circles of the com screens glowed bright and the faces of the men swam dimly in the gloom, high-lights picked out on their cheekbones and foreheads in gold and red, green and faint blue reflected from the instruments they tended. General Conway automatically flashed a tired glance around the boards and screens that told him what was happening on the entire Pacific Front. He saw the radar shadows of the fleet, checked the code board for wind and weather, the status panel for plane assignments. But the information meant nothing. His brain refused to accept the burden. He had only one problem now.

"Where's the robot?" he asked. He had to shout to make himself heard, because to the normal noise of the room with its complex of relayed voices was now added a crashing uproar Conway failed to identify for a moment.

The communications officer nodded toward a bluish television screen at his

left, part of a long row. Small and bright upon it a doll-sized robot could be seen, raging through a doll-sized storeroom. But the noise it made was life-size. It seemed to be hunting for something, and its method was frantic. It didn't open drawers—it ripped the whole side off cabinets and swept the contents out with great, rhythmic, scything motions, sending them spinning through the air. Now and then the bright cone of its glance would swerve to follow the fall of some object briefly, and twice the robot paused to snatch up items and turn them tentatively over. But clearly, whatever it wanted was not here. And as clearly, it operated on true egoism—whatever it found useless it destroyed furiously. It had no referent but its own immediate need.

"And maybe he's right," Conway thought. "Maybe if we can't get him whatever he needs nothing down here is worth keeping."

Behind him he heard Broome and the communications officer conferring in strained voices above the tumult.

"I don't know," the officer was shouting. "It tore up the library so fast we couldn't tell what it had read and what it hadn't. You see how it's going now. It moves so fast—"

Broome leaned over the communications officer's shoulder and punched the two-way button on the intercom for Sub-Seventeen where the robot was raging.

"Ego," he said into the mike. "Do you hear me?"

The robot ripped down the side of the last cabinet, swept its contents out in a rhythmic shower. Amplified over the screen they heard Broome's voice echo back to them from the tiny greenish storeroom on the wall. The robot paused very briefly. Then it stood up straight, turned around once in a very rapid circuit that swept its cone of light across the walls.

"Want—" its hollow voice howled, and instantly shut itself off into silence again. It crashed its hands together like something in the last extremity of desperation, and then walked straight for the wall at the corner of the room.

The wall bent, cracked and opened. The robot stalked through and out of sight.

It seemed to Conway that every face in the room swung around toward his, pale ovals glistening with drops of gold and red and greenish sweat in the darkness. It was up to him now. They waited for instructions.

He wanted to lash out as the robot had lashed, tear these floating luminous screens down and smash the glowing panels with them, silence the yammering voices from the walls. Responsibilities he could not handle buzzed like hot bees around his head. It was too much, too much. A deep wave of exhaustion washed over him, followed by a wave of hysteric exhilaration, both so ghostly and so far away they hardly seemed to touch Conway at all. He was somebody else entirely, infinite distances off, with ghostly problems that had no relation to the vacuum of the here and now...

"General?" Broome's voice said. "General?"

Conway coughed. "The robot," he said briskly. "We've got to stop him. You plotting his course so far, Sergeant?"

"Yes, sir. Screen Twelve."

Twelve was one of the hanging panels, transparent in the dark, a net of luminous gold lines on it marking the corridors, with the sectors showing in dim blue numerals. "The red dots are the robot, sir," the sergeant told him.

They watched a disembodied hand float forward from behind the screen and add fluorescent grease-dots to the lengthening red line which had started in Broome's lab, crossed the library and storeroom and gone out by the solid wall. They stalked now across the next three sectors, wading through the walls, as they went in an elongating luminous chain of red.

Their goal was obvious to everyone. About seven inches ahead in the heart of the map lay a round room with bright green squares glowing around its walls. They all knew what the green squares were. They all knew how intimately their own survival hinged upon the blizzard of electronic impulses storming through those incredibly complex calculations in the computers. Every mind in the room clicked over like the computers themselves, considering what would happen when the robot reached that room.

"The supersonic team," Conway said crisply. "The heavy-duty robots. Where are they?"

"The supersonics are coming up from level six, sir. About five minutes for them. The HD robots should intersect in about three minutes. You can see them in—what is it? purple?—on the plot panel."

A slow line of purple dots was moving inward down a gold-lined corridor from the periphery of the chart.

"Too slow," Conway said, watching the red dots which marked the footsteps of the thinking robot. Or was it thinking, now? "Anybody know if those walls between are plaster or stone?" There was a silence. Nobody did. But as they watched, the red dots paused at a gold line, rebounded twice, reversed themselves and made for a break in the line that indicated a door.

"Stone," Conway said. "That one, anyhow. I hope he didn't jar anything loose trying."

"Maybe we'd better hope he did," Broome said.

Conway looked at the old man. "I'm going to stop him," he said.

"Understand? We're not going to junk Ego. We need him too badly. I'm sorry we weren't better prepared to handle him, but I'd do it again if I had to. We can't wait."

"He's moving fast, sir," the communications officer said.

Conway looked at the screen. He bit his lip painfully and then said, "Volunteers. I want somebody to jump in there and delay him. I don't care how. Trip him. Wave a red rag in his face. Anything to gain time. Every

second counts. All right, Corporal. Lieutenant, that's two."

"We can't spare any more from here," the communications officer said.

"All right, on your way," Conway snapped. "Get him on the screens, sergeant."

Three round television screens clicked into bluish life, showing a trail of wrecked desks and smashed equipment. In the third screen Ego, looking very small and remote and innocent, was smashing himself head-on against a too-narrow door. On the last smash the door-frame gave way and Ego surged through and stalked off down the tiny, diminishing corridor beyond. On the plot board the red dots showed him only about five inches away from the calculator room.

"But what do you want with the calculators?" Broome was murmuring as he stared after the vanishing figure on the screen. He tapped irritatingly with his nails on the metal table. "Maybe," he said, and paused. He looked up at Conway. "I'm no good here, General. I'm going to the calculator room. I have some ideas, but the analogue computer thinks a lot faster than I do. Ego moves too fast. It may take machines to figure out machines. Anyhow, I'll try."

"Go on, go on then," Conway said. "You've got between five and ten minutes. After that—" He didn't finish, but in his mind he said, "—I can rest. One way or the other, I can rest."

The communications officer had been clicking television screens on and off, hunting. Now he said, "Look, sir! The volunteer team—God, he's tall!" The observation was spontaneous; until now the communications room hadn't seen Ego alongside human figures.

Ego was a stalking giant in a dimly lit corridor on the screen. The volunteers had just burst out of a corridor door ten paces ahead of him, and he towered mightily over them. You could see their tiny, scared faces no bigger than peas turned up toward the oblivious, striding giant as he followed the searchlight splash of his single eye down the hall.

The two men must have moved at a dead run from here to there. They hadn't had time to pick and choose, and their instructions had been ambiguous, but somewhere on the way they had snatched up a stout steel beam which now showed like a bright thread across the corridor. One man darted across the hall just ahead of the robot, and the two of them braced the beam shoulder high from opposite doorways, making a barrier across the path.

The robot didn't even glance at the obstacle. He struck the beam squarely, the clang echoing through the corridor and reverberating from the screen into the communications room. Ego bounced a little, recovered his balance, measured the situation and then stooped to pass under the bar. Hastily the two men lowered their burden. Again a clang and a recoil, and this time the bar bent into a deep V at the point of impact. Over the screen they heard one of the men yell as the end of the bar caught him. Ego heaved upward with both hands, stepped under the bar and stalked off down the hall.

"Thirty seconds saved," Conway said bitterly. "And one man down. Where are the HDs now?"

"About a minute and a half away, sir. Coming along corridor eight. They ought to intersect just outside the calculator room door. See, on the board?"

Slowly and heavily, it seemed to Conway, the purple dots moved against the darkness, ploddingly. A floating hand materialized and added two more red dots to the chain of Ego's footsteps moving toward the heart of the citadel. The red dots were ahead. They were going to outstrip the purple.

"I'm going to fail," Conway said to himself. He thought of all the human lives here underground, wholly dependent upon him, and all the lives outside, confident that the Pacific Front was in good hands. He wondered what the commanding general on the other side was doing now, and what he would do if he knew...

"Look, sir," the communications officer said.

There was still one man of the volunteer team left on his feet. He hadn't given up yet. Ego's last heave had apparently snapped the steel bar off short at the V, leaving one end like a bent club. It must have been very heavy, but the man in the corridor was operating on a drive too intense to notice the weight. Club on shoulder, he was sprinting after Ego down the hall.

They saw him lessen the distance between them. They saw him at the robot's heels. Distantly they heard him shout.

"Ego!" he called, as he had heard Broome call the name. And in answer, as the robot had answered before, Ego paused, turned, bathed the man in the cold one-eyed beam of its searchlight.

"Want—" the strangled; metallic voice said hollowly, and stopped.

The man with the club jumped high and smashed for the single bright eye in the robot's forehead.

"Is it safe?" Conway asked. "Will he hurt him, Broome?" But he got no answer. Broome had disappeared.

On the screen the robot struck upward furiously with both hands, parrying the club just in time. The crash of impact made the screen shiver. The man had time and strength for one more swing, and this time at the height of its arc Ego seized the club and plucked it almost casually out of the man's hands. Over his enormous steel shoulder he sent it clanging down the corridor behind him.

Conway glanced quickly at the chart. The purple dots were gaining. The red dot at the end of Ego's chain wavered left and right as Ego dodged the two blows of the club. Conway looked back at the screen.

The disarmed man hesitated only briefly. Then he gathered himself and sprang straight up toward the blank steel face with its single eye. By some miracle he passed between the closing arms and locked his own arms

around the steel neck. His body blinded the torch-lens of the robot's eye, and he clung desperately, legs and arms clenched around the lurching steel tower of Ego's body.

From the darkness beyond their struggling figures a heavy, rhythmic thudding began to be heard, making the television screen vibrate a little.

"The heavy-duties," Conway breathed. He glanced again at the chart, not needing it to see the line of purple dots almost at the corridor intersection now, and the red dot of Ego wavering erratically.

The robot didn't depend on vision alone. You could tell that by his motion. But the clinging man disturbed him. The heaving weight pulled him off balance. Ego plucked futilely at the man for an instant, staggering thirty degrees off course toward the left-hand wall. Then the steel hands got a grip on the clinging man, and the robot ripped him away easily and smoothly, with a gesture like tearing a shirt off his chest, and flung him with casual force against the wall.

Beyond Ego, at the far end of the corridor, you could see the tall double doors of the calculator room. Ego stood for a moment as if he were collecting himself. The screen seemed to be wavering, and Conway made a futile, steadying motion toward it. The vibration was so strong now that vision blurred upon it.

"What's the matter?" Conway asked irritably. "Is it out of focus, or—"

"Look, sir," the communications officer said. "Here they come."

Like a walking wall the heavy robots wheeled out of the darkness at the edge of the screen, their ponderous tread making the whole scene shudder. Heavily they ground to a halt facing Ego, and stood there shoulder to shoulder across the corridor, their backs to the calculator doors.

Ego stood for a moment quite still, but shivering all over, his single eye sweeping from left to right and back again over them, infinitely fast. Something about these units of his own kind seemed to kindle a new and compelling drive, and Ego gathered himself together and lowered his shoulders and head a little, and surged forward as if eager for battle. The HDs, locked together in an unswerving row, braced themselves and stood firm.

The crash made every screen in the communications room flicker in distant sympathy. Sparks sprang out and steel plates groaned. Ego hung for an instant motionless upon the steel wall that opposed him, then fell back, staggered, braced himself to crash again.

But he did not charge. He stood there sweeping his bright scanner over the line, and the clicking in his chest rose and fell so loudly the listeners in the communications room could hear it plainly. A storm of alternate choices seemed to be pouring through the electronic mind of the thinker.

While Ego hesitated, the steel wall he confronted moved, curving outward at both ends toward the solitary figure. It was clear what the intention of the operators was. If these ponderous shapes could be made to close Ego

in they could immobilize him by sheer massiveness, like tame elephants immobilizing a wild one.

But Ego saw the trap in the instant before the line began to move. His backward step and quick spin showed it. Conway thought his eye flashed brighter, and his whirl was incongruously light-footed. In contrast to the heavy-duty machines he looked like a steel dancer in his light, keen balance. He made a quick feint toward one end of the line, and the robots massed sluggishly together to receive him. They opened a gap in their line when they moved, and Ego darted for the gap. But instead of passing through it he put out both arms and pushed delicately and fiercely at the two sides of the opening, in exactly the right spots. The two robots leaned ponderously outward, tipped just barely off their balance. They leaned, leaned, inexorably leaned and fell. Each carried its next companion down with it. The corridor thundered with the crash.

Trampling on the fallen machines, the line closed up and moved ponderously forward. Ego ran at it with a clear illusion of joyous motion, stooped, struck two robots at once with the same delicate, exact precision, knowing before he struck at just what hidden fulcrum point their balance rested. The corridor thundered again with the tumult of their collapse. As the line tried to close once more over the fallen warriors Ego's hands shot out and helped them heavily together, smashing two more into-one another with unexpected momentum. This time as he touched them his touches were sharp blows, and the steel plating buckled in like tin.

In less than two minutes the walking wall was a mass of staggering leviathans, half of them out of commission, the rest stumbling ponderously over their fallen comrades trying to reform a line already too short to work.

So much for that try, Conway thought. Then the super-sonics were their last hope. There wouldn't be time for more. Maybe there wasn't even time for that.

"Where's the supersonic squad?" he asked, impressed at the false briskness of his own voice. The communications officer looked up at the luminous chart.

"Almost there, General. Half a minute away."

Conway glanced once at the television screen, which now showed Ego standing over the prostrate metal giants and swaying rather oddly as he looked down. It wasn't like his behavior pattern to hesitate like this. There seemed to be something on his mind. Whatever it was, it might mean a few moments' leeway.

"I'm going out there myself, sergeant," Conway said. "I—I want to be on the spot when—" He paused, realizing that he was saying aloud what was really a private soliloquy, Conway to Conway, with no eavesdroppers. What he meant was that he wanted to be there when the end came— one way or the other. He had envied the robot, he had hoped infinite things for it. He had begun to identify with the powerful and tireless steel. Win or lose, he wanted to be on the spot at the payoff.

Running down the corridor was like running in a dream, floating, almost, his

legs numb and the sound of his footfalls echoing from feathery distances. Each time his weight jolted down he wondered if that knee could take it, whether it wouldn't fold and let him fall, let him lie there and rest... But no, he wanted to stand beside Ego and see the steel face and hear the mindless voice when they destroyed the robot, or the robot destroyed them all. The third chance—success—seemed too remote to consider.

When he got there he hardly knew it. He was dimly aware that he had stopped running, so there must be a reason. He was standing with his hand on a doorknob, his back leaning against the panels, gasping for breath. To the left stretched the narrow corridor down which he had run. Before him the broad hall loomed where men had fought Ego and failed, and machines had fought him and now lay almost still, or staggered futilely, out of control.

No matter how clearly you see a scene on television screens, you never really experience it until you get there. Conway had forgotten, in this brief while, how tall Ego really was. There was a smell of machine oil and hot metal in the air, and dust motes danced in the cone of Ego's searchlight as he stooped over the fallen robots. He was about to do something. Conway couldn't guess what.

Running footsteps and the clank of equipment sounded down the corridor to the left. Conway turned his head a little and saw the supersonic squad pounding toward him. He thought, maybe there's still a chance. If Ego delays another two minutes...

On the floor the fallen robots still twitched and stirred in response to the distant commands of their operators. But a heavy-duty robot, fallen, isn't easy to set upright again. Ego stooped over the nearest, seeming almost puzzled.

Then with sudden, rather horrifying violence, he reached out and ripped the front plate off his victim with one rending motion. His gaze plunged shining into the entrails of the thing, glancing in bright reflections off the tubes and the wiring so coarse in comparison with his own transistors and printed circuits. He put out one steel hand, sank his fingers deep and ripped again, gazing, engrossed, at the havoc he made. There was something frightful about this act of murder, one robot deliberately disemboweling another on his own initiative, with what seemed the coolest scientific interest.

But whatever Ego sought wasn't there. He straightened and went on to the next, ripped, stooped, studied the ticking and flashing entrails intently, his own inward ticking quite loud as if he were muttering to himself.

Conway, beckoning the supersonic squad on, thought to himself, "In the old days they used to tell fortunes that way. Maybe he's doing it now..." And once more the chilly thought swam up to the surface of his consciousness that perhaps he knew what drove the robot to desperation. Perhaps he too knew the future, and the knowledge and the pressure made the two of them kin. Win the war was what Ego's ticking entrails commanded, just as the more complex neurons of Conway's brain commanded him. But what if winning was impossible, and Ego knew...

The supersonic squad, running hard, burst out of the side corridor and pulled up short at their first sight of Ego in the—no, not flesh. In the shining steel, giant-tall, with the cyclops eye glaring. The sergeant panted something at Conway, trying to salute, forgetting that both his hands were full of equipment.

Conway with his pointing finger drew a semicircle in front of him before the calculator room door.

"Set the guns up, quick—along here. We've got to stop him if he tries to get in."

Ego straightened from his second victim and moved on to a third, hesitating over it, looking down.

The squad had, after all, only about thirty seconds to spare. They had been assembling their equipment as they ran, and now with speed as precise as machinery they took up positions along the line Conway had assigned them. He stood against the door, looking down at their stooping backs as they drew up the last line of defense with their own bodies and their guns between Ego and the calculators. Or no, Conway thought, maybe I'm the last line. For some remote and despairing thought was shaping itself in his mind as he looked at Ego...

In exactly the same second that the first ultrasonic gun swung its snout toward the corridor, Ego straightened and faced the double doors and the circle of men kneeling behind their guns. It seemed to Conway that over their heads he and Ego looked at each other challengingly for a moment.

"Sergeant," Conway said in a tense voice. "Cut him off at the leg, halfway to the knee. And pinpoint it fine. He's full of precision stuff and he's worth a lot more than you or me."

Ego bathed them in his cold headlight beam. Conway, wondering if the robot had understood, said quickly, "Fire."

You could hear the faintest possible hissing, nothing more. But a spot of heat glowed cherry-red and then blinding white upon Ego's left leg just below the knee.

Conway thought, "It's hopeless. If he charges us now he'll break through before we can—"

But Ego had another defense. The searchlight glance blinked once, and then Conway felt a sudden, violent discomfort he couldn't place, and the heat-spot went red again and faded. The sergeant dropped the gun nozzle and swore, shaking his hand.

"Fire on six," he said. "Eight, stand by."

Ego stood motionless, and the discomfort Conway felt deepened in rhythm with a subtle, visible vibration that pulsed through the steel tower before him.

A second sonic gun hissed faintly. A spot of red sprang out on the robot's leg. The vibration deepened, the discomfort grew worse. The heat-spot

faded to nothing.

"Interference, sir," the sergeant said. "He's blanketing the sound-wave with a frequency of his own—something he's giving out himself. Feel it?"

"But why doesn't he charge?" Conway asked himself, not aloud, for fear the robot could really understand. And he thought, maybe he can't charge and broadcast the protecting frequency at the same time. Or maybe he hasn't thought yet that he could wade right through before we could hurt him much. And Conway tried to picture to himself the world as it must look to Ego, less than an hour old, with impossible conflicts raging in the electronic complexities of his chest.

Conway said, "The eight-gun's on another frequency? Keep trying, sergeant. Maybe he can't blanket them all at once. Hold out as long as you can."

He opened the door behind him quickly and softly and went into the computer room.

This was another world. For a moment he forgot everything that lay outside the double doors and stood there taking in the feel and smell and sight of the room. It was a good place. He had always liked to be here. He could forget what stood eight feet tall and poised for destruction outside the door, and what lay waiting in the future, no farther away than day after tomorrow. He looked up at the high, flat faces of the computers, liking the way the lights winked, the sound of tape feeding through drums, the steady, pouring sound of typewriter keys, the orderly, dedicated feel of the place.

Broome looked up from the group around the typewriter of the analogue computer. All the men in the room had left their jobs and were clustering here, where the broad tape flowed out from under the keys and the columns of print poured smoothly, like water, onto the paper.

"Anything?" Conway asked.

Broome straightened painfully, easing his back.

"I'm not sure."

"Tell me," Conway said. "Quick. He'll be here in seconds."

"He's set up a block, accidentally. That's pretty sure. But how and why we still don't—"

"Then you don't know anything," Conway said flatly. "Well, I think I may have a—"

On the other side of the door sudden tumult broke out. Steel feet thudded, men shouted, equipment crackled and spat. The shouting rose to a crescendo and fell silent. The double doors crashed open and Ego stood on the threshold, facing the calculators. Here and there on his steel body spots of dull heat were fading. He was smeared with stains of oil and blood, and his searchlight eye swept around the room with a controlled speed that yet had something frantic in it. Ego looked at the calculators and the calculators placidly ticked on, rolling out unheeded data under the

jaws of their typewriters as every man in the room faced the robot.

In the open doorway behind Ego the squad sergeant stumbled into sight, blood across his face, the nozzle of a sonic-gun in his hand.

"No," Conway said. "Wait. Stand aside, Broome. Let Ego get to the calculators."

He paid no attention to the buzz of shocked response. He was looking at Ego with almost hypnotized attention, trying to force the cogs of his own thinking to mesh faster. There was still a chance. Just a shadow of a chance, he knew that. And if he let Ego at the calculators and Ego failed, he wasn't sure he could interfere in time to save anything. But he had to try. A line of dialogue out of something he couldn't identify floated through his mind. Yet I will try the last. Some other desperate commander in his last battle, indomitable in the face of defeat. Conway grinned a little, knowing himself anything but indomitable. And yet—I will try the last.

Ego still stood motionless in the doorway. Time moves so much slower than thought. The robot still scanned the computers and thought with complex tickings to himself. Conway stepped aside, leaving the way clear. As he moved he saw his own image swim up at him from the stained surfaces of the robot body, his own gaunt face and hollow eyes reflected as if from a moving mirror smeared with oil and blood, as if it were he himself who lived inside the robot's body, activating it with his own drives.

Ego's pause on the threshold lasted only a fraction of a second. His glance flicked the calculators and dismissed them one by one, infinitely fast. Then, as Broome had done, Ego wheeled to the analogue computer and crossed the floor in three enormous strides. Almost contemptuously, without even scanning it, he ripped out the programing tape. He slapped a blank tape into the punching device and his fingers flickered too fast to watch as he stamped his own questions into the wire. In seconds he was back at the computer.

Nobody moved. The mind was dazzled, trying to follow his speed. Only the computer seemed fast enough to keep pace with him, and he bent over the typewriter of the machine tautly, one machine communing with its kinsman, and the two of them so infinitely faster than flesh and blood that the men could only stand staring.

Nobody breathed. Conway—because thought is so fast —had time to say to himself with enormous hopefulness, "He'll find out the answer. He'll take over now. When the new assault starts he'll handle it and win, and I can stop trying any more..."

The stream of printed answers began to pour out under the typewriter bar, and Ego bent to read. The bright cone of his sight bathed the paper. Then with a gesture that was savage as a man's, he ripped off the tape as if he were tearing out a tongue that had spoken intolerable words. And Conway knew the computer had failed them, Ego had failed, Conway had gambled and lost.

The robot straightened up and faced the machines. His steel hands shot out in a furious, punishing motion, ready to rip the computers apart as he

had already ripped the other machines which had failed him.

Conway in a voice of infinite disillusion said, "Ego, wait. It's all right."

As always when you spoke its name, the robot paused and turned. And faster than data through the computers there poured through Conway's mind a torrent of linking thoughts. He saw his own image reflected upon the robot's body, himself imprisoned in the reflection as Ego was jailed in a task impossible to achieve.

He realized that he understood the robot as no one else alive could do, because only he knew the same tensions. It was something the computers couldn't deduce. But it was something Conway had partly guessed all along, and forbidden himself to recognize until the last alternative failed and he had to think for himself.

Win the war was the robot's basic drive. But he had to act on incomplete information, like Conway himself, and that meant that Ego had to assume responsibility for making wrong decisions that might lose the war, which he was not allowed to do. Neither could he shift responsibility as the computers could, saying, "No answer—insufficient data." Nor could he take refuge in neurosis or madness or surrender. Nor in passing the duty on to someone else, as Conway had tried to do. So all he could do was seek more knowledge furiously, almost at random, and all he could want was—

"I know what you want," Conway said. "You can have it. I'll take over, Ego. You can stop wanting, now."

"Want—" the robot howled inhumanly, and paused as usual, and then rushed on for the first time to finish his statement, "—to stop wanting!"

"Yes," Conway said. "I know. So do I. But now you can stop, Ego. Turn yourself off. You did your best."

The hollow voice said much more softly, "Want to stop..." And then hovering on the brink of silence, "... stop want..." It ceased. The shivering stopped. A feel of violence seemed to die upon the air around the robot, as if intolerable tensions had relaxed at last inside it. There was a series of clear, deliberate clickings from the steel chest, as of metallic decisions irrevocably reached, one after another. And then something seemed to go out of the thing. It stood differently. It was a machine again. Nothing more than a machine.

Conway looked at his own face in the motionless reflection. The robot couldn't take it, he thought. No wonder. He couldn't even speak to ask for relief, because the opposite of want is not want, and when he said the first word, its negative forced him to want nothing, and so to be silent. No, we asked too much. He couldn't take it. Meeting his own eyes in the reflection, he wondered if he was speaking to the Conway of a long minute ago. Perhaps he was. That Conway couldn't take it either. But this one had to, and could.

Ego couldn't act on partial knowledge. No machine could. You can't expect machines to face the unknown. Only human beings can do that. Steel isn't strong enough. Only flesh and blood can do it, and go on.

"Well, now I know," he thought. And it seemed strange, but he wasn't as tired as he had been before. Always until now there had been Ego to fall back on if he had to, but something he must not try until he reached the last gasp. Well, now he had reached it. And Ego couldn't carry the load.

He laughed gently to himself. The thought that had chilled him came back and he looked at it calmly. Maybe win the war was impossible. Maybe that paradox was what had stopped Ego. But Conway was human. It didn't stop him. He could accept the thought and push it aside, knowing that sometimes humans really do achieve the impossible. Maybe that was all that had kept them going this long.

Conway turned his head slowly and looked at Broome.

"Know what I'm going to do?" he asked.

Broome shook his head, the bright eyes watchful.

"I'm going to bed," Conway said. "I'm going to sleep. I know my limitations now. The other side's only flesh and blood too. They have the same problems we have. They have to sleep too. You can wake me up when the next attack starts. Then I'll handle it—or I won't. But I'll do my best and that's all anybody can do."

He moved stiffly past Ego toward the door, pausing for a moment to touch his palm against the motionless steel chest. It felt cold and not very steady against his hand.

"What do I mean, only flesh and blood?" he asked.