

DOORSTEP

Steadying his elbow on the kitchen table serving as a desk, Brigadier General W. F. Straut leveled his binoculars and stared out through the second-floor window of the farmhouse at the bulky object lying canted at the edge of the wood lot. He watched the figures moving over and around the gray mass, then flipped the lever on the field telephone.

"Bill, how are your boys doing?"

"General, since that box this morning-"

"I know all about the box, Bill. It's in Washington by now. What have you got that's new?"

"Sir, I haven't got anything to report yet. I've got four crews on it, and she still looks impervious as hell."

"Still getting the sounds from inside?"

"Intermittently, General."

"I'm giving you one more hour, Major. I want that thing cracked."

The General dropped the phone back on its cradle, and absently peeled the cellophane from a cigar. He had moved fast, he reflected, after the State Police notified him at 9:41 last night. He had his men on the spot, the area evacuated of civilians, and a preliminary report on the way to Washington by midnight. At 2:36, they had discovered the four inch cube lying on the ground fifteen feet from the object-ship, capsule, bomb, whatever it was. But now-four hours later-nothing new.

The field phone jangled. He grabbed it up.

"General, we've discovered a thin spot up on the top surface; all we can tell so far is that the wall thickness falls off there."

"All right. Keep after it, Bill."

This was more like it. If he could have this thing wrapped up by the time Washington woke up to the fact that it was something big-well, he'd been waiting a long time for that second star. This was his chance, and he would damn well make the most of it.

Straut looked across the field at the thing. It was half in and half out of the woods, flat-sided, round-ended, featureless. Maybe he should go over and give it a closer look personally. He might spot something the others were missing. It might blow them all to kingdom come any second; but what the hell. He had earned his star on sheer guts in Granada. He still had 'em.

He keyed the phone. "I'm coming down, Bill." On impulse, he strapped a pistol belt on. Not much use against a house-sized bomb, but the heft of it felt good.

The thing looked bigger than ever as the jeep approached it, bumping across the muck of the freshly plowed field. From here he could see a faint

line running around, just below the juncture of side and top. Greer hadn't mentioned that. The line was quite obvious; in fact, it was more of a crack.

With a sound like a baseball smacking the catcher's mitt, the crack opened; the upper half tilted, men sliding-then impossibly it stood open, vibrating, like the roof of a house suddenly lifted. The driver gunned the jeep. There were cries, and a ragged shrilling that set Straut's teeth on edge. The men were running back now, two of them dragging a third. Major Greer emerged from behind the object, looked about, ran toward him, shouting.

" . . . a man dead. It snapped; we weren't expecting it . . ."

Straut jumped out beside the men, who had stopped now and were looking back. The underside of the gaping lid was an iridescent black. The shrill noise sounded thinly across the field. Greer arrived, panting.

"What happened?" Straut snapped.

"I was . . . checking over that thin spot, General. The first thing I knew it was . . . coming up under me. I fell; Tate was at the other side. He held on and it snapped him loose, against a tree. His skull . . ."

"What the devil's that racket?"

"That's the sound we were getting from inside, before, General. There's something in there, alive-"

"All right; pull yourself together, Major. We're not unprepared. Bring your halftracks into position. The tanks will be here in another half-hour."

Straut glanced at the men standing about. He would show them what leadership meant.

"You men keep back," he said. He puffed his cigar calmly as he walked toward the looming object. The noise stopped suddenly; that was a relief. There was a faint and curious odor in the air, something like chlorine . . . or seaweed . . . or iodine.

There were no marks in the ground surrounding the thing. It had apparently dropped straight in to its present position. It was heavy, too. The soft soil was displaced in a mound a foot high all along the side.

Behind him, Straut heard a shout go up. He whirled. The men were pointing; the jeep started up, churned toward him, wheels spinning. He looked up. Over the edge of the gray wall, six feet above his head, a great reddish protrusion, like the claw of a crab, moved, groping.

In automatic response, Straut yanked his .45 from its holster, jacked the action, and fired. Soft matter splattered, and the claw jerked back. The screeching started up again angrily, then was drowned in the engine roar as the jeep slid to a stop. Straut stooped, grabbed up a leaf to which a quivering lump adhered, jumped into the vehicle as it leaped forward; then a shock and they were turning, too fast, going over . . .

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" . . . lucky it was soft ground."

"What about the driver?"

Silence. Straut opened his eyes. "What . . . about . . ."

A stranger was looking down at him, an ordinary-looking fellow of about thirty-five.

"Easy, now, General Straut. You've had a bad spill. Everything is all right. I'm Paul Lieberman, from the University."

"The driver," Straut said with an effort.

"He was killed when the jeep went over."

"Went . . . over?"

"The creature lashed out with a member resembling a scorpion's stinger; it struck the jeep and flipped it; you were thrown clear. The driver jumped and the jeep rolled on him."

Straut pushed himself up. "Where's Greer?"

"I'm right here, sir," Major Greer stepped up, stood attentively.

"Those tanks here yet, Greer?"

"No, sir. I had a call from General Margrave; there's some sort of holdup. Something about not destroying scientific material. I did get the mortars over from the base . . ."

Straut got to his feet. The stranger took his arm. "You ought to lie down, General-"

"Who the hell are you? Greer, get those mortars in place, spaced between your tracks."

The telephone rang. Straut seized it.

"General Straut."

"Straut? General Margrave here. I'm glad you're back on your feet. There'll be some scientists from the State University coming over; cooperate with them. You're going to have to hold things together at least until I can get another man in there-"

"Another man? General, I'm not incapacitated. The situation is under complete control-"

"I'll decide that, Straut. I understand you've got another casualty. What's happened to your defensive capabilities?"

"That was an accident, sir. The jeep-"

"I know. We'll review that matter at a later date. What I'm calling about is more important right now. The code men have made some headway on that

box of yours. It's putting out some sort of transmission."

"Yes, sir."

"They've rigged a receiver set-up that puts out audible sound. Half the message-it's only twenty seconds long, repeated-is in English: It's a fragment of a recording from a daytime radio program; one of the network men here identified it. The rest is gibberish. They're still working over it."

"What-"

"Bryant tells me he thinks there's some sort of correspondence between the two parts of the message. I wouldn't know, myself. In my opinion it's a threat of some sort."

"I agree, General. An ultimatum."

"All right; keep your men back at a safe distance from now on. I want no more casualties."

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Straut cursed his luck as he hung up the phone. Margrave was ready to relieve him; and after he had exercised every precaution. He had to do something, fast, something to sew this thing up before it slipped out of his hands. He looked at Greer.

"I'm neutralizing this thing once and for all. There'll be no more men killed while I stand by."

Lieberman stood up. "General! I must protest any attack against this-"

Straut whirled. "I'm handling this, Professor. I don't know who let you in here or why-but I'll make the decisions. I'm stopping this man-killer before it comes out of its nest, maybe gets into that village beyond the woods; there are four thousand civilians there. It's my job to protect them." He jerked his head at Greer, strode out of the room. Lieberman followed, protesting.

"The creature has shown no signs of aggressiveness, General Straut-"

"With two men dead-?"

"You should have kept them back-"

Straut stopped, turned.

"Oh, it was my fault, was it?" Straut stared at Lieberman with cold fury. This civilian pushed his way in here, then had the infernal gall to accuse him, Brigadier General Straut, of causing the deaths of his own men. If he had the fellow in uniform for five minutes . . .

"You're not well, General. That fall-"

"Keep out of my way, Professor," Straut said. He turned and went on down the stairs: The present foul-up could ruin his career; and now this egghead interference . . .

With Greer at his side, Straut moved out to the edge of the field.

"All right, Major. Open up with your .50 calibers."

Greer called a command and a staccato rattle started up. The smell of cordite, and the blue haze of gunsmoke . . . This was more like it. This would put an end to the nonsense. He was in command here, he had the power . . .

Greer lowered his binoculars. "Cease fire!" he commanded.

"Who told you to give that order, Major?" Straut barked.

Greer looked at him. "We're not even marking the thing."

Straut took the binoculars, stared through them.

"All right," he said. "We'll try something heavier. Let it have a round of 40mm."

Lieberman came up to Straut. "General, I appeal to you in the name of science. Hold off a little longer; at least until we learn what the message is about. The creature may--"

"Get back from the firing line, Professor." Straut turned his back on the civilian, raised the glasses to observe the effect of the recoilless rifle. There was a tremendous smack of displaced air, and a thunderous boom! as the explosive shell struck. Straut saw the gray shape jump, the raised lid waver. Dust rose from about it. There was no other effect.

"Keep firing, Greer," Straut snapped, almost with a feeling of triumph. The thing was impervious to artillery; now who was going to say it was no threat?

"How about the mortars, sir?" Greer said. "We can drop a few rounds in and blast the thing out of its nest."

"All right, try it, if the lid doesn't drop first. We won't be able to touch it if it does." And what we'll try next, I don't know, he thought; we can't drop anything really big on it, not unless we evacuate the whole country.

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The mortar fired, with a muffled thud. Straut watched tensely. Five seconds later, the ship erupted in a gout of pale pink debris. The lid rocked, pinkish fluid running down its opalescent surface. A second burst, and a third. A great fragment of the menacing claw hung from the branch of a tree a hundred feet from the ship. Straut grabbed for the phone. "Cease fire!"

Lieberman stared in horror at the carnage.

The telephone rang. Straut picked it up.

"General Straut," he said. His voice was firm. He had put an end to the threat for all time.

"Straut, we've broken the message," Margrave said excitedly. "It's the

damnedest thing . . ." Straut wanted to interrupt, announce his victory, but Margrave was droning on.

" . . . strange sort of reasoning, but there was a certain analogy. In any event, I'm assured the translation is accurate. Put into English-"

Straut listened. Then he carefully placed the receiver on the hook.

Lieberman stared at him. "What was it, the message? Have they translated it?"

Straut nodded.

"What did it say?"

Straut cleared his throat. He turned and looked at Lieberman for a long moment before answering.

"It said, 'Please take good care of my little girl!' "