

The Last Command

Keith Laumer

I come to awareness, sensing a residual oscillation traversing me from an arbitrarily designated heading of 035.

From the damping rate I compute that the shock was of intensity 8.7, emanating from a source within the limits 72 meters 146 meters. I activate my primary screens, trigger a return salvo. There is no response. I engage reserve energy cells, bring my secondary battery to bear—futilely. It is apparent that I have been ranged by the Enemy and severely damaged.

My positional sensors indicate that I am resting at an angle of 13 degrees 14 seconds, deflected from a baseline at 21 points from median. I attempt to right myself, but encounter massive resistance. I activate my forward scanners, shunt power to my I-R micro-strobes. Not a flicker illuminates my surroundings. I am encased in utter blackness.

Now a secondary shock wave approaches, rocks me with an intensity of 8.2. It is apparent that I must withdraw from my position—but my drive trains remain inert under full thrust. I shift to base emergency power, try again.

Pressure mounts; I sense my awareness fading under the intolerable strain; then, abruptly, resistance falls off and I am in motion.

It is not the swift maneuvering of full drive, however; I inch forward, as if restrained by massive barriers. Again I attempt to penetrate the surrounding darkness and this time perceive great irregular outlines shot through with fracture planes. I probe cautiously, then more vigorously, encountering incredible densities.

I channel all available power to a single ranging pulse, direct it upward. The indication is so at variance with all experience that I repeat the test at a new angle. Now I must accept the fact: I am buried under 207.6 meters of solid rock!

I direct my attention to an effort to orient myself to my uniquely

desperate situation. I run through an action-status checklist of thirty thousand items, feel dismay at the extent of power loss. My main cells are almost completely drained, my reserve units at no more than .4 charge. Thus my sluggishness is explained. I review the tactical situation, recall the triumphant announcement from my commander that the Enemy forces were annihilated, that all resistance had ceased. In memory, I review the formal procession; in company with my comrades of the Dinochrome Brigade, many of us deeply scarred by Enemy action, we parade before the Grand Commandant, then assemble on the depot ramp. At command, we bring our music storage cells into phase and display our Battle Anthem. The nearby star radiates over a full spectrum unfiltered by atmospheric haze. It is a moment of glorious triumph. Then the final command is given—

The rest is darkness. But it is apparent that the victory celebration was premature. The Enemy has counterattacked with a force that has come near to immobilizing me. The realization is shocking, but the .1 second of leisurely introspection has clarified my position. At once, I broadcast a call on Brigade Action wave length:

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“Unit LNE to Command, requesting permission to file VSR.”

I wait, sense no response, call again, using full power. I sweep the enclosing volume of rock with an emergency alert warning. I tune to the all-units band, await the replies of my comrades of the Brigade. None answer. Now I must face the reality: I alone have survived the assault.

I channel my remaining power to my drive and detect a channel of reduced density. I press for it and the broken rock around me yields reluctantly. Slowly, I move forward and upward. My pain circuitry shocks my awareness center with emergency signals; I am doing irreparable damage to my overloaded neural systems, but my duty is clear: I must seek out and engage the Enemy.

Emerging from behind the blast barrier, Chief Engineer Pete Reynolds of the New Devonshire Port Authority pulled off his rock mask and spat grit from his mouth.

“That’s the last one; we’ve bottomed out at just over two hundred yards. Must have hit a hard stratum down there.”

“It’s almost sundown,” the paunchy man beside him said shortly. “You’re a day and a half behind schedule.”

“We’ll start backfilling now, Mr. Mayor. I’ll have pilings poured by oh-nine hundred tomorrow, and with any luck the first section of pad will be in place in time for the rally.”

“I’m—” The mayor broke off, looked startled. “I thought you told me that was the last charge to be fired”

Reynolds frowned. A small but distinct tremor had shaken the ground underfoot. A few feet away, a small pebble balanced atop another toppled and fell with a faint clatter.

“Probably a big rock fragment falling,” he said. At that moment, a second vibration shook the earth, stronger this time. Reynolds heard a rumble and a distant impact as rock fell from the side of the newly blasted excavation. He whirled to the control shed as the door swung back and Second Engineer Mayfield appeared.

“Take a look at this, Pete!”

Reynolds went across to the hut, stepped inside. Mayfield was bending over the profiling table.

“What do you make of it?” he pointed. Superimposed on the heavy red contour representing the detonation of the shaped charge that had completed the drilling of the final pile core were two other traces, weak but distinct.

“About .1 intensity.” Mayfield looked puzzled. “What—”

The tracking needle dipped suddenly, swept up the screen to peak at.21, dropped back. The hut trembled. A stylus fell from the edge of the table. The red face of Mayor Dougherty burst through the door.

“Reynolds, have you lost your mind? What’s the idea of blasting while I’m standing out in the open? I might have been killed!”

“I’m not blasting,” Reynolds snapped. “Jim, get Eaton on the line, see if they know anything.” He stepped to the door, shouted. A heavysset man in sweat-darkened coveralls swung down from the seat of a cable-lift rig.

“Boss, what goes on?” he called as he came up. “Damn near shook me out of my seat!”

“I don’t know. You haven’t set any trim charges?”

“Jesus, no, boss. I wouldn’t set no charges without your say-so.”

“Come on.” Reynolds started out across the rubble-littered stretch of barren ground selected by the Authority as the site of the new spaceport. Halfway to the open mouth of the newly blasted pit, the ground under his feet rocked violently enough to make him stumble. A gout of dust rose from the excavation ahead. Loose rock danced on the ground. Beside him the drilling chief grabbed his arm.

“Boss, we better get back!”

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Reynolds shook him off, kept going. The drill chief swore and followed. The shaking of the ground went on, a sharp series of thumps interrupting a steady trembling.

“It’s a quake!” Reynolds yelled over the low rumbling sound.

He and the chief were at the rim of the core now.

“It can’t be a quake, boss,” the latter shouted. “Not in these formations!”

“Tell it to the geologists—” The rock slab they were standing on rose a foot, dropped back. Both men fell. The slab bucked like a small boat in choppy water.

“Let’s get out of here!” Reynolds was up and running. Ahead, a fissure opened, gaped a foot wide. He jumped it, caught a glimpse of black depths, a glint of wet clay twenty feet below—

A hoarse scream stopped him in his tracks. He spun, saw the drill chief down, a heavy splinter of rock across his legs. He jumped to him, heaved at the rock. There was blood on the man’s shirt. The chief’s hands beat the dusty rock before him. Then other men were there, grunting, sweaty hands gripping beside Reynolds. The ground rocked. The roar from under the earth had risen to a deep, steady rumble. They lifted the rock aside, picked up the injured man, and stumbled with him to the aid shack.

The mayor was there, white-faced.

“What is it, Reynolds? By God, if you’re responsible—”

“Shut up!” Reynolds brushed him aside, grabbed the phone, punched keys.

“Eaton! What have you got on this temblor?”

“Temblor, hell.” The small face on the four-inch screen looked like a ruffled hen. “What in the name of Order are you doing out there? I’m reading a whole series of displacements originating from that last core of yours! What did you do, leave a pile of trim charges lying around?”

“It’s a quake. Trim charges, hell! This thing’s broken up two hundred yards of surface rock. It seems to be traveling north-northeast—”

“I see that; a traveling earthquake!” Eaton flapped his arms, a tiny and ridiculous figure against a background of wall charts and framed diplomas. “Well—do something, Reynolds! Where’s Mayor Dougherty?”

“Underfoot!” Reynolds snapped, and cut off.

Outside, a layer of sunset-stained dust obscured the sweep of level plain. A rock-dozer rumbled up, ground to a halt by Reynolds. A man jumped down.

"I got the boys moving equipment out," he panted. "The thing's cutting a trail straight as a rule for the highway!"

He pointed to a raised roadbed a quarter mile away.

"How fast is it moving?"

"She's done a hundred yards; it hasn't been ten minutes yet!"

"If it keeps up another twenty minutes, it'll be into the Intermix!"

"Scratch a few million cees and six months' work then, Pete!"

"And Southside Mall's a couple miles farther."

"Hell, it'll damp out before then!"

"Maybe. Grab a field car, Dan."

"Pete!" Mayfield came up at a trot. "This thing's building! The centroid's moving on a heading of oh-two-two—"

"How far subsurface?"

"It's rising; started at two-twenty yards, and it's up to one-eighty!"

"What the hell have we stirred up?" Reynolds stared at Mayfield as the field car skidded to a stop beside them.

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"Stay with it, Jim. Give me anything new. We're taking a closer look." He climbed into the rugged vehicle.

"Take a blast truck—"

"No time!" He waved and the car gunned away into the pall of dust.

The rock car pulled to a stop at the crest of the three-level Intermix on a lay-by designed to permit tourists to enjoy the view of the site of the proposed port, a hundred feet below. Reynolds studied the progress of the quake through field glasses. From this vantage point, the path of the phenomenon was a clearly defined trail of tilted and broken rock, some of the slabs twenty feet across. As he watched, the fissure lengthened.

"It looks like a mole's trail." Reynolds handed the glasses to his companion, thumbed the send key on the car radio.

"Jim, get Eaton and tell him to divert all traffic from the Circular south of Zone Nine. Cars are already clogging the right-of-way. The dust is visible from a mile away, and when the word gets out there's something going on, we'll be swamped."

"I'll tell him, but he won't like it!"

"This isn't politics! This thing will be into the outer pad area in another twenty minutes!"

"It won't last—"

"How deep does it read now?"

"One-five!" There was a moment's silence. "Pete, if it stays on course, it'll surface at about where you're parked!"

"Uh-huh. It looks like you can scratch one Intermix. Better tell Eaton to get a story ready for the press."

"Pete, talking about news hounds—" Dan said beside him. Reynolds switched off, turned to see a man in a gay-colored driving outfit coming across from a battered Monojag sportster which had pulled up behind the rock car. A big camera case was slung across his shoulder.

"Say, what's going on down there?" he called.

"Rock slide," Reynolds said shortly. "I'll have to ask you to drive on. The road's closed to all traffic—"

"Who're you?" The man looked belligerent.

"I'm the engineer in charge. Now pull out, brother." He turned back to the radio. "Jim, get every piece of heavy equipment we own over here, on the double." He paused, feeling a minute trembling in the car. "The Intermix is beginning to feel it," he went on. "I'm afraid we're in for it. Whatever that thing is, it acts like a solid body boring its way through the ground. Maybe we can barricade it."

"Barricade an earthquake?"

"Yeah, I know how it sounds—but it's the only idea I've got."

"Hey—what's that about an earthquake?" The man in the colored suit was still there. "By gosh, I can feel it—the whole damned bridge is shaking!"

"Off, mister—now!" Reynolds jerked a thumb at the traffic lanes where a steady stream of cars were hurtling past.

"Dan, take us over to the main track. We'll have to warn this traffic off —"

"Hold on, fellow." The man unlimbered his camera. "I represent the New Devon Scope. I have a few questions—"

"I don't have the answers." Pete cut him off as the car pulled away.

"Hah!" The man who had questioned Reynolds yelled after him. "Big shot! Think you can . . ." His voice was lost behind them.

In a modest retirees' apartment block in the coast town of Idlebreeze, forty miles from the scene of the freak quake, an old man sat in a reclining chair, half dozing before a yammering Tri-D tank.

" . . . Grandpa," a sharp-voiced young woman was saying. "It's time for you to go in to bed."

"Bed? Why do I want to go to bed? Can't sleep anyway . . ." He stirred, made a pretense of sitting up, showing an interest in the Tri-D. "I'm watching this show. Don't bother me."

"It's not a show, it's the news," a fattish boy said disgustedly. "Ma, can I switch channels—"

"Leave it alone, Bennie," the old man said. On the screen a panoramic scene spread out, a stretch of barren ground across which a furrow showed. As he watched, it lengthened.

" . . . up here at the Intermix we have a fine view of the whole curious business, lazangemmun," the announcer chattered. "And in our opinion it's some sort of publicity stunt staged by the Port Authority to publicize their controversial port project—"

"Ma, can I change channels?"

"Go ahead, Bennie—"

"Don't touch it," the old man said. The fattish boy reached for the control, but something in the old man's eye stopped him . . .

"The traffic's still piling in here," Reynolds said into the phone. "Damn it, Jim, we'll have a major jam on our hands—"

"He won't do it, Pete! You know the Circular was his baby—the super all-weather pike that nothing could shut down. He says you'll have to handle this in the field—"

"Handle, hell! I'm talking about preventing a major disaster! And in a matter of minutes, at that!"

"I'll try again—"

"If he says no, divert a couple of the big ten-yard graders and block it off yourself. Set up field arcs, and keep any cars from getting in from either direction."

"Pete, that's outside your authority!"

"You heard me!"

Ten minutes later, back at ground level, Reynolds watched the boom-mounted polyarcs swinging into position at the two roadblocks a quarter of a mile apart, cutting off the threatened section of the raised expressway.

A hundred yards from where he stood on the rear cargo deck of a light grader rig, a section of rock fifty feet wide rose slowly, split, fell back with a ponderous impact. One corner of it struck the massive pier supporting the extended shelf of the lay-by above. A twenty-foot splinter fell away, exposing the reinforcing-rod core.

“How deep, Jim?” Reynolds spoke over the roaring sound coming from the disturbed area.

“Just subsurface now, Pete! It ought to break through—” His voice was drowned in a rumble as the damaged pier shivered, rose up, buckled at its midpoint, and collapsed, bringing down with it a large chunk of pavement and guard rail, and a single still-glowing light pole. A small car that had been parked on the doomed section was visible for an instant just before the immense slab struck. Reynolds saw it bounce aside, then disappear under an avalanche of broken concrete.

“My God, Pete—” Dan started. “That damned fool news hound . . . !”

“Look!” As the two men watched, a second pier swayed, fell backward into the shadow of the span above. The roadway sagged, and two more piers snapped. With a bellow like a burst dam, a hundred-foot stretch of the road fell into the roiling dust cloud.

“Pete!” Mayfield’s voice burst from the car radio. “Get out of there! I threw a reader on that thing and it’s chattering off the scale . . . !”

Among the piled fragments something stirred, heaved, rising up, lifting multi-ton pieces of the broken road, thrusting them aside like so many potato chips. A dull blue radiance broke through from the broached earth, threw an eerie light on the shattered structure above. A massive, ponderously irresistible shape thrust forward through the ruins.

Reynolds saw a great blue-glowing profile emerge from the rubble like a surfacing submarine, shedding a burden of broken stone, saw immense treads ten feet wide claw for purchase, saw the mighty flank brush a still-standing pier, send it crashing aside.

“Pete, what—what is it . . . ?”

“I don’t know.” Reynolds broke the paralysis that had gripped him. “Get us out of here, Dan, fast! Whatever it is, it’s headed straight for the city!”

I emerge at last from the trap into which I had fallen, and at once encounter defensive works of considerable strength. My scanners are dulled from lack of power, but I am able to perceive open ground beyond the barrier, and farther still, at a distance of 5.7 kilometers, massive walls. Once more I transmit the Brigade Rally signal; but as before, there is no

reply. I am truly alone.

I scan the surrounding area for the emanations of Enemy drive units, monitor the EM spectrum for their communications. I detect nothing; either my circuitry is badly damaged, or their shielding is superb.

I must now make a decision as to possible courses of action. Since all my comrades of the Brigade have fallen, I compute that the fortress before me must be held by Enemy forces. I direct probing signals at them, discover them to be of unfamiliar construction, and less formidable than they appear. I am aware of the possibility that this may be a trick of the Enemy; but my course is clear.

I reengage my driving engines and advance on the Enemy fortress.

“You’re out of your mind, father,” the stout man said. “At your age—”

“At your age, I got my nose smashed in a brawl in a bar on Aldo,” the old man cut him off. “But I won the fight.”

“James, you can’t go out at this time of night . . . ” an elderly woman wailed.

“Tell them to go home.” The old man walked painfully toward his bedroom door. “I’ve seen enough of them for today.” He passed out of sight.

“Mother, you won’t let him do anything foolish?”

“He’ll forget about it in a few minutes; but maybe you’d better go now and let him settle down.”

“Mother—I really think a home is the best solution.”

“Yes,” the young woman nodded agreement. “After all, he’s past ninety—and he has his veteran’s retirement”

Inside his room, the old man listened as they departed. He went to the closet, took out clothes, began dressing

City Engineer Eaton’s face was chalk-white on the screen.

* * *

“No one can blame me,” he said. “How could I have known—”

“Your office ran the surveys and gave the PA the green light,” Mayor Dougherty yelled.

“All the old survey charts showed was ‘Disposal Area,’” Eaton threw out his hands. “I assumed—”

“As City Engineer, you’re not paid to make assumptions! Ten minutes’ research would have told you that was a ‘Y’ category area!”

“What’s ‘Y’ category mean?” Mayfield asked Reynolds. They were

standing by the field comm center, listening to the dispute. Nearby, boom-mounted Tri-D cameras hummed, recording the progress of the immense machine, its upper turret rearing forty-five feet into the air, as it ground slowly forward across smooth ground toward the city, dragging behind it a trailing festoon of twisted reinforcing iron crusted with broken concrete.

“Half-life over one hundred years,” Reynolds answered shortly. “The last skirmish of the war was fought near here.

Apparently this is where they buried the radioactive equipment left over from the battle.”

“But what the hell, that was seventy years ago—”

“There’s still enough residual radiation to contaminate anything inside a quarter-mile radius.”

“They must have used some hellish stuff.” Mayfield stared at the dull shine half a mile distant.

“Reynolds, how are you going to stop this thing?” The mayor had turned on the PA engineer.

“Me stop it? You saw what it did to my heaviest rigs: flattened them like pancakes. You’ll have to call out the military on this one, Mr. Mayor.”

“Call in Federation forces? Have them meddling in civic affairs?”

“The station’s only sixty-five miles from here. I think you’d better call them fast. It’s only moving at about three miles per hour but it will reach the south edge of the Mall in another forty-five minutes.”

“Can’t you mine it? Blast a trap in its path?”

“You saw it claw its way up from six hundred feet down. I checked the specs; it followed the old excavation tunnel out. It was rubble-filled and capped with twenty-inch compressed concrete.”

“It’s incredible,” Eaton said from the screen. “The entire machine was encased in a ten-foot shell of reinforced armocrete. It had to break out of that before it could move a foot!”

“That was just a radiation shield; it wasn’t intended to restrain a Bolo Combat Unit.”

“What was, may I inquire?” The mayor glared from one face to another.

“The units were deactivated before being buried,” Eaton spoke up, as if he were eager to talk. “Their circuits were fused. It’s all in the report—”

“The report you should have read somewhat sooner,” the mayor snapped.

“What—what started it up?” Mayfield looked bewildered. “For

seventy years it was down there, and nothing happened!"

"Our blasting must have jarred something," Reynolds said shortly. "Maybe closed a relay that started up the old battle reflex circuit."

"You know something about these machines?" The mayor beetled his brows at him.

"I've read a little."

"Then speak up, man. I'll call the station, if you feel I must. What measures should I request?"

"I don't know, Mr. Mayor. As far as I know, nothing on New Devon can stop that machine now."

The mayor's mouth opened and closed. He whirled to the screen, blanked Eaton's agonized face, punched in the code for the Federation station. "Colonel Blane!" he blurted as a stern face came onto the screen. "We have a major emergency on our hands! I'll need everything you've got! This is the situation . . ."

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I encounter no resistance other than the flimsy barrier, but my progress is slow. Grievous damage has been done to my main drive sector due to overload during my escape from the trap; and the failure of my sensing circuitry has deprived me of a major portion of my external receptivity. Now my pain circuits project a continuous signal to my awareness center, but it is my duty to my Commander and to my fallen comrades of the Brigade to press forward at my best speed; but my performance is a poor shadow of my former ability.

And now at last the Enemy comes into action! I sense aerial units closing at supersonic velocities; I lock my lateral batteries to them and direct salvo fire, but I sense that the arming mechanisms clatter harmlessly. The craft sweep over me, and my impotent guns elevate, track them as they release detonants that spread out in an envelopmental pattern which I, with my reduced capabilities, am powerless to avoid. The missiles strike; I sense their detonations all about me; but I suffer only trivial damage. The Enemy has blundered if he thought to neutralize a Mark XXVIII Combat Unit with mere chemical explosives! But I weaken with each meter gained.

Now there is no doubt as to my course. I must press the charge and carry the walls before my reserve cells are exhausted.

From a vantage point atop a bucket rig four hundred yards from the

position the great fighting machine had now reached, Pete Reynolds studied it through night glasses. A battery of beamed polyarcs pinned the giant hulk, scarred and rust-scaled, in a pool of blue-white light. A mile and a half beyond it, the walls of the Mall rose sheer from the garden setting.

“The bombers slowed it some,” he reported to Eaton via scope. “But it’s still making better than two miles per hour.

I’d say another twenty-five minutes before it hits the main ring wall. How’s the evacuation going?”

“Badly! I get no cooperation! You’ll be my witness, Reynolds, I did all I could—”

“How about the mobile batteries; how long before they’ll be in position?” Reynolds cut him off.

“I’ve heard nothing from Federation Central—typical militaristic arrogance, not keeping me informed—but I have them on my screens. They’re two miles out—say three minutes.”

“I hope you made your point about N-heads.”

“That’s outside my province!” Eaton said sharply. “It’s up to Brand to carry out this portion of the operation!”

“The HE Missiles didn’t do much more than clear away the junk it was dragging.” Reynolds’ voice was sharp.

“I wash my hands of responsibility for civilian lives,” Eaton was saying when Reynolds shut him off, changed channels.

“Jim, I’m going to try to divert it,” he said crisply. “Eaton’s sitting on his political fence; the Feds are bringing artillery up, but I don’t expect much from it. Technically, Brand needs Sector okay to use nuclear stuff, and he’s not the boy to stick his neck out—”

“Divert it how? Pete, don’t take any chances—”

Reynolds laughed shortly. “I’m going to get around it and drop a shaped drilling charge in its path. Maybe I can knock a tread off. With luck, I might get its attention on me and draw it away from the Mall. There are still a few thousand people over there, glued to their Tri-D’s. They think it’s all a swell show.”

“Pete, you can’t walk up on that thing! It’s hot—” He broke off. “Pete, there’s some kind of nut here—he claims he has to talk to you; says he knows something about that damned juggernaut. Shall I . . . ?”

Reynolds paused with his hand on the cut-off switch. “Put him on,” he snapped. Mayfield’s face moved aside and an ancient, bleary-eyed visage stared out at him. The tip of the old man’s tongue touched his dry lips.

“Son, I tried to tell this boy here, but he wouldn’t listen—”

“What have you got, old timer?” Pete cut in. “Make it fast.”

“My name’s Sanders. James Sanders. I’m . . . I was with the Planetary Volunteer Scouts, back in ‘71—”

“Sure, dad,” Pete said gently. “I’m sorry, I’ve got a little errand to run—”

“Wait . . .” The old man’s face worked. “I’m old, son—too damned old. I know. But bear with me. I’ll try to say it straight. I was with Hayle’s squadron at Toledo. Then afterwards, they shipped us—but hell, you don’t care about that! I keep wandering, son; can’t help it. What I mean to say is—I was in on that last scrap, right here at New Devon—only we didn’t call it New Devon then. Called it Hellport. Nothing but bare rock and Enemy emplacement—”

“You were talking about the battle, Mr. Sanders,” Pete said tensely. “Go on with that part.”

“Lieutenant Sanders,” the oldster said. “Sure, I was Acting Brigade Commander. See, our major was hit at Toledo

—and after Tommy Chee stopped a sidewinder at Belgrave—”

“Stick to the point, Lieutenant!”

“Yessir!” The old man pulled himself together with an obvious effort. “I took the Brigade in; put out flankers, and ran the Enemy into the ground. We mopped ‘em up in a thirty-three hour running fight that took us from over by Crater Bay all the way down here to Hellport. When it was over, I’d lost sixteen units, but the Enemy was done. They gave us Brigade Honors for that action. And then . . .”

“Then what?”

“Then the triple-dyed yellow-bottoms at Headquarters put out the order the Brigade was to be scrapped; said they were too hot to make decon practical. Cost too much, they said! So after the final review—” he gulped, blinked—“they planted ‘em deep, two hundred meters, and poured in special high-R concrete.”

“And packed rubble in behind them,” Reynolds finished for him. “All right, Lieutenant, I believe you! Now for the big one: What started that machine on a rampage?”

“Should have known they couldn’t hold down a Bolo Mark XXVIII!” The old man’s eyes lit up. “Take more than a few million tons of rock to stop Lenny when his battle board was lit!”

“Lenny?”

“That’s my old command unit out there, son. I saw the markings on the Tri-D. Unit LNE of the Dinochrome Brigade!”

“Listen!” Reynolds snapped out. “Here’s what I intend to try . . . ” He outlined his plan.

“Ha!” Sanders snorted. “It’s a gutsy notion, mister, but Lenny won’t give it a sneeze.”

“You didn’t come here to tell me we were licked,” Reynolds cut in. “How about Brand’s batteries?”

“Hell, son, Lenny stood up to point-blank Hellbore fire on Toledo, and—”

“Are you telling me there’s nothing we can do?”

“What’s that? No, son, that’s not what I’m saying . . . ”

“Then what!”

“Just tell these johnnies to get out of my way, mister. I think I can handle him.”

At the field comm hut, Pete Reynolds watched as the man who had been Lieutenant Sanders of the Volunteer Scouts pulled shiny black boots over his thin ankles and stood. The blouse and trousers of royal blue polyon hung on his spare frame like wash on a line. He grinned, a skull’s grin.

“It doesn’t fit like it used to; but Lenny will recognize it. It’ll help. Now, if you’ve got that power pack ready . . . ”

* * *

Mayfield handed over the old-fashioned field instrument Sanders had brought in with him.

“It’s operating, sir—but I’ve already tried everything I’ve got on that infernal machine; I didn’t get a peep out of it.”

Sanders winked at him. “Maybe I know a couple of tricks you boys haven’t heard about.” He slung the strap over his bony shoulder and turned to Reynolds.

“Guess we better get going, mister. He’s getting close.”

In the rock car, Sanders leaned close to Reynolds’ ear. “Told you those Federal guns wouldn’t scratch Lenny.

They’re wasting their time.”

Reynolds pulled the car to a stop at the crest of the road, from which point he had a view of the sweep of ground leading across to the city’s

edge. Lights sparkled all across the towers of New Devon. Close to the walls, the converging fire of the ranked batteries of infinite repeaters drove into the glowing bulk of the machine, which plowed on, undeterred.

As he watched, the firing ceased.

“Now, let’s get in there, before they get some other damn-fool scheme going,” Sanders said.

The rock car crossed the rough ground, swung wide to come up on the Bolo from the left side. Behind the hastily rigged radiation cover, Reynolds watched the immense silhouette grow before him.

“I knew they were big,” he said. “But to see one up close like this—” He pulled to a stop a hundred feet from the Bolo.

“Look at the side ports,” Sanders said, his voice crisper now. “He’s firing antipersonnel charges—only his plates are flat. If they weren’t, we wouldn’t have gotten within half a mile.” He undipped the microphone and spoke into it:

“Unit LNE, break off action and retire to ten-mile line!”

Reynolds’ head jerked around to stare at the old man. His voice had rung with vigor and authority as he spoke the command.

The Bolo ground slowly ahead. Sanders shook his head, tried again.

“No answer, like that fella said. He must be running on nothing but memories now . . .” He reattached the microphone, and before Reynolds could put out a hand, had lifted the anti-R cover and stepped off on the ground.

“Sanders—get back in here!” Reynolds yelled.

“Never mind, son. I’ve got to get in close. Contact induction.” He started toward the giant machine. Frantically, Reynolds started the car, slammed it into gear, pulled forward.

“Better stay back.” Sanders’ voice came from his field radio. “This close, that screening won’t do you much good.”

“Get in the car!” Reynolds roared. “That’s hard radiation!”

“Sure; feels funny, like a sunburn, about an hour after you come in from the beach and start to think maybe you got a little too much.” He laughed. “But I’ll get to him . . .”

Reynolds braked to a stop, watched the shrunken figure in the baggy uniform as it slogged forward, leaning as against a sleet storm.

“I’m up beside him.” Sanders’ voice came through faintly on the field radio. “I’m going to try to swing up on his side. Don’t feel like trying to chase him any farther.”

Through the glasses, Reynolds watched the small figure, dwarfed by the immense bulk of the fighting machine, as he tried, stumbled, tried again, swung up on the flange running across the rear quarter inside the churning bogie wheel.

“He’s up,” he reported. “Damned wonder the track didn’t get him”

* * *

Clinging to the side of the machine, Sanders lay for a moment, bent forward across the flange. Then he pulled himself up, wormed his way forward to the base of the rear quarter turret, wedged himself against it. He unslung the communicator, removed a small black unit, clipped it to the armor; it clung, held by a magnet. He brought the microphone up to his face.

In the comm shack, Mayfield leaned toward the screen, his eyes squinted in tension. Across the field, Reynolds held the glasses fixed on the man lying across the flank of the Bolo. They waited

The walls are before me, and I ready myself for a final effort, but suddenly I am aware of trickle currents flowing over my outer surface. Is this some new trick of the Enemy? I tune to the wave energies, trace the source. They originate at a point in contact with my aft port armor. I sense modulation, match receptivity to a computed pattern.

And I hear a voice:

“Unit LNE, break it off, Lenny. We’re pulling back now, boy. This is Command to LNE; pull back to ten miles. If you read me, Lenny, swing to port and halt.”

I am not fooled by the deception. The order appears correct, but the voice is not that of my Commander. Briefly I regret that I cannot spare energy to direct a neutralizing power flow at the device the Enemy has attached to me. I continue my charge.

“Unit LNE! Listen to me, boy; maybe you don’t recognize my voice, but it’s me. You see, boy—some time has passed. I’ve gotten old. My voice has changed some, maybe. But it’s me! Make a port turn, Lenny. Make it now!”

I am tempted to respond to the trick, for something in the false command seems to awaken secondary circuits which I sense have been long stilled. But I must not be swayed by the cleverness of the Enemy. My sensing circuitry has faded further as my energy cells drain; but I know

where the Enemy lies. I move forward, but I am filled with agony, and only the memory of my comrades drives me on.

“Lenny, answer me. Transmit on the old private band—the one we agreed on. Nobody but me knows it, remember?”

Thus the Enemy seeks to beguile me into diverting precious power. But I will not listen.

“Lenny—not much time left. Another minute and you’ll be into the walls. People are going to die. Got to stop you, Lenny. Hot here. My God, I’m hot. Not breathing too well, now. I can feel it; cutting through me like knives. You took a load of Enemy power, Lenny; and now I’m getting my share. Answer me, Lenny. Over to you”

It will require only a tiny allocation of power to activate a communication circuit. I realize that it is only an Enemy trick, but I compute that by pretending to be deceived, I may achieve some trivial advantage. I adjust circuitry accordingly and transmit:

“Unit LNE to Command. Contact with Enemy defensive line imminent. Request supporting fire!”

“Lenny . . . you can hear me! Good boy, Lenny! Now make a turn, to port. Walls . . . close”

“Unit LNE to Command. Request positive identification; transmit code 685749.”

“Lenny—I can’t . . . don’t have code blanks. But it’s me”

“In absence of recognition code, your transmission disregarded.” I send. And now the walls loom high above me.

There are many lights, but I see them only vaguely. I am nearly blind now.

“Lenny—less’n two hundred feet to go. Listen, Lenny. I’m climbing down. I’m going to jump down, Lenny, and get around under your fore scanner pickup. You’ll see me, Lenny. You’ll know me then.”

The false transmission ceases. I sense a body moving across my side. The gap closes. I detect movement before me, and in automatic reflex fire anti-P charges before I recall that I am unarmed.

* * *

A small object has moved out before me, and taken up a position between me and the wall behind which the Enemy conceal themselves. It is dim, but appears to have the shape of a man

I am uncertain. My alert center attempts to engage inhibitory circuitry

which will force me to halt, but it lacks power. I can override it. But still I am unsure. Now I must take a last risk; I must shunt power to my forward scanner to examine this obstacle more closely. I do so, and it leaps into greater clarity. It is indeed a man—and it is encloded in regulation blues of the Volunteers. Now, closer, I see the face and through the pain of my great effort, I study it

“He’s backed against the wall,” Reynolds said hoarsely. “It’s still coming. A hundred feet to go—”

“You were a fool, Reynolds!” the mayor barked. “A fool to stake everything on that old dotard’s crazy ideas!”

“Hold it!” As Reynolds watched, the mighty machine slowed, halted, ten feet from the sheer wall before it. For a moment, it sat, as though puzzled. Then it backed, halted again, pivoted ponderously to the left, and came about.

On its side, a small figure crept up, fell across the lower gun deck. The Bolo surged into motion, retracing its route across the artillery-scarred gardens.

“He’s turned it.” Reynolds let his breath out with a shuddering sigh. “It’s headed out for open desert. It might get twenty miles before it finally runs out of steam.”

The strange voice that was the Bolo’s came from the big panel before Mayfield:

“Command Unit LNE reports main power cells drained, secondary cells drained; now operating at.037 percent efficiency, using Final Emergency Power. Request advice as to range to be covered before relief maintenance available.”

“It’s a long way, Lenny” Sanders’ voice was a bare whisper. “But I’m coming with you”

Then there was only the crackle of static. Ponderously, like a great mortally stricken animal, the Bolo moved through the ruins of the fallen roadway, heading for the open desert.

“That damned machine,” the mayor said in a hoarse voice. “You’d almost think it was alive.”

“You would at that,” Pete Reynolds said.