

# HOUSE OF ENTROPY

## THE MONGO MACHINE

PART 2

BUCK ROGERS. JOHN CARTER. CRASH CORRIGAN.

THREE WARRIORS. OUT OF TIME.

BY JAMES L. RICHARDSON

IN PART 1:

### **It's 1943, the blood-soaked peak of World War II.**

A long-dismissed report from adventurer John Carter is suddenly confirmed: the Nazis really have uncovered a machine capable of contacting, and possibly transporting people to other worlds. If they reactivate it, the war won't just turn. It could leave Earth behind entirely.

To stop that from happening, Allied command sends in three specialists: **Carter, Buck Rogers, and Crash Corrigan.** Their orders are simple, brutal, and absolute: Shut the machine down.

#### **At all costs.**

They're joined by mission specialist **Colonel Wilma Deering**, whose reputation is matched only by her accuracy with a rifle. But their midnight drop behind enemy lines nearly goes horribly wrong, saved only by Deering's disregard for her own safety and mission protocol.

Reunited and apparently undetected, they follow Deering's resistance contacts across frozen wilderness toward a hidden German power facility, their resistance colleagues falling almost to a man along the way.

And somewhere in that steel maze...**the machine is waiting.**

**And now, Part 2 of The Mongo Machine:**

## CHAPTER 07

“Shame it’s such a clear night,” observed Buck as he peered through his rifle’s scope at the dam below them. “A couple of guards don’t walk the entire length of their patrol. With a little luck we could slip through the gap, but it’s a cinch their buddies up in the towers spot us. That blizzard we had the other day would be just the ticket.”

Margit, hanging back and nursing her injured arm, hissed, “You shall have your cover, Captain Rogers. I will see to it.” A moment later, she vanished into the forest as if she’d never been.

“That woman gives me the heebie-jeebies,” observed Crash Corrigan. “She’s like cold smoke.” He made a fist, and with a puff of his cheeks, opened his fingers to mimic a waft of smoke, “Poof!”

“And a couple of aces short of a deck,” chuckled Buck with an upward glance. “Not a cloud in the sky.”

Wilma Deering looked through her scope, noting the patrol gap Rogers had identified. “We wait. There’s still a lot of night left, and if Margit says we’ll have cover, we’ll have cover.” She nodded to John Carter and the other two and ordered, “Make your way to that stand of trees just beyond their perimeter and wait for two clicks from me. I’ll stay on overwatch.”

“You’re not joining us?” asked Carter. Everyone knew she was the best shot of the four and none of the men were comfortable with taking her back into combat. She had proved herself a capable warrior in the last two days, though and the three of them had found themselves grudgingly accepting that she was not only technically in command of the mission, but also eminently qualified for the position. She’d kept them alive through twenty miles of Nazi territory. It had been a near thing, but her steel had served them well.

“I’ll be there, Carter,” she confirmed. “I’m just gonna watch your three pretty

backsides to make sure you get there, first.”

“Hear that, Crash?” asked Buck with a grin. “She thinks I’ve got a pretty backside.”

“And I’ll put my foot in it if you don’t get it in gear,” she hissed.

The three men set off down the slope, expertly gliding through the shadows of the trees and scrub on the hillside. Had she not known where to look, she’d never have picked them out once they’d gone a few yards. Margit slid up beside her, sliding into the warm hollow Rogers had just vacated. She pulled a collapsible binocular from the pouch at her waist and scanned the dam for a few moments.

“They’re sloppy,” she noted.

“We’re deep behind the red line. I’d bet they don’t expect trouble from anywhere but the air,” suggested Deering. “No reason to waste crack troops on guarding a slab of concrete.”

“No reason at all,” said Margit with grim humour. She lifted her head and cocked it as if listening. “Your cover is close. Another quarter hour or less will see the snow begin to fall.”

“One of these days, you’re gonna have to explain to me just how you know that,” said Wilma.

“Wind, ice, and snow define this land. This land is of my people,” said the Norwegian woman. “We understand each other.”

“Uh-huh,” answered Deering, her tone somewhere between uncertainty and amusement. A single white flake wafted down and settled on the top of her rifle scope as if to clarify Margit’s statement.

Ten minutes later, Wilma sent two clicks over the radio to her team.

Three shadows detached themselves from the rest of the darkness, crouching low but making haste across the open ground between the trees and the shadow of the nearest tower. From her vantage on the hillside, Deering saw only the initial movement and then lost the men in the cover of the rapidly escalating blizzard. A moment later, two clicks came over the radio. They had made cover.

“Time to move,” she said to Margit.

“I will be right here,” answered the Norwegian, rolling into the hollow Wilma had been nestling in and settling in behind the scoped Lee-Enfield.

“Let’s hope I don’t need to test your skills,” whispered Wilma as she started down the slope, following the path taken by the team. Behind her, she heard the distinct clack of the bolt action on the rifle. Margit was a crack shot, almost as good as Deering herself. The snow she had apparently whistled up was looking to turn from squall to full on blizzard in unnaturally short order. The wind and whipping snow would make overwatch tricky, but there were few people Wilma trusted more.

The snow stinging her cheeks had lost its charm.

## CHAPTER 08

Buck, Crash and John Carter had seamlessly switched to their prearranged hand signals. With Deering on overwatch, command of the team fell to Carter until she rejoined them. He had the other two flank him. Using every shadow to their advantage, they slipped around the first tower into deeper cover. The roving patrol soldiers passed their hiding place twice and never gave any indication that they had noticed anything out of the ordinary.

A few moments later, Corrigan tapped the other two lightly on the shoulder and nodded back the way they came. All three turned to see Wilma Deering deftly picking her way from shadow to shadow, timing her movements to the less-than-crisp routine of the Nazi guard troops. She couldn't know for certain where they were waiting for her, but Carter caught her attention by bouncing a reflection off his wrist-mounted compass when she turned to peer in their general direction. A moment later she joined them in the deeper cover of the shadows between the tower and the wall of an outbuilding.

When she was certain there were no soldiers close enough to overhear, she whispered, "We're off the map now, gents." While the intelligence had confirmed that the machine they were after had been transferred here, they had not been able to get their hands on the plans for the dam. Beyond a few low-quality reconnaissance photos of the structure, they had no idea where the unit would be housed or how it would be connected to the power grid. "Any ideas?"

Corrigan held up a warning hand, silencing any reply. The patrol was returning. They weren't the most diligent about covering their routes, but walking was preferable to standing in this cold. They all pushed back, deeper into the shadows as a young man, his rifle slung over his shoulder and a lit cigarette announcing his position in the dark, passed within a few feet of them. Only when he had passed well beyond them did they dare to even breathe.

“My mamma always said,” began Corrigan, sniffing theatrically, “when in doubt, follow your nose.”

Puzzled, the other three shared a look, and then as one took a deep breath. Sure enough, there was an out-of-place whiff of ozone in the air.

“And your ears,” added Carter, cocking his head. A faint but distinct clack, much like the bolt being thrown on a rifle, but deeper, sounded from the same direction that they had detected the odour of ozone. A moment later, a low hum began and did not stop. Deering gave them a nod. Corrigan held them back with a hand gesture and then waved them ahead once the guard had disappeared.

Taking turns on point, they leapfrogged from shadow to shadow, pistols drawn. All four had loaded their weapons with the special glass beads rather than the metal ammunition. This close to the target, if the opportunity presented itself, they needed to be ready and might not have time to change out their load. The liquid in the glass beads would do more damage to a machine than a man, at least initially. At close range, the impact alone could still drop someone with a head or torso shot. The hum grew louder as they made their way deeper into the facility.

At a large building near the centre of the cluster of buildings close to the near side of the concrete dam, four guards stood at their post. They were alert, their weapons held loosely at rest, not slung. No one was smoking and the way they were stationed, there was no way to approach the door without being seen.

“Any chance there’s a back door?” wondered Rogers.

“Even if there is, we can’t take the time to find it,” answered Carter in a husky whisper.

“Boys, there’s a time for stealth and there’s a time for something else,” stated Deering, her tone oddly playful. She stood and slipped off her jacket, holstered her pistol and twisted her belt so the holster sat behind her, out of view. She pulled the tight, knit cap from her head and fluffed her hair with a flourish. She made her way back to the nearest corner of the building and disappeared from view. A moment later, she staggered into the open doing a fair imitation of someone lost in the blizzard, frantically waving to get the guard’s attention. As

she passed the three men still hunkered deep in the shadows, she hissed, “Be ready.”

Carter watched as she staggered past and with a series of hand gestures he directed the other two to creep as close to the guard position as they could. Now fully in the open, Deering called to the guards, “*HJELP MEG!*” in an excellent Norwegian accent. After two days with Margit and her team, they knew it well. Before the guards could respond, she slumped to her knees, arching back in apparent distress.

Though more alert than the roving sentries, these four were young and likely given the duty of watching a door because more experienced men were in short supply this deep into the Norwegian interior. As Wilma had observed, an attack from the ground was far less likely than a bombing run should this facility be targeted. These four were simply a concession to military protocol.

As one, the four reacted as she had hoped they would. A helpless woman, alone and in distress was a welcome break from the mind-numbing monotony of guard duty. That she was attractive and shapely drove them to scramble to her assistance before they had time to register the incongruity of a lone female traveller without a coat or pack this far from the nearest village or town.

The four hastily shouldered their rifles, practically falling over one another to be the first to reach her. Three shadows slipped in behind the four guards, unseen. Slapping a hand over their target’s mouth, each sliced efficiently through the jugular vein in a single stroke, red blood spraying across the fresh, white snow. The struggle was brutal but very brief. The lead soldier had reached the kneeling form of Wilma and pulled up short as he heard the gurgling and soft thuds of bodies hitting the ground behind him. Through thick glasses, he goggled down as Wilma’s hand whipped up, a pistol drawing level with his face.

When the glass bead impacted him just above the bridge of his nose, the muzzle of the gas gun was so close to him that thanks to the angle of his forehead, the little nodule did not shatter, bouncing off to land with a soft thunk in the rapidly accumulating snow. The young soldier’s eyes rolled up into his skull and he gave a soft ‘whaaahhh’ sound as he crumpled to the ground, unconscious.

“Set them up as if they’re sitting around the door, trying to stay warm,” hissed Deering. “It won’t fool them for long, but it might buy us a few seconds.” The team dragged the three bodies and the insensate fourth into a loose group around the door, wrapping their clothing over the wounds as best they could. The smell of blood overwhelmed the ozone they’d detected earlier, but they ignored it.

Corrigan yanked one of the rockets from Rogers’ pack and slid it behind the soldiers’ bodies. Rogers stopped him from grabbing the second one. Corrigan shrugged and reached around to add the two from his pack to the little bundle. He snagged a grenade from the web belt of one corpse and did something the others couldn’t see clearly. When he finished, he made a show of sitting the soldier in front of him neatly into a pose that approximated a sleeping one and backed carefully away. “If they find that...”

“Boom,” grinned Rogers.

“Big boom,” Corrigan corrected.

“We should...” Carter gestured with a thumb across his throat and a nod at the soldier snoring and twitching at their feet. His thick glasses were askew, his rifle in his lap.

“He’s a kid,” said Deering. “He’ll be out long enough.” She grabbed the rifle from his lap, pulled the magazine, and tossed it into the shadows, popping the round from the chamber before returning the weapon. “Just in case,” she said, meeting Carter’s eyes as she replaced the rifle.

“You’re the boss,” said Rogers, cheerfully, patting the spectacled young man affectionately on the head. “But if *four eyes* here comes too, we’re in the soup.”

“So let’s not be here when he does,” hissed Corrigan. Cracking open the door, he peered inside. A strong whiff of ozone and something unfamiliar puffed out; the air fogged as the heat from within escaped. “It’s clear,” he whispered over his shoulder.

“Take point, Crash,” ordered Wilma. She fell in behind him, Buck and Carter pulling up the rear. Pistols ready, the four stalked down the hall, the temperature and the hum rising to meet them. After several yards, another door stood in their

way. Unlike the outer door, this was a large, metal affair, more reminiscent of a bank vault than anything. In its centre a large handle, set vertically was inset in a circular housing. Corrigan reached out and grasped it in his left hand and looked over his shoulder at Wilma. She nodded firmly. He twisted the handle clockwise and was rewarded with a solid thunk and a hiss. The door pushed inward, swinging smoothly on well-oiled hinges. The noise of the hum doubled in volume, and doubled again as the door swung wider.

The team stormed through as one.

## CHAPTER 09

The other side of the door was like nothing any of them, save John Carter, had ever seen. A team of men in white lab coats along with a couple of black-uniformed Nazis were watching gauges and dials or staring at the machine itself. Standing on a spidery metal framework, a massive, bulbous device dominated the room; images flashed across what appeared to be an empty space at the centre of the sphere. Waves of light pulsed in a counterpoise to the images, flashing with impossible colours as the images shifted.

Just looking at the strange, indescribable light made them queasy, yet it took real effort to tear their eyes away. When a vista of red sand under a strangely bright orange sky slid into view within the machine, John Carter breathed, “Barsoom,” so quietly that none of the team was certain they had heard it.

They hadn’t been seen yet. Every eye in the room was focused on the readings or the mesmerizing spectacle unfolding in the heart of the machine. The four split into two, half to either side of the door. They spread along the walls, trying to get into a position close enough to the machine and the instruments that their short-ranged gas guns would be effective.

One of the black-clad soldiers tore his eyes from the bulbous machine and the strange, flickering images within, spotting Buck Rogers closing on him. He looked puzzled for a moment and then opened his mouth to raise an alarm. The concentrated acid within the glass bulb that shattered in his open mouth stopped his cry, but his flailing, choking form was more than enough to alert the rest of the room to their presence. Closest to the device on his side of the room, Rogers emptied his magazine into the body of the humming, flickering device, the acid-bearing spheres shattering and instantly sending a hissing, choking cloud of vapour up and around the device. The acid chewed and bubbled its way through the metal housing, but seemed to have little effect on the machine otherwise. The

images, the hum and the hypnotic light flashes continued unabated.

The rest of the team was already leaping to the attack. Firing her pistol at the machine, Wilma leapt over a table and landed a flying kick to the shoulder of one of the soldiers as he wrestled his pistol from his holster. The weapon flew up and *into* the machine, vanishing as it passed through the empty space within, as the image again flashed and changed.

The tone of the hum changed. Corrigan, still moving after knocking a white-coated scientist to the floor, broke the edge of the field that shimmered around the machine. For an instant he hung in the air, caught in its light, and then he was simply...gone.

“Corrigan!” shouted John Carter and Buck Rogers at the same instant from opposite sides of the room.

From the doorway, Deering spied the young soldier they had left alive, his glasses still askew. He was drawing a bead on John Carter with his rifle. As she watched in horror, he pulled the trigger. Only a dry click, and then he was holding the rifle closer to his face in puzzlement.

Before he could figure out what she’d done, a huge explosion sounded outside. The fist of air shoved the bespectacled soldier bodily through the door. Part of her brain registered that the kid was no threat and she whipped her head around, her pistol barrel leading, in search of targets. Chaos had engulfed the room, the scientists frantically calling out readings to one another in German, the enemy soldiers finally starting to return fire, and the explosion and strange hum of the machine adding to the confusion. She emptied her magazine at the machine’s spindly leg structure, reasoning that perhaps the main housing might be too thick for the acid to be an effective weapon there, but perhaps if she dropped the thing on its head by kicking its legs out, that might accomplish something.

Diving for cover behind a toppled table, she slammed home a magazine of the more conventional metal ammunition. The gas guns weren’t as powerful as a regular weapon but in these close quarters, that hardly mattered. She still had another full magazine of the acid pellets, but right now bullets were a better

option. If they survived, she'd deal with the machine. If not...

Rogers popped up and fired a quick shot in the direction of the soldiers who had gathered at the far end of the room. The enemy ducked into cover and Carter and Deering waited until they lifted their heads before snapping off shots of their own. The gas guns had a poor rate of fire and limited range, so they'd practiced this kind of timed, alternating fire to compensate. It worked well, so long as their ammunition held out.

Suddenly the hum from the machine again changed its pitch, a second, whining note joining the deep thrum. The images within the machine seemed to swell and bulge as if trying to break free of the housing that surrounded them. The light pulsed between images, somehow both brighter and darker, flooding the room with colours the eye couldn't name. One of the scientists doubled over and heaved violently, overcome by the effect.

A tall, lean soldier in the menacing black of the Nazi SS, stood and took aim at the table behind which Wilma was crouching. A bullet tore through the wood just above her head, then another just beyond the tip of her nose, splinters of wood carving lines in the sensitive skin of her cheeks. The next shot would find her, and the wooden table would not protect her. The shot never came.

Instead a strangled cry sounded from across the room. Deering risked a quick peek and was stunned to see the black-clad soldier lifted and dragged into the belly of the machine by some unseen force. The instant he made contact with the pulsing light, like Corrigan before him, he simply vanished.

“Wilma!” shouted Buck. “That thing is gonna blow!”

Shots rang out across the room, forcing him closer to her as he tried to stay ahead of them.

“That’s the point, Rogers!” she shouted back.

“If it goes, how do we get Corrigan back?” he demanded, anger and concern warring for dominance in his voice.

“We don’t, Buck,” said John Carter, popping up to send another bullet into the knot of enemy soldiers. The clipped cry from the group told them he had scored a hit. “We fry the damned thing and they send Corrigan’s folks a medal and a

flag."

An ominous creak joined the cacophony that filled the room. Through the smoke and clamour, Wilma could see that her idea had borne fruit. The spider-like leg structure was buckling beneath the weight of the huge machine it held. The acid's reaction had run its course, but the effect was like an avalanche, unstoppable once it had begun.

As if snatched from the ground by an invisible hand, two more soldiers and a scientist suddenly shot toward the opening in the metal housing, blinking from existence the moment they made contact with the pulsing light within. A moment later, John Carter too was lifted from his crouch behind an upturned table and sucked across the room and into the roiling, flickering light belching from the dying device.

"Carter!" wailed Wilma Deering. There was absolutely nothing she could do and no way she could imagine to get her men back. She and Rogers were now alone. Sliding in beside her, Buck grabbed her shoulder and gave it a shake. Her eyes filled with fury and grief in equal measure.

"We've gotta go, Wilma!" he shouted. She could hear booted feet pounding down the hall toward them and there was no other exit from this room.

"Go?" she demanded. "Go where?"

Buck held up a German grenade in one hand and the last remaining rocket in the other. "Wherever they went," he said, matter-of-factly. "Only we close the door behind us." He wagged his grenade and rocket for emphasis.

"Are you insane?" she asked, horrified.

"It's been suggested," he grinned. He hooked a finger through the grenade pin, cocked his arm in invitation, and smiled wider. "Shall we?"

By the sounds of it, the soldiers were at the door. A grin split her features and she took the proffered arm. A hail of gunfire followed them as they charged across the room and dove for the opening in the machine as it toppled towards them. Buck dropped his grenade and the rocket as he launched them with all his strength.

The machine toppled over onto the floor, falling in such a way that the

opening and its flashing images dropped neatly over the grenade and rocket as they exploded. The alien metal of the housing absorbed most of the blast, but even that strange material couldn't contain the combined fury of high explosive and chemical rocket fuel completely. A deep, resounding 'whumphf' sent a ring of compressed air through the room, ripping the housing apart and crumpling the lab's sensitive instrumentation in its violence.

Thaddeus Sivana, conscripted a month ago, the day after his eighteenth birthday, had watched the whole strange battle through his cracked and cockeyed spectacles. Between the blow from the woman's strange gun and the impact of the compression wave from the explosion earlier, he had barely been able to stay conscious, let alone reload his weapon and bring it to bear.

Entering the laboratory, he had arrived just in time to see the first enemy saboteur vanish into the machine. Before being conscripted, Sivana had been on a track to attend a prestigious university to further his studies in theoretical physics, but in its wisdom, the state had decided he was of more use behind a gun than in front of a chalkboard. What he had just seen defied everything he knew about the laws that governed the universe.

How wonderful!

Fighting to remain awake, he had watched more of the room's occupants being dragged into whatever field was powering the impossible device. He devoured every detail the way a gourmand would consume a feast of rare delicacies. He was horrified when he realized that the goal of these saboteurs was to destroy this elegant, uncanny machine but his arms and legs refused to work and he was forced to impotently watch as events unfolded. He tried to focus on the images flashing within the machine, to focus and understand what he was seeing. The hum from the apparatus sent fingers of delicious agony into the tissues of his brain and he thought he heard a voice that was not a voice whisper, "Mongo," behind his eyes.

When the man and the woman leapt into the device, everything in him demanded he follow, but the effort to move was beyond him. His body had always been frail; his mind was his true strength. In that moment, he would have

traded his exquisite brain for a stronger frame.

The machine crashed mightily to the floor, and an instant later, Thaddeus Sivana was slammed against the wall by another compression wave. Hot metal rained down around him, but somehow, he managed to maintain consciousness. Though peppered by a dozen or more globules of hot metal, he was not struck by anything fatal. A shard of twisted metal as long as his middle finger and as thick as his slim wrist clattered to the ground a few inches from his left hand. Though he didn't know why, he slid his thick wool sleeve over his hand and picked up the hot fragment and dropped it into one of the pouches on his belt.

As he released it, his bare skin touched it for the briefest moment.

Though his ears rang painfully, Sivana still heard the voice behind his eyes whisper, 'Mongo.' It was the most beautiful sound he had ever known.

## EPILOGUE

“Where...?” John Carter’s voice vanished into a vast red desert beneath an unnaturally bright orange sky. The air hummed with alien life, but he received no answer.

“...the hell...?” muttered Crash Corrigan. He was lying on his back, gaping up at the dome above and the living sea beyond. Thousands of darting fish as bright as gemstones swam in a blue that burned his eyes.

“...are we?” Buck Rogers breathed, lowering Wilma Deering gently to the gleaming street from where she had lain atop him. The impossible city loomed above, towers tilting around them at mad angles, blotting out the sky.

**Coming soon from the *House of Entropy*: the next thrilling adventure of Buck Rogers, John Carter, and Crash Corrigan!**