



WHERE LATE THE CITY CRUMBLES

Life in the Colonial Militia

A decade ago, they invaded, laying waste to much of New Moravia and launching repeated raids against humanity. But unlike the monsters of the bedroom, these nearly invisible creatures don't like the dark. So, humanity is forced to fight them underground. Armed with night-vision goggles, humanity can raise hell with the Invaders. At least what is left of them... because, after a decade of fighting no one on New Moravia is whole anymore. For some, it's worse than others.

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Malinta Tunnel, Bataan Sector, New Moravia.

The ground shook again. The Invaders were dropping more bombs on the surface. They roared like thunder, but it was just for show. The damage to the surface had been done long ago. All they were doing was adding rubble to the surface. The intent was to keep everybody awake. Lt. Francie Alderson was used to it. She leaned back in her chair, snoozing. One had to sleep whenever it was possible. Mostly you slept whenever you were waiting around for something to happen.

The whole underground was a warren of tunnels. There was the occasional light, but they were placed to attract the Invaders and make them easy targets. Most of the underground was dimly lit. But you got used to it. There were tripwires everywhere. If you wanted to move fast, you needed to wear night-vision goggles. Almost everyone had a pair hanging around their necks or on their foreheads. Goggles and uniforms. It was the only thing everyone possessed. After all the surface industry was destroyed, the only things the underground manufacturers managed to continue to turn out with any regularity were uniforms and goggles. Everything else you pretty much had to scrounge for.

Dark and dingy was the order of the day. And there was the ever-present smell of mold. The reality was most of the underground tunnels weren't tunnels at all, but underground rivers. After the first attacks, nobody had time to carve out thousands of miles of tunnels. The original colonists thought the underground rivers were a nice oddity, now they were essential. Besides, the place was filled with stairs going up and down. This had a tendency to get the Invaders lost inside the warrens, a wonderful side benefit. Fran felt someone nudge her shoulder.

Major Josiah Norville Dobbs towered over her. He was far younger than one might picture a major, but then they all were. Fran was sure just yesterday she'd turned sixteen. The major was in good shape, rather good looking too. Fran thought he was hot. Only one of his arms had been replaced by a robotic. "You looking for me?"

Fran straightened herself out and stood. Part of it was she was trying to show off. It was her chest. Well, that's what most men noticed about her first, not the robotic right hand. She was anxious for the major to notice. But he was good at it. He could check out a soldier's breasts with appearing to be checking them out. "Command send me down here."

"Oh, why the hell did they do that?"

"They are looking for Sergeant Weissman."

He sat down at his makeshift desk and tried to ignore her. "What makes you think I have him?"

This only infuriated Fran. She adjusted her chest again. She knew she had him. Fran could tell he was lying. He always looked down at his datapads when he was lying. She turned on all her charm, leaning over his desk so he could get a good view down her partially open shirt. "Because you always do. Any of the engineers meander by here and you snatch them up like a ripe chicken."

He tried to ignore her, but she had him. He couldn't avoid glancing up. Dobbs got up and went over to a backpack laying on the floor. He fumbled around, pretending to look for something. The truth was he was attracted to her. There was a lot to be attracted by. Dobbs knew you had to make connections

when you could. Life was short. But she was so young. Dobbs glanced back at her. “Fell free to look around if you want to.”

Sgt. Dick Kopp stormed in. You couldn’t knock on the curtain in front of the major’s office anyway. “He’s in the back room. He’s taking everyone at poker.”

Dobbs took the sergeant aside, wrapping his robotic arm around the man’s shoulder. “Keep him in the back room. Make sure he wins.”

Fran adjusted herself again, twisting so the open part of her shirt was a little more exposed. She was going commando for the major and she wanted to be sure he was aware. She undeniably caught the sergeant’s eyes. Dobbs had to push him back through the curtain. Fran’s voice was accusatory. “So, you do have him.”

He tried to be cagey but determined. She liked his deep, resounding voice. “I admit nothing of the kind.”

“You can’t keep doing this. Command has him as AWOL.”

“I need him. Straighten it out, will you?”

She couldn’t deny him anything. Only he didn’t know how far she was willing to go. Or if he did, he was too much the gentleman to let it show. If she let him have the engineer, she’d have to come back to do the paperwork. “Alright, but you own me.”

“I owe you.”

Fran gave him one last look and then disappeared through the curtain. Dobbs tapped the COMM link on his wrist. “Kopp, get Weissman in here.” The voice of the sergeant came back through the device. “Right away, major.”

Dobbs tried adjusting his uniform. Seeing Lt. Alderson always got him worked up. He was glad he hadn’t started sweating. Maybe he could get her a promotion. He could fraternize with a captain. Kopp moved the curtain aside and brought in Weissman. The young man glanced around the office. He had shifty eyes; Dobbs could tell he was inventorying the entire room. “Admission’s free, have a seat.”

“What your name, soldier?”

The young man looked nervous. He’d lost both legs and a hand had them replaced with robotics. He’s been around a bit. Dobbs could tell, he’d already seen more than his fair share of fighting. “Weissman”

“First name?”

“Jackson”

“What do your friends call you?”

“Jackson”

“You have fine friends, Weissman,” Dobbs remarks sarcastically. “Very inventive. I hear you’re an engineer. You ever serve in a medical detachment before?”

Weissman practically exploded. “What? You want me to join the 73rd? A PTSD command? You’re kidding, I’ll drop dead. I’ll drop dead.”

Dobbs tried to calm the man. “Sit down. I don’t know where everybody gets all these crazy ideas. Every soldier in my unit is highly decorated.”

The sergeant continued without even appearing to behave as if he’d heard what the major was saying. “I know I’m depressed, but I’m not PTSD.”

The Major started to get a little defensive. “They’re fighters,” he insisted.

“They’re fighters?” Weissman protested, “Look at me.” He finally sat down on the old ammo box which acted as the office chair. His butt hit the seat as if he’d been standing for a year. With a sigh, Weissman spoke rapidly. “You say they are all highly decorated soldiers. That settles it. Well, you don’t want me. It’ll spoil your record. I’m not a true engineer. I just dabble. I couldn’t put two springs together to form a mattress.”

Dobbs eyed his datapad. “Your record with the 154th says otherwise. Why it says here you even built the captain a new spine and half a chest. Pretty impressive. You’ll have to come up with some more creative fabrications. They wouldn’t even believe you in the 23rd and you know how dumb they are.”

“I’ll try.”

“You mean I’ll try, sir.”

“Yes... yes, sir.”

The major became enthusiastic. “So, are you ready to join up?”

Weissman stammered. “Major, I...”

Now it was Dobb’s turn to pour on the charm. “Weissman we have the best food in the sector. Not to mention some of the most attractive women.”

The Sergeant toured sour. “Who’s got an appetite.” He was lying, of course. Who in the militia didn’t think food was in short supply? And on this planet, everyone was in the military. This meant the whole planet was constantly hungry.

“Well, head over to the mess,” Major Dobbs suggested. “Get something to eat. It’ll calm your nerves. Sergeant Kopp,” Dobbs spoke to the man he knew was listening on the other side of the curtain. “Mr. Weissman has agreed to join the 73rd. Welcome aboard. Show him around, would you.”

Sergeant Kopp appeared pleased. “Glad you could join us.” He led Weissman down the main tunnel. It was one of the few sections humans carved out of the local limestone rock formations. It almost looked like a real hallway.

Weissman wasn’t impressed. “People are always making this mistake about me. I not worth taking the time to get to know. You guys would be wise to transfer me right now.”

Kopp tried to act surprised, but he was doing a lousy job. “But you’ll miss the poker game tonight.”

“I wasn’t planning on being here that long.”

Corporal Gavoni turned the corner with a bundle of supplies. “New guy?”

Dobbs gave him a wry grin. “He’ll make a good engineer, Gavoni. He understands stress.” Dobbs gaped at the bundle the corporal was carrying. “Gavoni, what are you carrying?”

“Clothespins, sir.”

The major put his hands on his hips. Most people didn’t do this anymore. It was one thing stabbing your leg with a finger, it was another to poke yourself with a surgical steel appendage. “Clothespins? What the hell good are Clothespins?”

The corporal grinned back with a vaguely duplicitous look. “I don’t know, sir. But I sure we can trade it for something.”



Christine Towser ducked around the ruins of the church. She was wearing a mockery of her normal uniform. Her jet-black shirt was a size too small. She was wearing ridiculously small shorts and inky black boots that came up past her knee. A stray cannonball slammed into one of the remaining walls, sending plaster flying everywhere. She could hear the troops forming up. Chanting the rebel yell. They charged, bayonets gleaming. To Christine, they appeared as a sea of Confederate butternut uniforms. Only they were dead. Shortages of troops had caused the south to reanimate their dead. What charged Janet were half-demons and half monsters in gray wool uniforms. Where there should have been faces, all she could see were bleach-white skulls.

The air was filled with bursting artillery shells. Smoke and fire covered half the sky. Christine pulled back the clip and inserted a round into the 50-caliber chamber. She pressed the trigger. The clatter of the machine-gun sounded like the clanking of a tank tread. In between, she could hear the clink of the brass casings as they landed on the ground. She expected to see the gray-clad rebels soldiers fall at the same rate, but they continued to advance mindlessly. Puffs of dirt erupted from their uniforms as the bullets struck. Christine could see light leaking through the other side of the small, round holes.

A small creature jumped up on the wall next to her. It looked as if it was a marionette of a dragon, straight out of some long-forgotten, Victorian children’s play, the strings missing. Opening its mouth, it sprayed the line of approaching troops with a blast of flame. It was like the jet of a burning oil well. The advancing horde disappeared in a burst of vapor and the screeching, tormented cries of the undead. Christine released the trigger and the final shell casing rattled against the floor. But the clank of tracks could still be heard.

Rising out of a nearby gully was the barrel of a tank. Ascending like some creature from the grave, the sleek Panzer Mark IV clambered up into view. The turret turned to face the ruins, its machine guns clamoring away. As the shells thudded against the walls, both the puppet-dragon and Christine ducked behind them. The blast of the tank’s 75mm high-explosive cannon shot vibrated the walls, plaster rained down on the two defenders.

Christine crawled over to a long box on the floor. She flipped open the lid amidst the din of the machine gun and cannon fire and pulled out a panzerfaust anti-tank weapon. The whole thing looked like

someone had sliced off the top of a painted over streetlamp. Christine peered over the top of the wall, gaging the tank's approach. The marionette dragon squatted alongside her. She calculated the distance to the tank by the sounds of its tracks. The panzerfaust was a short-range weapon and only good for one shot. She had to make it count.

Leaning over the wall, she took careful aim and pressed the trigger. Flames shot out the back of the launcher as the warhead speed toward the armored front of the tank. Christine could see the smoke from the tank's cannon burst forth. What happened next appeared to her to be in slow motion. She could see the tank shell heading straight for her. It couldn't miss. Her eyes remained opened wide, even though her brain tried desperately to shut them. She felt the terror of the approaching round, the icy grip of the approaching steel. She knew there would be no escape. A familiar voice came from behind her. It was warm and reassuring.

"Okay, F Company, its time for us to take a little jaunt topside. But before we go, I want to introduce you to our new engineer." She woke up with a start.



Jackson Weissman looked down the tunnel tube at the motley crew resting on the ground. "Weissman," announced Sgt. Dick Kopp, "this is F Company, Cpl. Gavoni, privates Yossarian, Orr, Towser, Fraser, Robinson, and Corporal Perkins."

Weissman was taken aback. "Where's the rest of the company?"

"This is it. We're still awaiting replacements."

The entire group, except their new engineer, groaned. Weissman did a quick mental inspection. They were a wide collection of replacement parts for him to maintain; arms, legs, chests, skullcaps, and even an eye or two. Then his eyes fell on Private Christine Towser. She was perfect. Well, maybe not back on earth. There she might have been considered plain, although her buxom appearance would have made her stand out on any planet. But here on New Moravia, she was special. She didn't have any replacement parts. No metal appendages at all. She didn't look like she had a scratch on her. Slim with a nice head of bobbed brunette hair, she had the most intense hazel eyes and clear skin. She was the best thing he had seen in months.

"Alright, listen up," Kopp shouted. "We're going up top, so check your weapons."

No one wanted to go up on the surface. The Invaders controlled everything. They had better weapons, better targeting devices, and they had complete and absolute air supremacy. Beside everything up on the surface was ruined anyway. The only reason to go up there was for the sheep. Since the human population was gone, the sheep had gone nuts. the Invaders didn't know what to do with them. They seemed totally harmless, so they ignored them. If they had any idea the entire garrison of humans was using them as a food supply, they could have destroyed them all. Of course, going up to get sheep was also another way to use humans as bait to get the Invaders underground so they could be destroyed.

Kopp briefed us. "There's a big herd over in Red sector, so we are going over there to bring them back."

There were more groans and mutterings from the group. To survive, you had to go up in the dark and get back before the sun came back up. The only good news was that the nights on New Moravia lasted 46 hours. Still Red was too far to walk, they were going to need transport.

Weissman walked right up to Christine. "Say, Towser is it? You're not hiding any, ah..."

"Robotic parts?" she finished for him, without even looking up for more than a second. "No," her reply was curt. Almost dismissive. She instantly went back to checking her weapon. Robinson pushed Weissman's shoulder back forcefully. His voice was gruff and harsh. "Hey, leave her alone."

"I was just trying to check on everybody's needs before we got going. You know, in case I needed to get any special materials or anything."

Fraser followed up Robinson's feeling. "Frak you. And screw your special materials too."

Standing up for himself, Weissman got touchy. "Look, I outrank you, Fraser."

Orr pushed Weissman's other shoulder. "You're not anything around here until we say you are, replacement."

Changing his tone, Weissman got plaintive. "Look I was only trying to start a conversation."

"Well, frak off anyway," Robinson continued.

"Look, I've been up top. Plenty of times. I've been in more than my share of firefights. How do you think I got this?" He held up his robotic hand, flexing all the steel fingers. Allowing them all to get a good look, the servos pulled his hand into a fist. Weissman had to slap his artificial hand to untangle his fingers out of the fist though. Without any skin covering them, the metal digits tended to get caught together in the palm of his hand.

Kopp took him aside; wrapping his artificial arm around his shoulders. "Don't let these dicks bother you, Weissman. They just don't trust outsiders. Even if you are an engineer. They'll get used to you. Right fellows?"

The group grumbled again.

"Well as my father, Bernard Herschel Schwartz used to say," Weissman declared, "There's no need to get you tail up and your stinger out!"

Kopp appeared perplexed. "I thought your name was Weissman?"

"It is," Weissman explained. "Weissman was my mother's name."

"Two minutes to lights out," Kopp announced loudly to the group. "What happened to your father?" Kopp inquired, inserting a magazine into his weapon. "They get divorced?"

The engineer sounded sentimental. "No, my dad bought it on day two of the invasion."

"I get it... lame. We don't give a shit about your sob stories, Weissman." Robinson pushed right past him towards the exit hatch. They all stood in the tunnel for what felt like twenty minutes. At last, the lights when out. It was pitch black. You couldn't see your hand in front of your face, artificial or otherwise. But

any light would have given the location of the hatch away to the Invaders. Robinson opened the hatch to the surface.

After being in the dark, all the stars appeared incredibly bright. Weissman put on his night-vision goggles and everything got even brighter. He had to blink for a minute to get used to it. Orr pushed him out of his way. "Get moving Weissman, we haven't got all night."

The group crawled over the rough terrain, working their way around boulders and through gullies. At the end of their journey, they came to a medium-sized wooden boat. It was resting on its side nowhere near even a drop of water. She was listing sideways, her deck sloping toward the ground. Cpl. Alfredo Gavoni climbed up on the deck and uncovered a hatch in the middle of the ship. Inside looked like rolls and rolls of canvas. Fraser and Perkins grabbed a two-handled pump on deck and started working it. For all the world it appeared to be a bilge pump, but it wasn't intended to pump water. As they worked the device, the canvas bag started to fill with gas.

Weissman stared at the whole process. "What's going on?"

Kopp decided to let him in on the secret. "The Invaders can detect anything metal flying in the air. But this thing is 100% wood and cloth."

The engineer didn't get it. "So?"

"So," Kopp explained, "we fill the bag with helium and then we float into the air. The boat acts as the balloon's gondola."

"You're kidding?"

"Not at all. Fortunately, New Moravia's gravity is only half that of Earth, so it's easier to do and the Invaders can't detect us."

His fellow sergeant wasn't convinced. "How do you know?"

Kopp gave him a slight chuckle. "We've used it before."

The ship straightened as the balloon bag filled. "Alright, you bums," Gavoni yelled, "everyone on board." The team scrambled over the side of the ship. As Fraser and Perkins finished pumping, the ship rose into the air. "Relax. Enjoy the ride," Gavoni told Weissman, "this is the easy part." They started drifting over the lower foothills and Robinson and Orr started spinning the ship's wheel. As they did so a propeller at the back of the ship started turning. The ship slowly headed out over the north Luzon plain, headed straight for Red Sector.

Chances are, half of the group was terrified of flying. But no one showed even the slightest evidence of it. They were a stoic lot. Or they had learned how to fake confidence. Even being up in a balloon made Weissman a little shaky. In the valley below, he could see them; lines of them.

The Invaders were a tough, determined enemy. Implacable. In all the literature, those kinds of enemies didn't take prisoners. But not the Invaders. They loved to take prisoners. They hung them in cages from tall poles all over the Luzon plain. Of course, they were all bobby-trapped. If anyone tried to cut them down or open the cage the bomb strapped to the bottom would go off. No one had yet figured out how to disarm them.

Weissman couldn't make out any movement in the cages, which was a good thing. It really ripped your guts out to be up close. Many of them would ask... no... beg you to shoot them. The engineer never had the guts to do it. It was hard even to think about it. It gave Weissman the impression the Invaders were working towards putting everyone in a PTSD company.

Corporal Gavoni put on a white jacket from a box on the ship's deck. It was one of the old uniforms from the air service. A fancy pilot's dress uniform. Just putting it on made his back straighten and his chin lifted a little higher.

"It suits you," Kopp commented.

Gavoni was all smiles. "Doesn't it though."

Weissman almost laughed, but he had to agree the view was stunning. And the terrain below was nice too. Once they cleared the valley and got into the foothills. His eyes, however, became locked on Christine Towser. He had vague memories of his mother before they had to replace both her arms. Christine reminded him of a much younger version of his mother. He tried not to stare but he found it impossible. He desperately wanted to talk to her... just talk. He worked his way in her direction, but before he could get to her, she shifted to the other side of the ship.

He tried to get into position again, Kopp intercepted him. "Go check on Yossarian, his legs not working right. See what you can do about it."

The engineer stumbled over the words but finally got out, "Right, I'll take a look at it."

Most of the robotic limbs on the planet had been built with spare parts. Some of them were better than others. Yossarian's looked like it had been built by a one-armed man who was blind in one eye and far-sighted in the other. The wiring was a mess. There was no backup to handle battle damage and the hydraulic system leaked all over the place. Weissman couldn't figure out why it was so sticky. Then the smell tipped him off. Yossarian was using blood plasma as hydraulic fluid. He was keeping it in his leg to use for emergency transfusions. The concept was as ingenious as it was disgusting.

Weissman loosed the third and the fourth nodules, which appeared to have gotten gunked up by the leakage. Yossarian tested the leg. "Yeah, it works better. Maybe you'll be some good after all." He stormed off without saying another word.

"Well, I guess the high road is closed for repairs. Don't thank me," Weissman called after him, "it's all part of my job."

"Don't let him get to you," Gavoni remarked checking the tie down on the gas bag. "he's a schmuck."

The engineer in Weissman noted the ocular unit replacing the corporal's left eye. "That looks like a regular lens," he commented. "Anybody ever give you a night-goggle lens?"

"No," Gavoni sounded surprised. "You can do that?"

"Yeah. Have a seat. I have you fixed up in a jiffy."

"Where'd you get a night-goggle lens?"

“Don’t ask, just don’t ask.” Weissman gave him a sheepish look. “Okay, if you must know, there’s this Lieutenant Colonel in the 24th. He’s got a collection of them. Rotates them in and out.” He patted Gavoni on the shoulder. “Fortunately, the Colonel doesn’t know how to count.”



They were at least 200 feet up, but Weissman could hear the sheep bleating below them. Intelligence had been right for once in their miserable lives. Gavoni signaled the rest of the crew and they started releasing gas from the balloon’s bag. The ship started to drift slowly toward the ground. Everyone had their eyes peeled on the ground. The Invaders were hard to spot. The sheep were grazing quietly on a field outside one of the old cities. It was all ruins now, but the sheep were chewing calmly as if everything was normal. It was a good sign. The sheep could smell nearby Invaders and it usually made them stampe. Still, everyone was tense, keeping their eyes facing upwind of the herd.

The ship settled down slowly but landed with a serious thud when it finally hit the ground. Most of the team jumped off at once and took up battle positions. Uneasy eyes scanned the horizon. Once the ship was packed away, they started driving the herd back to the Bataan sector. Frazier and Robinson tried hiding out in the middle of the heard. They looked ridiculous.

“What the hell do you guys think you are doing?” Gavoni, now back in his regular uniform, yelled at them.

Robinson popped his head up. “We’re just trying to blend in.”

“You guys are wearing black uniforms in the middle of a herd of white sheep,” Gavoni tried to explain to them. “You stand out like an olive in a snowstorm.”

Frazier shrugged his shoulders and the two cautiously made their way out to the outside of the flock. Gavoni turned to Weissman. “Their entire platoon was wiped out in an ambush. They were the only two that made it. They had to hide under the bodies of their comrades for three days before they could escape.”

“Is that why they were assigned to the 73rd?” Weissman asked.

Gavoni’s answer gave a new meaning to the term snotty. “No, they’re afraid of Christmas. Keep moving Weissman. Of all the dumb questions.”

Weissman noted that Christine was an expert at camouflage. He could hardly see where she was. Sometimes he thought he’d caught a glimpse of her, but when he looked again it was only a rock. “Hey,” Weissman tapped Gavoni on the shoulder, “where’s Towser? Did we lose her?”

“Don’t worry about her,” Gavoni snickered, “she can hide better than all the rest of these klutzes put together. She’s our best scout.”

“Not a thing a guy wants to hear, you know.”

“What?”

“Never mind. I was just talking to myself. What’s she doing in the 73rd?”

“Nightmares.”

“What kind of nightmares?”

“You know,” Gavoni practically winked at him, “the kind where you wake up screaming at the top of your lungs.”

Off in the distance, Orr spotted a lone invader vehicle driving down a dusty path. He made a hand signal, and everyone went down behind cover. Everyone except Weissman. Gavoni had to grab the engineer and throw him behind a rock. “Don’t go getting yourself shot,” Gavoni warned, “I don’t want to have to go out and find a new engineer.”

Weissman grinned. “I didn’t know you cared.”

“I don’t,” Gavoni muttered, “I just don’t like to fill out the paperwork.”

After crossing the lower foothills, the group took a break. Weissman sat down next to a ewe. “How are you doing?” The sheep continued to eat the local grass, completely ignoring the human. “You folks pretty healthy? You need an engineer? Got any artificial limbs in need of replacement? Any mechanical parts in need of repair? You see, I’m looking for a better situation. The people I’m involved with right now... well, they don’t seem to have much respect for an engineer. I kind of get the impression they wish I wasn’t here. You know what I mean? No? Well, it’s been nice chatting with you.”

During the breaks, some of the team members tried to get a few minutes of sleep. Weissman wasn’t very successful. He didn’t like being on the surface. It made his skin crawl. He noticed that Christine was sleeping either. Only Gavoni seemed to have no trouble getting in a little shut-eye.

Weissman turned to one of the sheep grazing nearby. He pointed out Christine to the disinterested animal. “Nice huh? I don’t think she likes me very much. It’s not that I’m unpleasant to look at exactly, you understand, it’s just that I look better at a distance.” The ewe seemed to agree.

It was another 30 hours to get the sheep over to one of the hidden entrances. A long, nerve-racking, 30 hours. Which was matched by the difficulty of the next step. Sheep, as a rule of thumb, don’t like to fit themselves through a small hole. They needed to be moved one at a time and they tend to make a lot of noise complaining while the whole process is going on. Weissman especially had a fair amount of difficulty with the task, not being used to carrying sheep. “Look,” Weissman tried to explain to a rather difficult specimen, “I don’t like this any more than you do.”

On his way toward the hatch, he noticed Christine. She wasn’t carrying one at all. He watched as she whispered into its ear and the animal went down the hole without any further encouragement. Two or three other ones followed it. “Weissman spoke to the one he was carrying. “Now, why can’t you be like them?”

They finally got them all underground as the sun started to threaten to burst over the horizon. The ruminant’s section was there to take over the herd. The team crowded into one of the side galleries and everyone was down on the floor faster than you can say, Jack Bennington. Christine, however, seemed wide awake. Weissman pulled off his night-vision goggles. It felt good not to have them on after 45 straight hours. “Well, like my father, Bernard Herschel Schwartz used to say,” Weissman declared, “That went about as well as a pig’s bath and not half as dusty.”

There was general grumbling around the team as members rolled over and tried to curl up into a ball. “Weissman, shut up,” Orr protested. “the man likes the sound of his own voice too much.”

Robinson seemed to agree. “Man’s got a ten-gallon mouth and an elephant’s ears.”

Weissman got defensive. “You people are about as friendly as a skunk at a church picnic.”

“Weissman,” Perkins grumbled, “shut up.”

Finally getting the message, Weissman leaned back against the rough rock wall, trying to adjust himself to get comfortable. His eyes met Christine’s. They seemed like caramel pools. One the one hand, Weissman didn’t even want to blink. But on the other hand, we could hardly keep them open. It was the last thing he thought about as he fell asleep.

The screams woke him up. Fraser was yelling at the top of his lungs, but he wasn’t even awake. Everyone else was still asleep as well. Weissman figured they all must be used to it in this outfit, but it made him a little uncomfortable. Then Perkins started screaming. It was like a call and response scenario... with all the participants still asleep. Weissman was at a loss for what to do. Fortunately, Major Dobbs showed up.

“Wake them up,” he instructed Weissman and at the same time, he was shaking Sergeant Kopp. “We need every over in D Tunnel. The Invaders are running a Mole.”

The Mole was a great big digging device with lots of lights all over it. They used it to dig down into the tunnels when they wanted to launch an attack. You couldn’t use your night goggles until you shot out all the lights. Which was a problem, because the glass plates on the lights were armored. Everyone stirred, but they were slow to get up. “Look,” Dobbs told them, “I know you’re tired. I know you’d rather be anywhere else. But that’s not an option right now. A Mole is working its way down to Tunnel D. We’ve got to get down there and hold them off until Charlie Company gets here.”

The major threw a magazine in a weapon. “What are you doing,” Kopp asked sarcastically.

Dobbs gave him a grin. “I’m going with you. I told you we need everyone we can get.” He put his hands on Weissman’s shoulder. “Even the engineer here. Perkins, get him a rifle.”

“Now I know we’re all screwed,” Gavoni protested.

The major’s entire body seemed to droop. “What do you want to do Gavoni? Do you want to face them in the dark? Or do you want to go up top and fight them up there?”

“Right, Chief.” Gavoni seemed to be galvanized into action. “Somebody get the kid a rifle. We’re going in.” There was still a fair amount of grumbling, but it was now accompanied by collective action.



D Tunnel was a long tube with plenty of alcoves. These nooks and crannies were filled with rubble. They were the perfect place for a sniper to hid out. Which was why every one of them was empty. It was the first place the Invaders would shoot. They’d take out the group in about fifteen seconds. The team was using an old-fashioned magician’s trick, black cloth.

Even if you looked carefully, the black cloth appeared to be part of the wall. It blended in perfectly. Especially in the dark. Still, everyone shifted uncomfortably... waiting.

“You know, my dad...” the entire team filled in “Bernard Herschel Schwartz” before Weissman could even say it. “Well, he used to say you either have to write a book or do something someone else will want to write in a book.”

“True that,” Frasier replied.

“Your father was a smart man,” Yossarian added.

Overhead they could hear the rumbling of the Mole. The sound grated on you, like a car security alarm. Francie Alderson tried to make a break for it. The lieutenant was terrified out of her mind. She looked just like she was, a frightened teenaged girl.

Running down the hall she ran right smack into Dobbs. He could have said anything to her. No one could have objected if he read her the riot act, gave her a long speech about duty, honor, and Colonial Defense service. But he didn’t do any of it. He started singing. It was the Marine Hymn, or maybe it was something else. Since Weissman didn’t know what the Marine Hymn sounded like anyway.

It didn’t matter, within a few notes, the song was picked up by Fraser, Perkins, and Yossarian. Dobbs only stopped long enough to yell at the others in the group. “Come on, you Yardbirds, let me hear you sing.” The rest of the group joined in. Those who didn’t know the words hummed the tune. All they needed was a couple of bagpipes and they’d be in business. They picked up the volume, and soon it was louder than the scraping sounds of the mole.

Francie Alderson cocked her weapon and started to belt out the song. She went back behind her black cloth and got ready. Nobody had to wait long. There was a deep rumble and a crash as the roof gave in. There was light everywhere. It was way too bright for anyone to use their night goggles. But the light was perfect to hide everyone behind their screens.

The tunnel broke into a symphony of light flashes. As expected, the lights resisted the explosions. Still, the firing continued. There was no more singing. You would have been able to hear to anyway with all the other noise going on. The smell of cordite was enough to choke a horse. You couldn’t see the Invaders. They wore some kind of cloaking armor which make them look like shadows or light refractions. When you killed them, the armor stopped working. They were humanoid, but the looked like tall, slim, faceless silver robots. Until they blew up. The Invaders took prisoners, but they didn’t ever want to be caught themselves.

You couldn’t see a thing with all the lights. Without your goggles on, you couldn’t see the enemy. But you could tell the team was hitting them. They sounded like a screaming teakettle when they were hit. Weissman kept pulling the trigger. At the end of each dull click, there seemed to be a scream. On top of this, Weissman could hear the crack and shattering of glass. One of the lights went out on the Mole. Perfect. One down, about 60 more to go.

Something slammed into him hard. So hard it practically made his head ring. He saw flashes of colored lights and felt someone land on top of him, but he couldn’t see a thing. Weissman felt fingers closing

around his throat. Weissman had a sinking feeling. He had never fought the Invaders in hand-to-hand combat before. This was new. He could feel the creature's fingers squeezing around his throat.

Weissman dropped his rifle and put all his effort into getting the Invader off him. They rolled around on the tunnels' floor. They were as close as two people sharing the same single bed. The Invader stank of grease and lubricant. The silver thing was quick, and his movements were concise. Despite all Weissman's efforts, the result was the creature's hands tightening on his throat.

The engineer slammed his fist into the side of the Invader's head. He could feel the scraping impact of his skin on the creature's armor. There was a distinctive crunch of bones in his hand each time the blow landed. At one point there was a sharp crack. What followed was a moment of suspension. Weissman couldn't tell if the Invader had been affected by the blows and he was running out of oxygen to keep throwing more. Then it dawned on him. *The metal hand you idiot.* He was about to throw the next blow with the steel hand when the creature's head exploded. Weissman was drenched in its yellow blood.

When he looked up, the barrel of Christine's weapon was inches away from his face. Smoke was pouring out of the tube. As soon as his hands were off his throat, the pain in his temples hit Weissman like someone was pounding away with a mallet. He couldn't see Christine's next move, but he saw the pipe bomb roll down the floor toward the Mole. He used his arms and legs to frantically scramble down the tunnel like a crab.

The explosion pushed him much farther down the tunnel than he could have propelled himself. The scent of burning rubber and charcoal filled his nostrils. At least his nose was still working, so he wasn't dead. Although he felt like he should be. When the bright glow of the flame dissipated, the hall was dark. Weissman could taste blood on his lips. "Lights out boys."

Rolling in a single motion, he picked up his rifle and popped the goggles back over his eyes. Gravel crunched under his feet. Now he could see them. By absorbing all light, the Invaders appeared as dark shadows. It at least gave you something to aim at. he found he couldn't pull the trigger fast enough. "How do you like death, slimeballs?"

The sounds of battle escalated to the point where everything blurred into one giant noise. Motions, movements and time appeared to meld into a single whole as well. As the passage filled with smoke it also became hard to breathe. If Dante was right about Hell, this was circle number six. As the sounds of combat slowly diminished, Weissman found what was left of Robinson on the floor. Both his mechanical arms had been knocked out. Plus, he was now going to need a prosthetic leg. The engineer stopped the leg bleeding and gave Robinson an expressive stare. "Which one is your shooting arm?"

"The right one, why?"

Weissman didn't answer him, he just got out a paperclip.

"What the hell good is a paperclip going to do?"

The engineer didn't bother to answer. He straightened out the clip and then used it as a wire and twisted it to hold two parts of his mechanical arm together. "That should hold until he can do some better repairs."

Robinson flexed his arm and found the trigger finger was now working. Weissman passed him his rifle. "Well, don't just sit there, shoot something!" The private didn't have to be told twice. He let loose with a barrage of fire. Then went full barbarian on any Invader he could get in his sights. Weissman got off a few more shots until he found Orr. There was nothing he could do for him. The man's face was already cold and pallid.

His attention was ripped away from Orr's body by the silence. Everything had stopped, even though his head was still ringing. The Invaders had been beaten back... and no sight of Charlie company. Lazy SOBs, they'd missed the whole thing. As the ringing in Weissman's ears abated he could hear crying. He turned in a panic to find Christine, but it was Lt. Alderson who was balling. She was cradling Major Dobb's head in her hands. There was blood gushing everywhere. She looked directly at Weissman, "Do something," she sobbed.

"I'm not a medic, I'm an engineer." Weissman put his hands down to stop the bleeding, but it was pointless. The man had too many holes in him. It was like trying to keep water in a colander. The major tried to say something, but all he could do was cough up some blood. His entire body spasmed and then laid still. Francie's tears turned into a waterfall and the young girl ran off down the passageway.

Gavoni grabbed Weissman's head and looked in his eyes. Next, he pulled the engineer's head forward. "You're going to have some bad lumps, but I think you'll live. Which is a good thing, you've got a lot of work to do young man. Perkins is going to need a new leg, Robinson's going to need some new arms, and if you ask me, you can replace Yossarian's whole head. He doesn't use the one he has."

The thought of repairing the team made him panic. Weissman looked around anxiously. Finally, his eyes fell upon Christine. Not a mark on her. He breathed a sigh of relief. She coldly rechambered her weapon.

Weissman glanced down at the body of the major. "You ever wonder what runs through their minds right before the end? They say it's a dream. The most magnificent dream you'll ever have." The engineer stood. Say what you will, but Weissman had changed. They could all hear it in his voice. Everyone needs a home and it was clear Weissman had found his.

Christine put her finger over Weissman's lips. "Come with me." Weissman just smiled.