

The Siege of Denver

by Brendan DuBois, ...

Published: 2015



In a dry trench about twelve klicks west of Denver, Private Melissa MacKay—originally from Hotchkiss, Colorado—rummaged through her battle pack, looking for some paperwork. This section of trench was pretty much identical to the other line of trenches that surrounded the besieged Mile High City, with duckboards on the ground and a dugout nearby to shelter her squad from the occasional incoming fire from the enemy. It was a cool morning, and a small pellet-burning metal stove outside of the dugout burning gave off a little heat.

A couple of meters down the trench, her squad leader, Corporal Stan Jankowski, did his best to shave using a handled mirror stuck into the dirt and a plastic cup of cold water. Next to Jankowski were his own battle pack, a field phone hanging off a stake connecting them to the sector's CP—a burnt-out Best Buy box store out by Route 60—and his Colt M-10. Melissa looked on enviously at Jankowski's M-10. She and the other squad member—Hector Morales, out getting their morning breakfast rations—were only qualified on the Colt M-4, the standard

automatic rifle used by the U.S. Army and its associated National Guard units and allies for decades. But her corporal was the one member of the squad who could carry the M-10, the weapon of choice for fighting the Creepers.

It was a bulky thing, black and looking like an oversized grenade launcher. But after a decade of fighting the Creepers—and mostly losing—the M-10 was about the only weapon available to take on the damn bugs. An infantry weapon fighting an interstellar war. What a world. She lifted her head, looked west. There was movement several hundred meters away, some horse-drawn wagons, soldiers, and two old transport vehicles, belching out steam and smoke from their wood-fired engines.

„What are you looking at, Mac?” Jankowski asked, scraping at a cheek.

„The Signal Corps is moving around. Maybe they’ll do a launch today.”

„Only if the wind is right,” he said. „Hey, Mac, you’re a history nerd. Any idea when this man’s Army last had a balloon corps?”

„Little over a hundred years ago,” she automatically replied. „A few years after the end of World War I.”

„Right you are.”

A hunched-over figure was running towards their trench section, carrying a satchel in his hand.

„Morales is coming in,” she said.

Jankowski wiped at his face with a threadbare green towel. „Anybody else running in with him?”

„Nope.”

„Goddamn Army.”

Melissa said nothing. She knew what Jankowski meant. A typical squad could have up to twelve soldiers, and unfortunately, she and Morales and Jankowski were it. Not good, but not much you could do about it when platoons were taking on company jobs, and companies were taking on battalion jobs. Ten years of war had not only thinned out the planet’s population, but had done the same to its battered armed forces.

Morales reached the edge of the trench, rolled over and grinned. His light brown skin was dusted with dirt, and his helmet was at his side, connected to his MOLLE vest, and his M-4 was slung over his shoulder. He held up the satchel. „Who’s up for breakfast?”

„I’ve been ready for an hour,” Melissa said. „Let’s get to it.”

On a clear section of duckboard, Morales opened up the satchel, took out closed metal containers and a Thermos bottle. The young soldier moved quick and their breakfast was revealed: lukewarm and sweet coffee, cold oatmeal, and two links of sausage.

„There should be three links,” Jankowski said, voice tight. „Why is there only two?”

„That’s all I got from the mess tent, Corporal,” Morales said.

„Bullshit. They know we’re three here, and we should have gotten three links.”

„That’s all they gave me.”

„What, did you eat one on the way over here? Did you?”

Melissa said, „Hey, you guys take the sausage. I don’t particularly like ’em anyway.”

Jankowski glared at her and Morales looked relieved, and Melissa took her breakfast down a ways in the trench, so she could eat by herself. It didn't take long, and when she was finished, she was hungry. She was always hungry. Even back home in Hotchkiss at their farm, there was never enough food to fill you up. Melissa walked back to Jankowski and Morales, and the corporal said, „Morales, you're on clean-up. Hump the dishes back to the mess tent.”

„Hey, it's Mac's turn,” he said. „I'm the one who humped out there to get breakfast. It ain't fair.”

„Don't care, Morales, really don't. You're humping it back.”

Morales kept quiet but Melissa could tell he was pissed. But so what? Crap rolled downhill, and he was the freshest member of their thinned-out unit. When Morales scrambled back over the side of the trench, she saw objects starting to rise up by the transport wagons she had seen earlier.

„Lookie here, Corporal,” she said. „Looks like they're inflating at least three balloons.”

The three dark gray shapes lumbered their way up into the morning sky. Jankowski said, „Well, I'll be damned. Wonder how much cargo they're gonna try this time.”

„You think they'll make it?”

Jankowski wet a finger and held it up in the air. „Two things will determine that, Mac. One will be the wind direction in this section. That's why they set up shop over there. So far it looks good. The other...”

He moved away from the western side of the trench, walked the few steps to the eastern side. Melissa joined him, as they stood on viewing platforms, looked out to the east, where several clicks away, the struggling city of Denver hung on. Before them was a blasted landscape of shattered buildings, broken roadways, rusted vehicles, clumps of grass and brush. On the horizon were the tall buildings of the city itself, hazy through smoke.

But she and Jankowski moved their heads almost as one, to note a dome-shaped structure, blue-gray in color, about two clicks away.

„The bugs,” Jankowski said. „They have a vote. They always do.”

Melissa leaned on the crumbling dirt of the trench. The area out there was No Man's Land, although a more accurate title would be No Human's Land. There was nearly a hundred percent chance that if you walked out there, you'd be barbecued within minutes. The dome was a Creeper base, one of seven that circled the city of Denver and which were established in the first year of the war, when the Creepers arrived in low earth orbit. At first it was thought they were a number of large comet-sized objects, until they maneuvered and achieved orbit and then...

Unleashed hell upon the earth.

First they exploded a number of nuclear devices in a careful pattern around the globe, immediately frying about 99 percent of electronics via EMPs, and then they maneuvered asteroids to drop into oceans, just outside of major cities around the earth, causing tsunamis that killed millions. Then bases like this one were set up on the ground, sheltering Creepers that came out whenever they wanted to burn and lase anything in their path. And if that wasn't enough, the Creepers had a number of killer stealth satellites in orbit that fried anything powered by

electronics—trucks, cars, aircraft, trains, power plants—essentially keeping the planet's survivors stuck in the nineteenth century.

Ten years later the war ground on, with Denver and a host of other unfortunate cities besieged by Creeper forces, which did not allow people out or food in. And why Denver and not Pittsburgh, or St. Louis, or Knoxville? No one knew.

„Corporal?“

„Yeah.“

She thought she had him in a reasonable mood, so she pressed ahead. „When I was assigned here, the lieutenant said I'd be doing some makee-learnie with you.“

„So he did.“

„So how about giving me a couple of practice shots with the M-10?“

Jankowski just kept on staring out at the wasteland. He had been a quiet sort when Melissa arrived here a month ago, not doing much in the way of small talk, just working to keep this section of the trench squared away. Only once had she ever learned anything about Jankowski on her own, and that had happened last month, when temporary hot showers had been set up near the CP. Emerging from the shower, rubbing his torso and arms dry with a towel, wearing a pair of shorts, Jankowski had strolled by her, and on his right upper bicep was an intricate tattoo. The ink job displayed a mountain peak and the Gothic letter „D“.

D for Denver, meaning Jankowski was a native son, one of the fortunate who had been out of the city when the Creepers had set up their siege, and who had been trying ever since to go back home.

„Mac?“

„Yeah?“

„Not today.“

Melissa took a breath. „All right, Corporal.“

„Your paperwork,“ he added. „When's it due?“

„Sixteen hundred today, Corporal,“ she said, feeling humiliated at being so late. „There's a courier stopping by to pick it up.“

„Then get to it.“

„Yes, Corporal.“

About ten minutes later, there was a hammering rumble coming from the northeast. She looked up from paperwork balanced on her knee, and she said, „Corporal?“

He was at the edge of the ditch, binoculars in his hands, and he said, „I saw the incoming. Looks like the Creepers were hitting the Rocky Mountain Arsenal again, or maybe the Denver airport.“

She returned to her papers. „The arsenal's been inactive for decades. And the airport got smeared on invasion day plus two.“

„What's your point?“

„Doesn't make sense.“

Jankowski made a noise that passed as a chuckle. „News flash, Mac, they're aliens.“

„Yeah.“ That was always question number one after the war began, trying to figure out why the Creepers came here, why they started the war the way they did, what was the point of traveling via interstellar space to fight like they were well-

armed British soldiers against African natives in the late 1800's. Didn't make sense, nothing made sense, and one day Jankowski said, „You know, if we ever make it and a history of this fiasco is ever written, it should be called *World War Why*,“ and Melissa thought that was a pretty good idea.

Morales rolled back into the trench, and said, „Heard an attack strike a couple of minutes ago. The airport?“

„Maybe,“ Melissa said. „Might be the arsenal.“

Morales sat down on the duckboards, put his back up against the wall. „Damn bugs... but hey, looks like the balloons are ready to be launched.“

Melissa got up and went to the western side of the trench, and she admired the view: three elongated balloons, gently swaying in the slight morning breeze. She could make out little knots of soldiers at work at the base of each balloon, and her chest felt tight. Go, she thought, go. There was an article she had read last year in *Stars & Stripes*, about the Denver siege, and somebody had called it „The Leningrad of the Rockies“, after that horrible Nazi siege during World War II that had starved hundreds of thousands.

Morales stood next to her. „Think they'll make it?“

„Up to the weather and the Creepers.“

„But there's no people, no electronics on the balloons, nothing advanced. The Creepers should leave it alone.“

„Should isn't a doctrine, Hector.“

Morales said, „You can always hope, can't you?“

„And hope ain't a tactic, either.“

Morales stayed quiet, and Melissa felt sorry for the kid. He was just a replacement, a boy who volunteered from one of the refugee camps in Arizona holding survivors from the L.A. tsunami strike, and he looked bright and strong enough to do his job. But would he be bright enough and strong enough when the proverbial bug crap hit the fan?

Jankowski called out, „Morales! You got watch.“

Melissa leaned against the dirt of the trench edge, watching the balloons rise up higher and higher as they were inflated. There was netting underneath each balloon, and the netting was filled with crates. Food and medical supplies, two items desperately needed in Denver, and the balloons were going to be unmanned. For some reason—why, why, why—the Creepers could sense humans in transportation, and previous manned lighter-than-aircraft had come to flaming ends. Efforts to dig tunnels or use old utility conduits to the city temporarily worked until they were blasted from the killer stealth satellites. This time, however, maybe this—

„Movement!“ Morales yelled. „We've got something going on over at the dome!“

She whirled around and grabbed a set of binoculars and Jankowski raced up as well. Melissa focused in on the dome base. A slit was quickly dilating close and two Creepers—battle units—were skittering out.

Something heavy gripped her throat. This wasn't the first time she had seen Creepers out in the open, but still, there was some sort of primal fear that bubbled right up at seeing the alien creatures on the move. Each was the size of Army transport truck, moving on eight articulated legs. There was a center arthropod,

also articulated, and two large arms, circling around, like they belonged to a goddamn scorpion. The end of each arm was tool-based, sometimes claws or pincers, or sometimes a laser or a flame-type projector, always dangerous. Inside the exoskeleton was a creature, looking like a science-fiction writer's nightmare of an intelligent insectlike alien. The structure was the same blue-gray as the dome base, and almost entirely indestructible.

As one, the Creepers shifted their direction of movement, and they were coming straight on an eastern approach, skittering and crawling over crushed metal, broken masonry, and torn up roads.

„They're coming right at us,” Morales whispered, voice shaky.

Melissa said, „The hell they are. They're heading for the supply balloons.”

Jankowski said, „Shit, you're right, Mac.” He went to the field telephone, gave the handle a whirl-whir, and spoke loudly and deliberately into the receiver. „CP Bravo, CP Bravo, this is Bravo 12. We have two Creepers, battle version, heading due east from dome eight, repeat, from dome eight. It appears they're heading for the balloon launch site. They're approaching grid coordinates, grid coordinates ten-niner-zero-zero-ten-four-five-six. Repeat, ten-niner-zero-zero-ten-four-five-six.”

Melissa pressed the field glasses firm against her eyes to control the shaking from her hands.

„Okay, Bravo 12, out.”

He slammed the receiver back into the field pouch and uttered an extremely foul obscenity.

Morales said, „What did they say, Corporal?”

„They're alerting the artillery, activating the QRF. Not sure when it's going to show up.”

„Well, that'd be—“

Melissa blinked her eyes as both Creepers fired a quick flash from an arm. Laser shots. Damn.

Melissa turned. A truck was burning near the balloon site.

A whistling whine noise pierced the air.

„Incoming!” Jankowski said. „Duck down!”

Melissa squatted as artillery rounds started hammering the torn-up ground around the Creepers, protecting herself from any shrapnel or flying debris stirred up by the blasts coming from the 105 mm artillery stationed a ways back. When the echoes of the blasts rolled away she glanced up.

The Creepers were still on the move. The exoskeletons were practically impervious to normal munitions, except for a lucky sliver of shrapnel or the outgoing rounds from M-10's like the one Jankowski carried, and the artillery blasts had probably only slowed them down for a minute or two.

„Mac! How far away are the Creepers?”

She glanced down at the range card, which marked easily identifiable landmarks in their area of responsibility, and then picked up the binoculars. There. The two creatures were quickly approaching a mound of debris that was topped by the burnt remnants of a CH-47 Chinook helicopter, back during the early weeks of the war before commanders learned any powered aircraft was just a moving target.

„Eight hundred meters, Corporal.”

Another flicker-flare of lasers being fired from the marauding Creepers, and an anguished yelp from Morales. „They got one of the balloons! The bugs got one of the balloons!“

Melissa glanced back in time to see the balloon on the far right collapse, as flames raced up the fabric. Not going to make it, she thought, the resupply mission was about to be burnt to the ground before it could even get off the ground.

Damn!

She looked to Jankowski, wondered what he was thinking, wondering how many family members of his were still alive over there. He lowered his head. His shoulders tensed up.

Then Jankowski grabbed the field phone, called down to the OP. „Cease fire on the fire mission, cease fire!“

After tossing the receiver down, Jankowski started back to where his gear was stored: backpack, helmet, M-10. „Morales! MacKay! Saddle up! We're heading out!“

Melissa tried to swallow, but her mouth was dust-dry. In a flash of seconds, she knew what Jankowski was thinking: the Creepers had already taken down one resupply balloon, desperately needed by the starving citizens of Denver, and there were only two left. Help was on its way but the battle was going to be decided in the next handful of minutes. And the Colt M-10 that Jankowski—and only Jankowski—was qualified to use had an effective range of fifty meters.

About seven hundred fifty meters too short. And Jankowski had decided they weren't going to sit and wait behind the relative safety of the trenches.

All three of them were going over the top, just like the doomed British, French and German soldiers nearly a century and a half ago.

Morales said, „What about the Quick Reaction Force?“

Jankowski secured his helmet. „Shut up. We're it. We're going over, standard intercept mission, the two of you putting down harassing fire. Get to it!“

Melissa put on her helmet, secured the chinstrap, checked her MOLLE vest and the four extra magazines she carried, picked up her Colt M-4 and joined her corporal. The M-4's were practically useless against the Creepers, but they did irritate them, and sometimes diverted them, allowing a soldier with an M-10 to close in for the kill.

Morales was fumbling with his helmet, hands shaking, and Melissa paused to help him out, and Jankowski said, „Guys, we squared away?“

„Yes, Corporal.“

„Yes, Corporal.“

„Like I said, just like a training mission. Mac, you take the left, Morales, you take the right. We rush them, concealing as best as we can, and once we get three hundred meters behind us, you two open fire, try to slow 'em down.“

He paused. „Denver... it's starving. It's up to us. Let's roll.“

Jankowski moved down trench to a section where wooden steps had been built, and he was the first one over, with Melissa following and Morales bringing up the rear.

The first thing Melissa noticed was the smell of smoke. Maybe she was used to it in the rear lines or in the trenches, but out here in the open, in no man's land, the scent was stronger, and part of her stomach felt a slug of nausea as she realized the some of the smoke she was smelling was coming from the funeral pyres inside the besieged city.

Melissa counted out her steps, as she moved back and forth, over and under, trying not to pay much attention of what she was crossing over, the churned up earth, the crushed cars, the chunks of asphalt and concrete. Her breathing was harsh, cutting into her, and she recalled how many times she had trained this maneuver, over and over again, until she could do it in her sleep...

...but now it was for real, with not one, but two alien Creepers up ahead.

„Three hundred,” she yelled out, falling to the rough terrain. She brought up her M-4, sighted in at the Creeper on the left, fired off a quick three-round burst. She rolled to the right, and maneuvered behind a large chunk of concrete, as Morales echoed her own outgoing fire. Jankowski was in the center, M-10 on his back, moving so fast she had difficulty keeping up with him.

Another burst of fire, and another. She moved to the left this time, just as the near Creeper raised itself up, and let loose with flame projections from each of its arms. Melissa fell to the ground, tried to burrow herself in, flatten herself out, make herself as small as possible as the flames roared overhead.

„Keep moving, keep moving, keep moving!” Jankowski yelled, practically leaping from one mound of rubble to another. „I'm almost in range!”

She fired off two more bursts, and then popped out an empty magazine, slammed a new one in, and let the bolt fly.

„Morales,” she yelled out, „keep on firing!”

Morales didn't answer back. Not her problem. She moved again, ducked down next to a flattened school bus, the yellow paint long ago having faded to white, and she fired off one more burst. The wind shifted and two things came to her that meant a Creeper on the move: the scent of cinnamon and the *click-click* of their segmented body in motion.

Never had she ever been so close to a Creeper, and her hands were shaking as she tried to keep up the harassing fire. Then Morales screamed, „They got the second balloon! They got the second balloon!”

Melissa yelled over to him, „Eyes front, Morales, eyes front!”

Then they were in range for the M-10, and she felt herself lucky indeed to be alive and to see Jankowski get to work. He removed a 50mm M-10 cartridge from his MOLLE vest, spun the base dial to set the range—ten, twenty-five or fifty meters, and she knew he was setting it for the furthest range—and the corporal broke open the breech, slammed the cartridge in, closed it with a hard snap.

She remembered her job. The three of them were in a scattered line, hiding behind a length of rubble and broken metal, probably a shattered highway overpass, and she popped up, fired off another burst at the near Creeper, the damn thing looking like it was about to crawl right over her. She rolled to the left as a streamer of flame screamed overhead.

Jankowski moved to the right, slipped up and yelled, „Eat this!” and fired, the recoil of the M-10 nearly blowing him back. Melissa scrambled up broken chunks

of concrete, saw a hole she could peek through. The near Creeper was still moving but there was a cloud in front of it, and she yelled, „Yeah, good shot, Corporal!”

Her corporal said nothing, sliding back down the rubble, moving quickly to reload his M-10. Melissa looked back at the Creeper. The round from Jankowski’s M-10 had exploded at the fifty-meter range. The cartridge was a binary weapon, with two chemicals inside—one of the most closely-guarded secrets in this war—and when mixed, it was lethal to the creature riding inside the Creeper exoskeleton. And right now, the Creeper before her was enveloped in the cloud.

It stopped.

It goddamn stopped.

The eight legs and the two weapon arms started shaking, as well as the center head stalk. It shook and quivered and then fell, to the side, the movement from the articulated limbs digging up divots of soil and rock.

Morales screamed, „You killed it, Corporal, you killed it, you killed it!”

Jankowski moved a few meters down the length of rubble. „Shut up, Hector, you’re waking up the dead in Denver. And where’s my harassing fire, damn it!”

Melissa moved some more, fired a few more rounds, the bolt slamming open. Empty magazine. The dead Creeper was still dead. Jankowski was pushing his way through more broken debris, slid down a battered highway sign marking EXIT 12, and then went back up to the top.

She tugged out the magazine, slapped in another one, let the bolt slide back. Ready.

Click-click.

Click-click.

Click-click.

The smell of cinnamon—another puzzle, why did the bugs stink of an Earth-bound spice?—and another rip of gunfire from Morales down the way. Kid was keeping his cool, which surprised her. He was too young, too eager, and he was a refugee, a Coastie, which meant he got a lot of grief from other soldiers. She could barely see him but he was still on his job.

Melissa moved up, was so goddamn close to the second Creeper that she could throw a stone at it, and Morales yelled, „The third balloon is up! They’ve launched the third balloon.”

Morales should have kept his damn mouth shut. Jankowski was near the top of his pile of rubble and he was bringing up his Colt M-10, but he hesitated, looked back at the balloon rising up from the staging area.

He slipped, fell forward, got up on his hands and knees, and his head and upper torso was torn away in a blast of fire, flesh, and a spray of blood.

Morales screamed, „It got the corporal, it got the corporal! Mac, whaddya we going to do?”

She yelled back, „Keep firing!”

„But... but... where’s the QRF?”

She yelled something nasty about the QRF to Morales, moved as fast as she could to the right, the M-4 now feeling like it was made of lead. Her chest hurt, her feet hurt, and smoke was making her eyes water, and she was chewing her tongue, trying to get saliva going again. She skittered across the broken rubble,

scraping her hands, and she looked to the west. The balloon was up, by God, and dangling below was a rope net, holding crates upon crates of rations and medicine.

Morales was shooting again. Good boy.

She moved up the broken slope, seeing the booted feet and the uniformed legs of her dead corporal, the stench pushing into her nostrils and mouth, trying hard not to see the charred chunks and bones on the upper torso.

Where was it?

Where was it?

There.

The Colt-10 was about a meter away. She picked it up, the damn thing heavier than her M-4. Could she do it? Could she?

She went up the rubble, a couple of meters away from Jankowski's body, whispered something to the corpse, and then flattened herself down on a piece of rusted metal. The damn bug was filling up her entire view. She brought up the M-10, aimed over the open iron sights, pulled the trigger.

WHAM!

It felt like a horse had just kicked her right shoulder. Melissa screamed, fell back, and she heard the detonation of the M-10's round. Panting hard, she crawled up the rough slope and saw the familiar cloud of a detonating round, and a Creeper, just like it should be.

Except the cloud was behind the Creeper.

She had missed.

Damn!

And in a flash she knew why. Poor old Jankowski had set the range for an approaching Creeper, and the damn thing had kept moving after barbecuing her corporal, and she had overshot.

She had overshot.

„Mac, it's still moving!”

She had to reload the M-10.

Which meant she had to grab another round from...

Jankowski's charred body.

Melissa moved in tunnel vision, trying to keep everything out of focus save what was before her, which was Jankowski's body. His fatigues were torn and one knee was scraped bloody raw. He must have hurt himself bad during the attack but the guy kept on going, hadn't bothered to stop or complain.

Focus. MOLLE vest torn and shredded.

There.

Three M-10 cartridges.

She tugged one free.

Morales yelled something and she yelled back, „Just keep firing, damn it!”

Sitting down, she spun the dial on the bottom of the cartridge, taking it from SAFE and stopping at ten meters.

Just ten meters away.

Fingers feeling thick and fumbling, she broke open the M-10's breech, removed the empty shell, slid the fresh one in. Snapped the breech shut.

„Morales!”

„Mac!“

She took a deep, painful breath: „If... something happens, you take over, got it? There are two cartridges left on Jankowski's vest. Got it?“

Morales yelled something and she didn't have time to keep talking.

Time to move.

She went back up the rocky slope, breathing hard, the stench of cinnamon even worse, the *click-click* almost deafening, More distant gunfire from Morales. Harassing fire, yeah, harassing. Just another term for doing something useless that made you feel better.

Up now on the slope, she thought of praying but couldn't think of a single word, and she flattened herself, brought the M-10 back to her shoulder. The Creeper was starting to raise itself up on its rear, and she thought, the rubble, it can't get a good aim on the resupply balloon because of the rubble, and it's pushing itself up to burn it down.

Melissa aimed the M-10, and the Creeper spotted her, because it was lowering itself down and—

WHAM!

Another scream. Her shoulder felt like it was torn to pieces, only kept in place because of her uniform blouse.

But she forced herself to watch.

Had to.

The round exploded just below the Creeper, and she thought, damn, should have grabbed another cartridge, because it looked like she had missed, and then the Creeper kept on lowering itself down.

Right through the toxic cloud.

And within a minute, it was on its back, quivering, shaking, moments away from dying.

Melissa rolled on her back, sobbing. Broken pieces of rock were jabbing into her back and legs and butt, and she didn't care.

Something floated above her, nearly blocking the sun.

She raised a hand, blocking the sun.

It was the resupply balloon.

Morales appeared, dusty and sweating. In one hand he had his M-4, and in the other, an open canteen. He offered the canteen to Melissa and she took two swigs of warm and flat tasting water.

It was delicious.

Morales said, „The balloon's moving in the right direction. Bet it gets to Denver within the hour.“

She rolled over, raised up her head. Sure enough, being caught by the winds, the balloon with its precious cargo was heading straight to the Mile High City.

„Bet you're right,“ she said, giving him back his canteen. „Let's... let's gather up the corporal and get back to where we belong.“

„Roger that, Mac.“

She was so engrossed in her paperwork that she didn't notice the first soldier coming into the trench, but seeing the second soldier and the third and then their lieutenant, commanding their company, part of 1st Battalion, 157th

Infantry Regiment, Colorado National Guard, really got her attention. She dropped her papers and stood up at attention, with Morales a couple of meters away doing the same. The third member of their squad, wrapped in a plastic poncho, secured by lengths of rope, had been taken away an hour ago by a Graves Registration team. His M-10 was leaning up against the trench, the two remaining cartridges on the duckboard.

Lieutenant Russ Picard gave the length of trench a quick look with his good eye. Half of his face was scarred with burn tissue and a black patch covered the empty socket. His uniform was dirty and repaired, and he looked tired, very tired. Companies were usually run by captains, not lieutenants, but as was said so often, nothing was usual any more.

„Who made the Creeper kills?” Picard asked.

Melissa said, „Corporal Jankowski. I got the second. Private Morales provided harassing fire.“

„Are you certified on the M-10?”

„No, sir, I’m not.“

He came forward, extended a hand, which she shook. „You are now.”

She felt a flash of surprise, and then said, „The balloon, sir, did... did it make it to Denver?”

He grinned. „It certainly did... but... well, it’s not enough. It’s never enough. Still, a number of civvies over there are going to live tonight thanks to this squad. Good job.”

Then he looked down at Melissa’s paperwork, and she bit her lip in embarrassment at the mess she had caused. „What’s that on the ground?”

„Belongs to me, sir.”

„Tetler, if you please.”

One of the privates picked up a sheet of paper, passed it over to Picard. He gave it a glance and said, „Well?”

Melissa said, „Geometry, sir. It’s my geometry final. It’s... due at 1700 today.“

Picard said, „No, it’s not. You just got an A. How does that sound?”

She couldn’t help smiling. „Sounds great, sir.”

He leaned in some. „How old are you, Private?”

„Fourteen, sir. I’ll be fifteen next May.“

„Private Morales?”

„Twelve, sir.”

Picard nodded. „Good job, the both of you.” Speaking to Melissa, he said, „You think you can stay here?”

She spoke quickly. „We’ll need a replacement, sir. Two if they can be spared. And one of them should be a corporal.“

Picard patted her shoulder. „Why? We’ve got a sergeant right here, don’t you think?”

Melissa managed to say, „Thank you, sir.”

„Good.” He looked to his escorts. „Come along gents, it’s time to get back to the war.”

In a minute she and Morales were alone. Her head felt as light as the balloon that had made it, and her hands and legs tingled with joy. Morales said, „Why are you smiling so much? Happy about the promotion?”

She tossed her papers in the air. "Happy I passed geometry."

