

## The Tunnels

-By Master Gunnery Sergeant Fenix

Trained to wait for a count of two hundred before moving, the boy sat rigid. Twenty yards behind him a yellow light flickered and glared, just beyond that light was the shaft that led to Beta Camp where the other youth retreated. He thought to himself that it would only be a short count of numbers until he could join them and regroup with other adults there. Lights continued to snap on and off through the tunnels. He took care not to silhouette himself, crouched in the black, as far away as he could be from a pair of naked dirt-caked bulbs, emitting bright spasms. Then he heard it. The sound of damp earth being trod upon. The sound disappeared, after a count of one hundred it came again. His hands tightened around the grip of his slugthrower. The third time the sound came; he heard the shrill squeak of something mechanical. The hairs on his arms stood up. His anus puckered. A clean escape would no longer an option. But he didn't know his odds. He would have to wait until whatever it was that was down there with him showed itself.

The sunset that took his childhood was inked with a broth of chemicals. Defoliant snatched the forest away. It had seemed to him as if the earth itself was under attack. Screams and booming explosions, great white flashes of light. Warriors ran urgently, clutching their slugthrowers and bellowing. He was sent into the tunnels with the other youths. Through the dark throats of dirt they ran. Explosions shook dust down onto them. There were long segments of pitch-black darkness, where corridors snaked and turned; above him he'd heard the pounding of bombs like the hammering of angry Gods.

He'd been noted as the best in his kafu, excelling far above the likes of his peers in

both leadership and tactical skill. Had the first machine offensive not scattered Alpha Camp all over the Outlands, he'd have been slated to join the strongest of the older boys in the war camps of the Southern settlements. But the machines struck at dusk, in the fifteenth rain of his being, and on that day he became his father's son- unbeknownst. His slugthrower proficiency earned him the position of rear guard and he was to lie in wait, quietly observing the length of tunnel from which he'd come, allowing the others to get away. The footsteps of his peers had dissipated behind him. All booming sounds from the above battle had ceased.

He'd been in the tunnels many times before, during evacuation drills and war games. He knew where the exits were to Beta and Charlie camp, where the dead ends were and where the booby traps had been placed. He marveled at the power of this knowledge now, understanding its worth, growing confident as he crept beneath the battlefield. But his confidence trembled there in the dark, waiting in the quiet.

It was a cave-rover, and it let loose a long stream of plasma rounds, tearing the darkness with bright blue streaks. Somewhat prepared, the boy managed to dodge the burst but only partly, his left shoulder sizzled and the thick plasma quickly melted his skin away, exposing the bone. He did not cry out. He wanted to, but knew that to do so would mean certain death. It would be only a matter of seconds before the rover readjusted its sights, read his heat signature, and finished him off. His slugthrower lay in the dirt, a foot away from his grasp. He'd been tugging the fragmented grenades from his vest when he realized he shouldn't still be alive. The rover should have zeroed in and killed him by now. He could hear the quiet whirring of its engine, and when its

floodlights snapped on, illuminating his bleeding body, he saw the mogmen.

He grew up with them being nothing but myth. Boogey men from the dark grass of a campfire story. It had been many rains since the first relocation; days that had allowed him youth; braiding grass, carving dolls out of wood, hunting lop-ears and catching glow-bugs. Even his training had felt jovial to him; more like a cat and mouse rough-house merry-go-round of activities than that of combat prep. Cordite was the smell of play. Night patrol, an elaborate game of hide and seek. Death was a time out where he picked thistles from the earth and waited impatiently. It was known to him that his father died fighting the machines during the flight of the first wave, but this too seemed somewhat surreal- more like a family fable than the sharp bladed reality that it was.

Villainous myth became truth, cautiously approaching his wounded body. Both trained rifles upon him and moved in a syncopated rhythm. He thought to himself that they almost moved as humans did, walking upright on two legs, guns poised with steady shoulders. They were coming for him as he'd heard they sometimes did; it would be a great spoil of war to capture one of his kind alive, to interrogate, to study, to publicly execute and make example of somewhere in the sterile halls of Mechanopolis.

The grenade he knowingly set off triggered the five others he'd had in his vest. The blast blew the boy to pieces and threw both mogmen across the width of the tunnel. One of them attempted to stand, only to twitch repetitively at the place where its leg once met its hip. Circuits sparked wildly from the wound, burning the blood that flowed from it. Electrical sparks snapped and flashed from protruding metal pieces of man married to

machine. After a series of spasms and jerking shrugs, all movement ceased. The other  
mogman lay crumbled in a heap. Silence retook the tunnel. Blood and entrails painted  
the walls. The floodlights of an unmanned cave rover remained.