

BITTERROOT TEARS

by Kip Cassino

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They had fired their last rounds in the morning. The big rail guns sat silent. Their long, beaklike accelerator tracks still pointed vacantly toward the final targets they had engaged. There had been no Weeper attack today. Not yet, anyway. The men of Bravo Battery waited for chow in a long, well-spaced line—listening for the sound of resupply choppers, or the liquid murmur that might signal another alien assault. They hardly spoke, preferring their own counsel to the panic that might invade any conversation. As time crawled by, the gun crews gathered near their bunkers, waiting for something to happen, hoping for information or instruction. None came.

In the command track, First Sergeant Ethan Mallory—acting battery commander since the attack yesterday—tried the radio again. “Rainbow Beacon seven, this is Rainbow Beacon two-seven, over,” he drawled into the mike. His only answer was sizzling static. He threw down the mike and turned away from the radio. Were the satellites down? “Well, hell,” he said to no one in particular, “I guess we’re infantry now.”

Tall and lanky at thirty-six, Mallory brushed his short salt-and-pepper hair before donning his fatigue cap. He had been raised in the Arizona desert, and tended to see the world in dispassionate black-and-white. Right now, his instincts told him the best plan was to leave this place with the men he had left. He meant to follow those instincts.

Stepping from the track, Mallory looked at the mountains to his north and east. “This is beautiful country,” he thought. “No place to fight a war.” His unit was deployed in a lightly wooded valley near Idaho’s Salmon River, in the foothills of the Bitterroot Mountains. North of these mountains, in the wheat fields of Alberta, the first known Weeper landings had taken place four months ago. Their tall, golden towers loomed over those fields today.

Mallory’s unit was part of a combined U.S./Canadian task force aimed at destroying the Weeper enclave, now a square roughly two hundred kilometers on a side, engulfing Idaho as far south as Coeur d’Alene. Within the enclave, nothing bigger than small animals moved or lived—excepting Weepers, of course.

“Time to talk to the men,” Mallory thought. He strode to a point equidistant from the each of the four gun bunkers. A faint sound to his right made him stop. His face momentarily suffused with fear. “Was that crying, or ...”

His sentence was never finished, as the murmur rose to a low, moaning wail. “Weepers!” Mallory barked. “Overalls and helmets, right now! Break out the blankets and glue!” As he gave his orders, the sergeant ran to the nearest bunker to secure his own protective gear. He realized they had a little time to prepare. The level of sound he heard meant scouts, the eyes of the main party behind them—but not very far behind. Not nearly far enough.

As he donned his helmet and sealed his overalls, Mallory could see the glint of the Weeper force as it sped through the valley in front of his battery. There were three apparent entities, each about five meters in height—flickering, golden, semi-transparent inverted cones, each composed of thousands of individual creatures—like a swarm of bees. By now the sound they made was like a congregation of weeping penitents.

As the aliens whirled within a few hundred meters of the battery, Mallory was dismayed to see two of his remaining troopers running before them, vainly trying to reach the safety of the bunkers. He recognized both: Grinnell and Hooper, probably out for a walk along the river. The men served on the same gun crew and had become good friends. Both loved the area and swore they'd come back to live here when the mission was over. Now they wouldn't have to wait. They'd stay in the valley for the rest of their lives.

The lead Weeper cone reached Hooper, who was bigger and slower, first. It simply bore through him, leaving only small scraps of bone and cloth which slowly fluttered to the ground. Grinnell veered left, hoping to buy time. Another cone confronted him, then hit him with such force that the trooper was lifted from the ground. For a split second he hung in the air, as he dissolved.

Eyes, Teeth, Stomachs, Brains: Mallory's briefing book described four known varieties of Weeper. All are about five centimeters in length, with two rows of semitransparent triangular golden wings, which are the source of the crying sound they make. All have prehensile tails that end in sharp, boney points. Eyes, the first variant, have three large compound optical receptors. These are the scouts and "hands" of a Weeper cone. Flying ahead of the main body, the Eyes somehow inform the cone about what lies before it. Eyes can also be found at the apex of the inverted cone, where they operate in groups as fingers. Their third eye is thought to be capable of accurate close-in vision.

Weeper Teeth have only one eye, but sport a piranha-like set of fangs common to it alone (all other variants have only an innocuous circular lip). While all Weeper variants can fight using their sharp tails, Teeth are the primary warriors. Teeth make up the majority of a cone's perimeter. They physically attack targets identified by Eyes.

Much of a Weeper cone's interior is populated by Stomachs. These Weepers digest food for the other variants, deliver it to them, and eliminate waste. Aside from its single eye, a Stomach sports a complex mouth with a tongue-like nipple. Stomachs visit Teeth after some unidentified signal mechanism, remove whatever is in their mouths, and link their nipples to other Weepers' lips. In this way they feed as many other Weepers as they can with what they have collected and digested.

The scientists who wrote the briefing book theorized that Brains control all activity within a Weeper cone. Brains have no eyes of their own, and very little digestive apparatus. In its place, they have highly developed neural networks, far denser than what's found in any earthly creatures of similar size. Cones that have been examined typically show populations of between twenty and thirty Brains. One had more than one hundred.

Humans who have survived close encounters with Weepers tend to think of them as some kind of alien bee swarm. They are not. Their biology is totally alien, more like terrestrial trees than bees or wasps. Are they intelligent? Certainly not as individuals. But in large groups, they have proven smart enough to build spaceships, travel between worlds, and defeat human armies.

Where did they come from? How did they get here? These and countless additional questions have no answers yet. Weepers have not communicated with humanity from their golden towers. All attempts to contact them have failed. Nuclear bombs don't kill them. A few days after detonation, the towers return, just as tall or even taller than before. Do the Weepers like radiation? Another unanswered question.

When nothing else worked, Canada and the U.S. sent in soldiers—two divisions from each nation, complete with weapons to defeat and destroy the aliens. Large “blanket” rounds were devised for artillery. These were designed to engulf cones in sheets of woven composite, coated with silicone gel. In theory, the blankets would fix and trap large numbers of Weepers, dismantling their cones. Unable to move and feed, the creatures would soon die. In theory.

Infantry units were issued various glue projecting weapons—rifles, pistols, and larger crew-served foam sprayers. Flame throwers were also thought to be useful. Conventional weapons were left behind. As one soldier put it, “If we meet any bears up there, we'll have to glue them to death.”

To protect the troops from their enemy, units were issued plentiful supplies of head-to-toe overalls. The overalls were made from two layers of “blanket” composite, with a thick layer of glue between them. In theory, Weeper Teeth would be fixed to the outer layer of the overalls by the leaking glue. The overalls were bulky and could have no ventilation. They could only be worn for short periods of time. Silicon-Plexiglas helmets completed the outfit. These had ventilation, but the individual orifices were small enough that Weeper threat to the wearer was considered minimal. Again, in theory.

Mallory and forty-five more survivors of Bravo Battery worked frantically in their bunkers to prepare for the coming assault. Ranging stakes had been preset to indicate when a cone could be hit by flamethrowers, blanket guns, and glue projectors. Everyone was buttoned up in their overalls and helmets. The first stake was passed. A blanket round fired. Ineffective! The targeted cone dodged the sheet, losing only a few Eyes. All three cones stopped, as if to consider their situation. The sound they made was overwhelmingly saddening.

Mallory keyed his helmet mike. “Take it easy, guys,” he said, projecting a calm he did not feel. The sweat pouring from him now was not all due to the overalls. “They can't hurt you in these overalls. We know that. Let them get real close, so you can't miss. If we get rid of these bastards, all we have to do is walk home.”

“Sarge,” piped a high, wavering voice, “I gotta use the latrine. Bad.” That would be Chalmers, Mallory thought—very young, maybe the youngest in the unit—and very, very scared.

“Chalmers,” he replied evenly, “You're a wonder. Bravest man here. Everybody else has already had the shit scared out of them! Don't try to hold it in. Just concentrate on your weapon. We got plenty of extra fatigues, and believe me, you won't be the only trooper needing them.”

A moment later, the flickering cones sprang forward. They spread out, leaving ten meters between each other, as though they were aware that this would prevent full concentration of the weapons trained against them. A flurry of Eyes darted through the bunkers, leading the towering cones behind them.

The men paid little attention to the Eyes. A blanket round hit the center cone squarely, leaving a gaping emptiness where it passed. The cone paused, contracted to half its former height, and continued to bore toward the bunkers. A very brave soldier ran from a bunker and doused the diminished cone with a flamethrower. Before being overcome and pinned to the ground by scores of Teeth, he managed to incinerate the upper half of the flickering creature, the area they'd all been told was where most of the Brains were located.

The effect was immediate. Still-burning shards of hundreds of Weepers of all kinds fell to earth. Those remaining flew away randomly, in all directions, as if confused. The soldier struggled to his feet, ripping scores of writhing Teeth from his overalls. "That's for Hooper, you son of a bitch," he crowed. Turning, he began running back to his bunker ...

... and straight into another cone. Teeth pinned him to the ground. Eyes probed his helmet, finding the small ventilation ports, pulling his helmet from his head as he cursed and heaved. Helmet removed, he was left to the Teeth. His screams were quickly silenced as his head dissolved. Something rolled lazily from the carnage. An eyeball. No other piece of him remained.

With the sound of a crying city, the Weeper cone dodged frightened, uncoordinated glue fire to enter Gun Two's bunker. Here ten men, bulky and clumsy in their overalls, tried hopelessly to harm the monster in their midst. Teeth and Eyes were everywhere, too small in the confined semi-gloom of the bunker to be seriously harmed by glue guns.

Mallory watched grimly from Gun One's bunker, twenty meters away. He heard the screams of the dying men. Something had to be done. But what? He turned to the gun's chief of section, standing next to him. "We still got any HE rounds, gunny?" he asked as calmly as he could.

"We do, First Sergeant," the gun chief replied, "but you know we can't use 'em. They don't do any good ..."

"They don't do any good in the open, gunny. In the open. Now lower that rail gun and load some high explosive. Your target is bunker two, if you can do it."

"Off your asses, gun one," the gun chief yelled. "It's time for us to fight. Johnson, I want that rail depressed to minimum—past it if you can. Direct fire. We'll use the cards. Target is bunker two. HE, fuse for impact. Mikey, I want five rounds, rapid fire."

Though shocked and frightened, the gun crew worked like a well-tuned machine. Here was something they knew how to do! The electro-magnetic rail that propelled their shells was depressed, almost to ground level. That broke some important components, but nobody cared. Chances were excellent this gun would never fire again.

The gun was set, fuses adjusted, in less than a minute. During that time Mallory tried to contact the men in bunker two. "Bunker two, this is Mallory," he said. "Anybody there?"

“Sarge, we’re ... pinned,” came the weak reply. “They found ... a way ... to get our helmets off. Two left. Dead ... soon.” It sounded like Harris. He was a good soldier.

“We can take out the bunker, Harris,” Mallory hurriedly explained. “Maybe kill ‘em. Can you make it out of the bunker?”

Harris sighed. “Ah. They’re done with Marino ... coming for me. Can’t move. Must be a thousand bugs on me. Do what ya gotta do, Sarge. I’m dead anyhow.” Contact ceased. Mallory nodded to the gun crew.

Immediately, the first explosive round accelerated to beyond three kilometers per second within its rail frame, hit the bunker, and blasted it to rubble. Four more rounds followed in quick, deafening succession. Nothing within the pile of logs and dirt moved. The crackle and pop of secondary explosions signaled that ammo within the debris was cooking off. In the distance, orphaned Weepers flew aimlessly, dropping to the ground from time to time.

Mallory scanned the horizon. Where was the third cone? Gone. The overwhelming crying sound no longer oppressed his ears. They were safe, at least for the moment, he decided. He removed his helmet and shrugged out of his overalls. “Gunny,” he called, “take a detail over to bunker two. See if there’s anything left of our guys. If there is, bury it. Then cover the whole place in glue.” He shook his head. “I guess we won. If this is what winning feels like, I’d sure as hell hate to lose.” He looked at his watch. He’d started the day with almost fifty men. Now he was down to thirty-five, and it wasn’t even lunchtime. His thoughts turned to Nan and the kids, back in Fort Carson. Were they safe? Would he see them again?

The sergeant picked up a Weeper he saw laying at his feet. As he held it, it began writhing in his hand—and would have bitten him badly if he hadn’t dropped it. The Weeper fell to the ground, burrowed into the soil with its tail, and stood upright. If man lost this was the future, Mallory realized. Row upon row of Weepers grown to the size of trees, with golden towers scattered among them. It would be a silent world, without other life of any kind.

Shaking the vision from his mind, Mallory made a desperate decision. If they stayed here, the Weepers would return and eventually kill them all. In the absence of any orders, what remained of the battery had to move. Quickly. He gathered the men. “We’ll have some chow, right now,” he told them. “Then we are getting the hell out of here.” He called the remaining two section chiefs to inspect the unit’s vehicles and see how many were still usable, then got some food for himself. There was no telling when any of them would eat again.

As Mallory finished the last gelid spoonful of his MRE, the section chiefs reported back. Apparently, that third cone had been busy after all. Most of the vehicles—the ammo carriers, gun movers, and the rest—had been chewed to wreckage. “We can maybe salvage two or three movable carriers,” Gunny lamented, “maybe.” He was a stout, bald, bullet of a man. When he frowned, his whole face seemed to furrow.

“How long?” Mallory asked.

“Maybe the rest of the day.”

“Too long. I need two, and I’ll give you an hour. No more.”

“That’s asking a lot, sarge. How many men can I have?”

Mallory thought for a moment. “All but four,” he decided. “We’ll post them as sentries. I’ll help too. Used to run a motor pool, you know.” He smiled, but he wasn’t happy. Every minute they spent in this valley was a mortal risk.

The survivors worked with grim purpose. In an hour and a half, a light vehicle and an ammo carrier were coaxed into running condition. Along with the command track, these would be enough to transport the remaining men, along with enough supplies to get them at least as far south as Boise, if there was no trouble along the way. That was a big “if,” considering the radio silence they’d had since yesterday. Still, they had to try.

Command track leading, the battered trio of vehicles moved down a quiet rural road, heading for Twin Falls—the task force headquarters site. Mallory’s orders had been brief. “Stay behind me. If you break down, let me know and we’ll jam you in what’s still running. If we’re attacked, get off the road and into the trees, then deploy your blankets and glue. The trees should shield you from the cones—for a while, anyhow.”

A pair of cones attacked them later that afternoon, ten meter monsters whirling out of the lowering sun from the west. Two vehicles escaped to the woods, but the rear-most ammo carrier was engulfed before anything could be done. It had carried fifteen men, and only six were fully into their overalls when the Weepers hit. During the slaughter that followed, two soldiers were able to stumble up the road and into the trees. The rest were consumed.

Night fell. Mallory used the command track to tow the surviving wheeled vehicle deeper into the woods. Feeling numb and shocked, he decided his much-reduced command should stay where they were for the rest of the night. They lit a fire, heated some MREs for dinner. There was no evidence that Weepers had an infrared capability, and the men were too tired and demoralized to care anyhow. After posting sentries and seeing to the rest of his unit, Mallory was left to himself.

He sat with his back against a large Hemlock and considered his situation. The cones had come from the west. Did that mean Boise was reduced to golden towers? The continuing radio silence was very disturbing. How far south had the Weepers pushed? The men, those left of them, depended on his judgement to get them to safety. Sadly, he had nothing left in his bag of tricks to give them.

His thoughts overwhelmed him. He sat by the tree, head in hands, and wept. For a little while, there was silence around him. Then, the woods were consumed by a weeping sound as well.

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