



FRENZY

Kal-El Bogdanove



The wind was at his back now. It was a good indicator of a fine glide ahead. To Alden Moss it felt like a benediction as he stood at the cliff's edge, making fists with his toes and letting the dry sandy soil float away in little puffs that receded into the nothingness below.

Alden knew there was ground there. He'd hiked it, and landed on it, and brought a cute local girl down to it to make out. But on mornings like this, when the light hadn't reached the canyon floor, he liked to pretend it wasn't there, as if he were about to step off and master an abyss as endless as space.

It wasn't quite sunup yet, but the first streaks of dawn were leaking in to stain the pearl-and-cobalt clouds. It was easily bright enough for a boy with good eyes to see. He checked the straps on the rig one last time, the way his father had taught him years before, and jumped.

The rushing of the wind filled the glider. The tops of the cliffs were golden now, and they seemed to stretch forever—an endless fractal sea of storied bluffs, spiraling canyons, and serene plateaus: a geological wonder unlike any other.

Alden pulled up, skimming along at cliff level, breaching in and out of the sunlight like a fleet fish leaping upstream. Behind him were the concerns of school, his parents, the draft... the other draft. All that was back on the ground. Up here, with the wind pushing into his lungs, stretching the glider, and roaring in his ears... Alden was free.

The sound, when it came, was so quiet beside the roar of the wind—a faint noise, and distant. Yet it cut to the marrow of Alden's bones as no other had in his twenty years.

Tekeli-li.

This was wrong. The air was his! His mind should be clear, his heart untroubled—master of the abyss! And yet it came again, louder now—

Tekeli-li!

—behind him. Alden craned his neck around, but the sun was at his back, and the great spreading wings of the glider, those wings that he had thought of as his, now seemed to him unendurable blind spots. What could be up here with him so early?!

TEKELI-LI!

It was the sound of a nightmare, of a nameless, ancient thing found in a fever dream. He dove now for the cliff, desperate to fall and land in his own bed, drenched in sweat and only half remembering this unhomelike noise! If only he could see it!

The shadow passed over him, and he heard the furious rustle of leathery wings, a gnashing, and a wetter note of wriggling flesh quivering in anticipation.

Alden screamed as It appeared, as he looked upon the face of terror, the loathsome, scarred maw of his nightmare. And his scream and the horrible cry of the creature became one seamless sound—

TEKELI-LI-I-I-I-I!

—until teeth found flesh, and silence took the canyon.

* * *

"This town needs the tourist trade."

Mayor Haskins whittled the tip off an expensive cigar as he said it. Rin Shearon nodded politely, but inside she thought, *Lord, he says that like I've never heard it before.*

Rin was tired and uncomfortable. The sweat that had collected in the small of her back during the pursuit through the hot sun was cooling in the over-air-conditioned office, and the heavy bag of black-market stims she'd taken off the perp was now causing her shiny marshal's star to dig two of its six points into her boob. *A perfect storm of physical irritation.* The mayor was expanding on his opening theme, as if being the marshal in Quijadas for four years, and having been the marshal's daughter for twenty-five before that, hadn't already made Rin aware that the only reason offworlders ever bothered to visit a rocky little moon like Choss was for the opportunity to dive off its scenic cliffs and glide through its crisp high-desert air.

For glide enthusiasts, Choss was the crown and Quijadas was the jewel, home to storied canyons and breathtaking outcroppings unique in all the sector, left behind when some prehistoric ocean had steamed away.

Rin's main job was keeping anything that didn't fit the picture of the perfect resort town away from the eyes of the tourists. Sometimes that meant running down a black-market stim dealer and tackling him behind the Azlup's Pack 'n' Jet, like she had today.

Mostly it meant writing speeding tickets, booking drunk-and-disorderlies, and scaring off the teenagers who went up to the mineral springs to hit weak garage-brewed turk. It was a good job, and Rin was good at it. She didn't know why she wasn't afraid to get her pointy cowgirl nose right up in the face of anyone who looked like he might start some shit, but she wasn't. Maybe it was genetic. Maybe five generations of town-taming granddads had just passed the trait down. Whatever—long as it worked.

The mayor was wrapping up now, and not too soon. Rin had been two bites into an egg salad sandwich when her dep had called in and said the dealer they were staking out was on the move. Egg salad was a favorite, even when it was karak and not chicken, but it didn't improve with time on the plate.

"Yes, sir, we're all glad this was taken care of with a minimum of fuss."

"No, sir, I don't think it's a sign of any sort of substantial drug trade reaching Quijadas."

"No, sir, I don't think anyone from the *Gazette* could have found out."

Balls.

The heat hit Rin like a fist as she stepped out of the cool dark of the mayor's office. She had driven her old rattletrap LAV to the scene and from the scene to lockup, but she'd switched to the cruiser before meeting the mayor because she knew he'd hate to see the LAV, with its mud-flecked doors and its ancient mounted guns, in the antiseptic downtown. *Cruiser prob'ly wouldn't clear the first arroyo if I had to leave the grid*, she thought wearily as she climbed in.

She made it two blocks, passing three ice cream parlors, a boutique full of handmade furniture, a place that sold artisanal cheeses, and a shop that offered "genuine protoss hummus" (which was hooey, Rin knew, because the protoss had no damn mouths). Then the call came in.

"Go ahead for Shearon," Rin said as she tapped the vidscreen. The amiable face of Rita, one of her two deputies, popped up.

"Hey, R. I got a weird call from Dolly Juarez up at North-Rim Rentals. Sounds like they've had some kind of accident. She's pretty upset."

Rin's guts did a flip-flop. It was ironic: the only things Rin really was afraid of were the goddamn cliffs the town was famous for.

Spend some cash, and you too could climb up, dive off, and glide your way into a tour of the prettiest canyons on Choss. *Let them have it*, thought Rin. *Brr*.

She stowed the little thrill of fear and U-turned. "Thanks, R. I'll head up. Can you imagine the fit Haskins is gonna throw if some rich bastard got himself killed, swooping around up there? I don't know if I can stomach the 'This town needs the tourist trade' speech twice today."

"Good luck, Marshal."

* * *

The glider was mangled, but the body was worse. Way worse. Dolly Juarez was a mess, so the rigging tech, Dium Flecc, led Rin along the winding maintenance trail to where the remains lay.

Rin felt the two bites of karak egg and mayo roil in her gut. She tried to look as if it were the corpse that was making her sick, but it was the sheer drop a meter away. The cliff towered above too, and Rin wondered for the millionth time, *How do people climb these things?*

She squatted to examine the gaping chest wound in the body. It had tumbled, rolled a ways, but it was clear that the primary damage was the massive thoracic puncture.

"For crying out loud, Dium. Nobody saw anything?"

"Alden Moss was a regular. Wealthy kid. University football star. He was gonna be top pick in the draft this year. Word is the Asteroids and the Tigers have been locked in an unofficial bidding war over him for a month."

Rin stared down at the contorted body. *No more long bombs. No more keg stands and pretty coeds. No more TDs. What a goddamn waste.*

Flecc continued, "He's gone gliding all over the sector. Been coming up here summers with his dad since he was a squirt. Hell, Dolly's got an autographed ball above the desk. Alden hasn't needed a guide in years. Comes up from the resort early in the morning... We wouldn't have known he'd gone out if not for the empty rack in the gear shack."

"You've been gliding a long time. What do you make of it?" asked Rin, delicately lifting a limb with the pen from her shirt pocket.

"If the dampener failed and he hit a strong shear like the ones on Zeph III, he could've hit the rocks. Tumble might account for the damage to the glider, any broken bones, and the shallow cuts. But I have never seen gravity make a wound like *that*."

"And where's the blood?" said Rin. "Even if he got snagged somewhere and dripped awhile, there'd be seepage here. Something. But there's not."

"Looks like something sucked on him like a Qwencher packet." Flecc scratched his bald head, tan from years outside. "Could be game bats found the corpse—"

"Be a lot of game bats to drain a big guy like this. And unless he was out there before moondown..."

This has all the earmarks of being a really big problem, thought Rin, and as she thought it, Flecc agreed with what she hadn't said.

"Marshal... I was only in the service one tour, and I spent that running airborne jump drills. Never even saw a live xeno. But I saw the ed-vids in basic, and in the vids I only ever saw *one* creature could make a gouge like that..."

All the earmarks, thought Rin. "Dee... you take any kind of armament with you when you were mustered out?"

"Took a Torrent. An SR-8. Blows the shit out of a range boar when I hunt on weekends."

"Maybe you keep that handy when you lead your tour groups, okay?" said Rin, rocking back on her heels and standing up, away from the stench of the dead kid.

"You think it *is* a xeno?" asked Flecc.

"Don't matter what I think," said Rin, averting her eyes from the canyon. "Matters what I can get Haskins to believe."

* * *

"Absolutely not."

The mayor's complexion went from waxy to pink. *How does he manage to stay pale when the rest of us have to flush a case of skin cancer at the doc's every ten years?* wondered Rin.

"Close the canyons on Inauguration Day weekend? Might as well set fire to the treasury and be done with it. 'Mutalisks in the canyons.' Ridiculous! What in the world do we have on Choss that could possibly attract the attention of the zerg?!"

"Might be some got left behind from the troubles." Rin hated the folksy local phrase used to soften what the rest of the damn sector referred to properly as "the war."

Rin knew Chossites had gotten off easy, relatively speaking. The military had set up a way station out in the desert and had ended up in a kind of squabble over it with the zerg.

Whole thing had lasted maybe a month; it was on the other side of the moon; and just about the only thing it had cost Quijadas was her dad.

Given that they'd lost nothing and she'd lost a lot, it irked Rin that the locals hid the whole thing in a euphemism. Often she took pleasure in calling that particular spade a spade, but today she felt she had enough of an uphill climb with the mayor already.

"Nonsense. The troubles were all the way over in Bim Battum! Three teams of sanitation marines scoured this moon, at no small cost to our city budget. Choss is certified vacation material."

Rin took the deep breath necessary to prevent herself from strangling him. "I'm no expert, but they say that mutalisks are a lot more bug-like than the other bugs. They'll go where the Swarm wants them to go, but sometimes they go where their little bug brains tell them is nice."

"I'm not taking food out of the mouths of my constituents because of a gliding accident. People sign release forms when they go up there. Contact the family; get him in a coldbox. That's the last word on the matter."

* * *

It wasn't. The next three deaths came two days later, a whole family picked off mid-flight. Rin got the story from poor Dium Flecc between gasps of pain as caustic blood ate through what was left of his arm. He'd brought the Torrent, and he'd taken the shot, but he hadn't had the damn sense not to be underneath the thing when he fired.

Mutalisk blood becomes highly corrosive when exposed to atmo, thought Rin. She'd gone on the hypernet and read up on the things the night after her failed assault on the mayor's pigheadedness. There was surprisingly little info, but Rin had learned *that* little gem before Rita had come in for an early shift and had promptly told her to go the hell home.

Mayor Haskins hadn't said a word since he'd come into the room; he had just gone from pale to pale green and tried to look anywhere but at Flecc.

"Flew right off with 'em. Lord, Rin. Flew right off!" Flecc moaned.

"You did all you could, Dee. I shoulda been up there."

And maybe I should have, thought Rin, though what good I would've been, trying to fight monsters on that damn cliff, is anyone's guess.

Doc Beele gave Flecc something, and he slipped into blissful unconsciousness. As Beele set to lasering the arm off cleanly, Rin turned to Haskins.

"You and I better take a walk."

Outside, bright, clean air swept away the acrid smell of Beele's tiny surgery, and Rin sucked it in gratefully. Haskins panted as if he'd just run a 5K.

"I'm gonna need a link to Strong in an hour. Not tonight, not tomorrow morning. An hour," said Rin.

Haskins nodded so hard his head seemed in danger of detaching as Rin continued, "He's our goddamn Dominion rep. He better get ready to start repping."

* * *

Strong was, in Rin's opinion, the least apt name Choss's D-rep could've had. He delivered about five percent of what he pledged—and this was for Quijadas, credit for credit the wealthiest town on Choss. Rin shuddered to think what his track record was like for Zeb, the ranch village ten clicks west, where most of the custodial staff for the resorts lived.

But Rin had emphasized the life-or-death nature of the situation, and Strong had promised to send Dominion assistance on next morning's freighter. It wasn't a minute too soon. The night had brought another attack closer to town.

Rin should have known better than to believe Strong. When the hundred-pound bookworm in the wool sport coat (*Wool! For a Choss summer!*) hailed her as he disembarked, she actually leaned left to see if maybe the Longbolt missile turrets she'd asked for were coming out on pallets *behind* the nerd.

"You must be Marshal Shearon," he said, and paused. "*Marshal Shearon.*" He chewed the words quietly. "Lotta 'sh's in there." Then, having deemed her name satisfactory, he extended a hand. "Brad Champlain, Special Research Operations. I understand you have a mutalisk problem."

Rin fought the urge to yell. "That's an understatement, Mr. Champlain. Don't take this the wrong way, but I was sorta expecting you to be a large stock of ground-to-air missiles."

"Really? I'm sorry, Marshal; they keep us pretty insulated from all that in SRO... Um, could I possibly persuade you to continue our conversation somewhere air-conditioned? I fear I may not have been fully prepared for your moon's heat."

* * *

"You're a mutalisk expert?"

They were in the Agave Club, overlooking the golf course. It was near the starport and air-conditioned, and Rin liked the egg-salad sandwich there—real chicken egg, imported. Usually above her pay grade, but for a business lunch...

Champlain laughed, a polite academic titter. "If it is possible to be an expert on mutalisks, then, I guess, yes. I am one. They are notoriously difficult creatures to study."

Good grief, thought Rin, echoing her mother and barely caring. "But you can help us get rid of our mutalisks..."

"Perhaps in the long run. You see, the reason the mutalisk is such an enigma is that it is impossible to conduct a thorough physical examination of one. The mutalisk is filled with a viscous ichor that breaks down into a fluoroantimonic compound when the animal's carapace is compromised. Basically, the mutalisk dissolves itself before any serious scrutiny can take place."

"Great. How do I get them to dissolve themselves?" asked Rin.

Champlain shrugged. "Terminate the animal."

"So your expert advice on how to kill mutalisks is 'kill them.' Doctor—"

"Just 'Professor' is fine."

"—I don't know how to find them. There may be as many as ten of the damn things out there—"

"Oh, heavens, no."

Rin was starting to lose patience. "Yes. I watched the security footage from North-Rim. There were at least five—"

"No, you misunderstand. What I'm trying to tell you is that if you saw a hunting party of five mutas twice in the same spot in as many days, then there is definitely a spire within 120 clicks of that location."

"A spire?"

"A *nest*, Marshal. You're looking at a clutch of sixty or more."

Rin felt the flip-flop in her gut that she normally associated with the cliffs. "Sixty?! Sixty mutalisks ready to eat my town, and they send me *you*, a guy who—no offense—doesn't look like he's ever even held a gun."

"None taken. Point of pride, actually."

"I'm sorry. I'm going to have to seek assistance elsewhere," sighed Rin.

"If you intend to exterminate a spire of sixty mutalisks, I would think so. If they've started attacking people, it means that they've depleted the local populations of wild prey animals. The situation can only get worse. I hope you'll let me stay on and study your clutch. I'll help if I can. I *am* well aware that these creatures are dangerous."

"Thanks, Doc."

"Professor," he replied jovially, and he took a bite of his Spanish omelet.
(Karak, not that you could tell with all the seasoning.)

Rin stared down at her egg salad. It had seemed so appealing fifty-five mutalisks ago.
Shit, thought Rin.

* * *

"Sixty?" asked Rita.

Rin had returned to the office from interminable deliberations with Haskins and the town fathers and found Rita finishing up the advisory bulletin as Rin had asked. *Always nice to know I can count on somebody*, Rin thought.

Rin unbuckled her sidearm, tossed it in her desk drawer, and flopped unceremoniously down in the chair next to her friend and deputy.

"Champlain says they've probably been there since the war, living off game bats and whatnot in the deeper canyons. I suppose he could be right. We *were* dead in the middle of the wet cycle when the fighting was happening. You know how the game bats boom like that every five years or so. But we've been in a dry crest the last two..."

Rin trailed off into a sigh. *Screwed over by weather. I coulda protected the town better if I were a meteorologist.*

Rita was staring, waiting for the other shoe.

"Anyway, he says if we keep indoors and away from the canyons, we're safe for a few more weeks. But at the rate they're pushing outward... We're evacuating Cliffside Rest."

"Gods, Haskins must be having kittens. What happens after a few weeks?"

Rin spread her hands. "We need firepower. Dominion's about as useful as a trapdoor in a rowboat. They won't admit their sanitation teams fekked up. We're gonna need mercs. But you let mercs into a town like this, you never get 'em out."

"Even with a marshal as tough as you, R?" Rita said with a wink.

Rin grinned and swiveled to face her friend. "Even then."

When Rin had been the rawest deputy on her dad's force, Rita had been a summer kid slinging club sandwiches at the Agave and spending her evenings gliding while her trust fund matured.

They'd met when Rita had called in a fight between a couple of drunk commodity traders. Rin and old Arco Bousquette had been the lawmen to respond.

Rita was the child of aristocrats who would've preferred that their little girl had been the toast of cotillion rather than the star ass kicker of the lacrosse team. Rin was the child of a stone-faced marshal who'd raised his daughter without ever appearing to notice that she wasn't a son.

The girls were a classic odd couple: elegant-looking Rita with her flame ringlets and olive skin, and rough-hewn Rin with blonde hair that she thought looked like an over-laundered bedsheet and a light complexion that burned and burned and never seemed to tan.

But they became immediate friends, Rin and Rita, braving endless jokes over the years from guys hoping to "get some R & R." Eventually the two of them made the dumb nickname their own.

When things finally exploded with Rita's folks, it was Rin and her dad who took Rita in, given her work on the tiny force.

When Marshal Shearon the elder passed, it was Rita who roused Rin out of the darkness. When Rita's entire family was exterminated in a zerg incursion, without ever reconciling with her, Rin repaid the favor.

And when Rita's five-year-old cousin, Jasper, was dropped off on the doorstep of his last living relative, Rin jumped in to help her friend raise him.

Like any good Choss girl, Rin had fooled around with the handsome summer folks, but none of them had stuck. What had stuck was Rita—closer than a sister—and Jasper, less Rin's son than she'd been her father's, but, like her father, she never seemed to notice. It was an odd little family, the orphan and the two lady lawmen, but it was what Rin had.

"What about your friend Pearly?" asked Rita. "Isn't he in a merc outfit?"

"R, he's in Raynor's Raiders. They don't make house calls to step on an anthill."

Rita was quiet for a moment.

"R?" Rin hesitated. "Keep Jasp inside for a couple days. Rent some holovids or something." Rin saw Rita nod in the dim desk-lamp light. They sat in silence for a spell. Then, as Rin was thinking about calling it a night, Rita added, "I just thought maybe he'd know someone. He's got people on-world."

* * *

"Damn 'n' eggs, it's Rhett Shearon's little girl. How're you doing, Marshal?"

"Not so XYZ, Pearly. We got kind of a pickle here. Mutalisks," said Rin, watching the monitor flicker as it tried to handle the decoding matrix she'd had to put in to get a clear signal from the *Hyperion*.

"Mutalisks?!"

"Confined to our parts, Pearly, for the moment. Gonna give Cliffside Rest some trouble, though." Pearly's whole family—including old Arco, now that he'd retired—lived in Bim Battum on the other side of Choss. Rin knew his first concern would be for his kin, and his

second would be for the intricate cliff-face hotel he'd engineered in the Quijadas canyons before he'd gone off fighting.

She explained the details of the situation, and Pearly listened with that intense focus that had made him her dad's best friend. When she was finished, he rocked back in his chair, light years away, and let out a lot of breath.

"I know a man who might, *might*, be able to help you. If you say the word, I'll get on the horn with him direct after we disconnect. But I want to warn you, Rin: you hire this man to kill these bugs, and that's what he will do. Every last one. You let something get in the way of that, he's liable to roll right over it. You understand?" Pearly leaned into the cam to make his point.

"Sounds heaven-sent, Pearl."

"All right. Man's name is Breg Shaw. You look for him to land by Friday."

* * *

Breg Shaw arrived in Quijadas late Wednesday in a ramshackle transport that made Rin reconsider her decision. Haskins looked like he'd smelled something unpleasant. But it wasn't as if they had much of a choice. They'd suffered two more deaths since Rin closed her link with Pearly, and the town was on edge.

When the dust had settled, they entered the hangar to meet their merc.

Shaw was a crusty, wizened man with obvious scars as if he'd been whittled out of knotty wood by an inexpert sculptor. He scoured them with deep, squinty eyes.

"You're the lady marshal?" He spat it out with a voice like a testy chainsaw.

"Katrín Shearon."

I don't like him, Rin thought. Rita would say that was because she didn't like most people. Rin felt this was unfair—she liked people who were worth a damn. Didn't matter; if Shaw could do the job, Rin would warm to him soon enough.

"Makes you the politician," continued Shaw, sizing up Haskins.

Haskins smiled as if he'd just bitten into a donut and discovered it was actually a bar of soap.

"And you've got a mutalisk problem you want me to clean up. I'll do it. Thirty thousand, plus maintenance fees for my gear. You'll have your sky back."

"You can get it done?" asked Rin.

"Oh, yes."

"Unfortunately, Mr., ah, Shaw, we aren't the ones you have to convince." Haskins had chosen this moment to find his voice. With a phlegmy little cough, he proceeded, "The aldermen have to okay an expenditure of this size. Now, we called an emergency meeting when Liddy at the port here picked you up as incoming. We're gathering at the town hall..." Shaw smirked. His eyes, Rin noticed, remained humorless, his voice quiet like an idling engine.

"Five dead, and you're worried about the aldermen—"

"Six," interrupted Rin.

Shaw went, "Ungh?"

"Six dead. We lost two while you were en route."

"Where's yer damn town hall?" he barked, revving that chainsaw.

"Center Green, up the main drag. I'll take you in the cruiser."

"Keep yer cruiser." He turned and stomped back to his ship.

Rin threw a bewildered glance to Haskins. *Takes a big asshole to make me side with my boss,* she thought.

There was a grinding whirr from inside the transport. A large cargo bay door began to open.

The door slid back completely, and all of a sudden Rin was much less worried about Shaw's abilities.

Out of the transport stepped the deadliest-looking goliath Rin had ever seen, with Shaw at the helm. On the side was stenciled the name *Flyswatter I*.

In fact, Rin had never seen a goliath in person, but the walker figured prominently in the articles on mutalisk defense she'd been reading since Alden Moss's death. She'd seen pictures, but none of them looked quite like this.

Shaw had replaced the usual twin smoothbore autocannons with Gatling-style chainguns on fully articulated arms complete with loader-claws. They seemed to Rin as if they would make for effective use on airborne targets. He had also managed to jury-rig a pair of UED-built missile racks. And in place of the standard crotch-mounted swivel machine gun, Shaw had somehow cobbled—

Holy crap, that's a burst laser off a Wraith! How'd he even get that thing running?!

But before she could fully form the question, Shaw's goliath was out of the hangar and striding toward her town at top speed.

Damn it! thought Rin, and she ran for the cruiser.

* * *

Shaw apparently didn't believe in speed limits, because Rin had needed to redline it on the way to the town center, feeling the dainty little cruiser (built to look good on milder worlds) whine and shudder at the breakneck pace.

But Rin and Haskins had made it without accident. They'd made it in time to see Shaw clank up outside the town hall, made it for the chance to see him lean on the horn—built to draw attention in full combat, not to pierce the quiet of a tiny resort town in the desert.

Folks came streaming out of the hall and around the hedges of the tidily walled-off day spas and tennis courts. The aldermen, concerned citizens, lots and lots of tourists—they were all crowding onto the green. Many looked irritated by the disturbance. Some simply looked curious.

Shaw hopped out of his rig and began speaking.

"My name," he said, "is Breg Shaw. I'm a mutalisk hunter. I've destroyed over thirty spires personally and participated in the destruction of hundreds. If you'll let me, I'll solve your mutalisk problem for you."

The crowd murmured.

"How do we know you're for real?" someone yelled.

"You pay me when the job is done. You can have whomever you like supervise the process." The crowd buzzed more loudly now, approvingly, and this time one of the aldermen spoke up.

"Can you stop these creatures quickly?"

"It might take me a week to locate your spire—"

"No, it won't!"

Everyone swiveled to look at Champlain as he pushed his glasses up his nose (*Honest to God?*) and elaborated. "You won't need a week. I've had my instruments in the canyons, recording mutalisk flight patterns. I've identified a fairly confined vector of habitation." Shaw stared, surprised to be interrupted, and damn near floored to discover the source. "What I mean is," Champlain finished, "I can take you right to the spire."

"Perfect! Perfect. You'll take our Dominion mutalisk expert and solve our little problem!" Haskins was beaming.

Now that the aldermen are on board, he hasn't a care in the world, thought Rin.

Shaw made a noise that sounded like "Tchah!" And before he could object further, Rin heard herself say it...

"And me."

* * *

"But why?!"

Rin had bet herself that Jasper would object, and now she owed herself a beer.

The boy stuck his reddening face out at her. Jasper looked a bit like Rita, but the gesture was pure Rin, and she saw it as clear as if she were staring into a mirror. Rin felt at once flattered and taken aback.

"In case this man Shaw doesn't deliver, somebody from here has gotta see what we're dealing with, be on hand to make tough decisions for the town, kiddo."

"But why does it have to be you?" Jasper asked.

Rin sighed and threw an arm around the boy's shoulder in the sort of "walk with me" side-on hug she'd had from her dad a hundred times. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"It's my town."

* * *

"We oughta be heading out there together," Rita grouched. "R 'n' R kicking some A!"

"Rita," said Rin, "think about what would happen if one of these things, even one, got into town. You really want the only law enforcement professional on hand to be Keith?"

Rin tried to laugh it off, but Rita stared right through the joke, into her eyes.

"R... if you die out there... I'll *kill* you."

Rin smiled. "Be safe."

* * *

Champlain was already packed by the time Rin pulled up in her rattletrap LAV at dawn the next day. Shaw and Champlain had spent part of the evening bolting the professor's lab pod to the *Flyswatter*, aft of the body, behind and under the missiles, where it was mostly out of harm's way. Now it sat there like a backpack on the goliath—a little scientific jump seat.

"Damn thing is still gonna pull five, ten percent off my forward top speed," Shaw grumbled.

"Just tell the op-con to replace the energy with twenty percent off your giant missile swivels while we travel. That won't interfere with the drive action chain. You can drop me when we sight the spire and have all your combat capability back," said Champlain.

Shaw raised an eyebrow. "That'll do."

"Morning, boys," said Rin. "Ready to move?"

"I wonder if *you* are, Marshal," said Shaw forebodingly, and as he climbed into the cradle of the helm, Rin saw Champlain roll his eyes.

Soon the odd trio trundled off into the desert, Rin's LAV trailing the bizarrely outfitted goliath into the heat of the day.

* * *

"It was my second doctorate, actually. The first was in organic chemistry. But that just flowed naturally into xenobiology. You know how it is—if a scientist is going to make any sort of impact in the Koprulu sector, he'd better get involved with the war effort."

Rin smiled as she listened to Champlain ramble on the vidscreen.

"Doctor, I gotta ask: what in the world did they send you here for? If you're trying to observe mutalisk behavior... half the sector is blowing up right now. On that scale, our problem is an anthill."

"*Professor*," sniffed Champlain. "I requested the assignment. I believe your spire might be the perfect place for me to find my big fish."

"Hold on; back up," sighed Rin.

"Well, you know zerg are adaptable; their genetic code is more a guideline than a rule, if you follow me..."

"Use tiny words, and I'll see if I can keep up," Rin joked, unable to resist teasing him.

"Oh! Ah... sorry. Well... mutalisks are amongst the most adaptable zerg subspecies. The ability to fly, unaided, in the vacuum of space or use their evolved reproductive tract as an offensive weapon... The mutalisk has evolved fascinating traits we know almost nothing about."

Makes them dangerous, thought Rin. *We know that.*

Champlain continued, "One adaptation mutalisks can develop is a natural tolerance to their spire mates' corrosive ichor. They live in such close quarters in the spire... Imagine if you were in danger of dissolving every time your little brother got a paper cut. It wouldn't do." Rin marveled at the waves of enthusiasm pulsing off of Champlain as he discoursed on his field of study. *It'd be cute,* she thought, *if he weren't talking about remorseless flying bugs that birth parasitic grubs and bleed acid.*

"Mutalisks develop this tolerance in response to minor exposure," he continued, "but they never get sufficiently inoculated for the body to withstand the corrosive soakage that

results from death and dissection. They just don't live long enough to build up the tolerance."

"Why not?" asked Rin.

"Because most mutalisks display little instinct for self-preservation. It's not in their nature to try to extend their own lives; their drive is to preserve the life of the spire. But every so often—and we're talking one mutalisk in millions—a mutalisk is born with that instinct intact. These mutalisks live years longer than average. It's my theory that, given enough time, a long-lived mutalisk would develop enough tolerance to its own fluids for its tissues to withstand a violent death and subsequent dissection. I call it the Theory of the Canny Mutalisk... my big fish."

"And you think our spire is a likely place to find one?" asked Rin.

"Out-of-the-way moon, non-strategic infestation, plenty of food... These mutalisks sought this hidden spire after the Dominion destroyed the only two known hives on Choss, *and* they managed to escape the notice of three additional sanitation attempts. They're good candidates. The natural geology of the region—your cliffs and mesas and all—makes it easy to avoid detection. This is where a mutalisk could survive—flourish, even—and learn to keep its head down and its nest undetected!"

"You really think they know enough to understand all that?" asked Rin.

"One of the reasons they're so fascinating, Marshal, is that it's hard to say with any accuracy just what they know and what they do not know." Champlain grinned.

"Listen to the pair of you." It had been so long since Shaw had spoken that Rin had almost forgotten he was there. Now as he cut in, she could see his sneer on the vidscreen, the tiny wide-angle camera in the helm ballooning his scars grotesquely. "You think you're on some

kind of field trip? You think you'll just bag yourself a mutalisk, maybe mount it in a little box with a pin and a scrap of cotton?" Derision dripped from every word. "A mutalisk is one thing: a killer. It's the most foul, the most *murderous* beast the Devil ever spat into this or any other sector. Ain't no part of itself it can't use to kill!"

"Which is precisely why it's so important that we study it!" Champlain leapt to the defensive. "The more we understand about these creatures, the better we can guard ourselves against them. If we do this right, the next little town that faces an infestation can prevent loss of life—"

"Quiet! Both of you!" Shaw's attention shifted instantly, his focus suddenly absolute. He cut the drive on his goliath, and Rin took the cue and killed the LAV.

"What?! What's going on?" asked Champlain.

"Shut it, and open your eyes!" barked Shaw. "Up there on the rise..."

Shaw tapped his console, and a second later a waypoint pinged up on Rin's display. She pulled out a pair of binoculars and sighted on the point he'd indicated.

Three mutas were latched onto a gigantic range boar, greedily sucking the life out of it. Rin heard the squeals now, high and thin and terrified. Rin had brought down plenty of range boars herself—tough, *mean* bastards the size of a rhino, that'd gore you as soon as look at you—but all of a sudden she felt a pang of sympathy for the beast.

"See?" Champlain whispered. "These mutas must have a profound need for *liquid* sustenance since the symbiotic nourishment organism, or 'creep,' that they would have enjoyed during the initial infestation has by now shriveled to nearly noth—"

The *Flyswatter* exploded to life. Rin heard Champlain make a noise like "Urk!" and then Shaw was charging toward the ridge.

The mutalisks shrieked and took wing. It was the first time Rin had ever heard the sound, the legendary chilling screech of the mutalisks, stolen from the mantis screamers the zerg had evolved them from, and Rin found that it cut her to the core.

"Tekeli-li! Tekeli-liiiii!"

This is not a noise that should exist, thought Rin. *This is a noise meant only for the damned.* The mutas wheeled once, and made a beeline for the *Flyswatter*, their undulating ovipositors rippling as they prepared to disgorge a pile of writhing glave wurms. For a moment Rin thought Shaw had lost his mind and was running to his ruin—

Then Rin heard Shaw's chainguns spin up. The first mutalisk went down in an aerosolized rain of acidic gore twenty meters out. Rin heard the soil sizzle as the droplets landed. The other two kept right on after Shaw and the *Flyswatter*. Shaw put his next burst of fire into the glave wurms that were wriggling obscenely out of the beasts. They popped and hissed in the hail of rounds. Rin's stomach gave an involuntary lurch.

The second mutalisk was close now, its snapping mandibles and seeking barbs nearing Shaw's control cradle. Rin heard Shaw grunt on the vidscreen and saw him swat with the chaingun, a savage backhanded right that sent the mutalisk tumbling into the dirt... directly toward her.

With barbed wings, the mutalisk clawed to a stop and leapt back into the air. It fixed its beady xeno eyes on Rin!

Most of the online footage of mutalisks had been taken from the air, lots of grainy documentary shots and military training vids. You got a sense of the chaos of moving wings

and the writhing of lower halves. And, of course, Rin had seen diagrams of mutalisk anatomy. But this was the first mutalisk Rin had seen *up close*, with its jaws gnashing and its wings rending the air.

Fear and revulsion welled up within Rin in nearly equal measure. Deep in her mind, a tiny primate voice awoke. *Run!* it shouted. *Run, or you will surely die!* The feeling coursed through her, and for a moment her hand flickered toward the reverse controls—

And then she heard Shaw's voice rumble out of the vidscreen.

"Ha hah! You sons of bitches! Straight to Hell with you!" On the screen he sputtered and spit.

Shocked from her trance, Rin snatched up her dad's old AGR-14, leaned out, and fired three rounds into the mutalisk ahead of her. It screeched, and Rin saw the sprays of blood ping against the hood of the LAV and burn tiny pinholes in the metal.

Shaw had dispatched the third mutalisk now, and he rounded on Rin, seized the second mutalisk by the tail, and smashed it into a projecting boulder with a crunch.

"I hope you're smart enough to know what's coming," Shaw snarled. Then he put a gun to the face of the mutalisk...

... and blew a wet acidic hole into the stone behind it.

There's a dude who enjoys his work. She watched the spittle collect at the corner of his mouth as he roared in triumph. *Maybe too much.*

The soil foamed as the muck began to pool. Shaw cackled and put a large round into the one sad glave worm that had survived the onslaught. On the vidscreen, Rin watched Shaw crane his neck around toward Champlain. "So, Professor, how was that for 'loss of life'?"

* * *

By noon Rin was getting impatient. They'd stumbled onto two other hunting pods, a pair and a group of six, and each time Shaw had taunted the mutalisks and laughed like a man possessed as he put them to slaughter.

"Shaw!" Rin shouted into the vidscreen as Shaw finished blasting the last bug with his crotch-mounted laser. *Good gravy!*

"What is it, missy?"

Rin ignored the diminutive. "I could've driven out here and gunned down muta strays with my dad's old AGR-14, but it was my understanding you were gonna take out a spire for us." "We're following your little scientist's heading." Shaw snickered.

"The heading is correct. If they're not within a klick of here—right over that rise—I'll tear up my credentials!" said Champlain, growing petulant. "Besides, every kill counts. They're certainly not breeding. Not without a hatchery."

The hunters pressed for the ridge, and as they crested it, Rin could see the sweeping valley and the massive tabletop mesa that dominated it.

"Wow!" said Champlain, too rocked by grandeur to remain surly.

"That's Anvil Rock," explained Rin. "Choss was settled first by a group of back-to-the-land commune types 'bout a hundred years ago. Called themselves the "Anaranjado Noventa" —

the "Orange Ninety" — even though there were about two hundred of 'em. They thought this rock was some kinda sacred place to take a spirit journey. No one's been out here as far as I know since the centennial, when I was about seventeen—"

"Look!" shouted Champlain. Shaw banked left down the hill, and Rin whipped out her binoculars and followed...

There, at the bottom of the valley, hiding in the shade of the mesa... was the spire.

It was way bigger and grosser than Rin had imagined, a claw-footed thrust of cartilaginous bone the diameter of a redwood tree Rin had seen in a pic-tome as a girl. The stem supported a pulsating, membranous sack with a gently respiring circular vent in the top.

Like the Devil's arsehole, thought Rin, hearing the voice of her dad in her head. *And it's huge.* The entire overhang of Anvil Rock was bristling with rustling wings and ovipositors—Rin couldn't count how many. Then, moving to the indecipherable rhythms that govern a flock, the horde took flight.

There were *tons* of them, a screeching, flapping cacophony of gnashing teeth and scrunching spiked protrusions. They filled the sky, a terrifying cloud of death, shrieking, "Tekeli-li!" *Come and die.*

And as the hopelessly huge horde settled around the spire again, Rin thought, *We're gonna need more goliaths.*

"I thought it might be something like this," muttered Champlain. "Your Anvil is probably laced with mineral deposits. They would work like iron-ball paint on ancient stealth craft, confusing radar imaging. No wonder we never caught this spire on any satellite scans. No wonder your sanitation teams missed it! The mutalisks were likely attracted by its roosting potential, but they lucked into a perfect hiding place."

"Maybe it wasn't luck at all. Maybe they *wanted* to hide from your satellites," grumbled Rin.

"No, no. Mutalisks can't grasp concepts as complex as radar imaging," Champlain replied.

"I thought you said it was hard to tell what they do get and what they don't," said Rin.

Champlain remained silent, staring out at the massive flock until Shaw grunted, "All right.

Champlain, let's get your monkey ass off my back and into the LAV with the pretty marshal. We'll send these overgrown black flies to meet their slimy maker."

* * *

Half an hour later Rin and Champlain were bombing at high speed on a transverse course past the spire. "Buzz the damn thing," Shaw had said. "Get that bucket humming and carve right by the spire. You make as much noise as you can, and you just keep going!"

Rin had argued with him. Surely Shaw's one goliath, armed to the teeth though it was, was not going to be able to destroy that massive spire.

"Stick to what you know," he'd barked back. "They're not that tough to bring down... long as the ugly bastards aren't home..."

Now as Rin accelerated, the old LAV juddered and shook, but it held. Champlain was in the back, tinkering with the bulky hunk of techno-whatsis he'd insisted on loading in with them.

"What is that thing, Doc?!" Rin yelled over the wind.

"Synthetic pheromone dispersal unit. Outside of the range of telepathic control, I believe mutas communicate through scent, with different musks. I've been collecting and tracking samples. If we get in trouble, I'll be able to deploy this and draw them off. This musk is designed to mimic the spawning effluent of a hatchery!"

Rin wrinkled her nose. *Eww*. "You use it often?" she hollered back.

"No!" He grinned proudly. "Just nailed the formula last week! Can't wait to see how it works!"

Swell. Rin narrowed her eyes and turned to the task at hand.

The plan was simple. Rin and Champlain would kite the bulk of the horde away from the spire with this high-speed drive-by. That would give Shaw a chance to run the *Flyswatter* in, plant an explosive charge in the top hole of the spire, blow it, and massacre the horde when it stacked up on the return attack.

"If you can get the bastards to stack up, you've won," Shaw had said. "Regular as clockwork."

Rin hoped to hell he knew what he was talking about, because the alternative was her dragging a giant mob of pissed-off mutas through the desert till she ran out of gas. The spire was getting closer now as they reached the flat of the valley.

"Oh, my," said Champlain, "it really is *big* up close!"

That was a hell of an understatement. Rin poured on the speed, but the spire didn't seem to get any nearer, just bigger and bigger.

As the LAV pulled up level with it, Rin thought, *Here goes nothing*, and leaned on the horn.

The deafening honk smashed the desert air like a maul through a melon. The horde leapt into the sky with a thunderous rustling, and Rin cut away across the canyon, going hellbent for leather.

"Look! Look!" Champlain's outburst was inappropriately gleeful. "Right up front! The canny mutalisk! Look!"

Rin hazarded a glance over her shoulder. *Bad idea. Really bad*, she thought, staring back at the sea of flapping wings and clicking carapaces.

But Champlain was insistent. "Look, right there! See all the scarring around the mandibles? See the number of striations on the underbelly? Right up front!"

Rin snuck another glance. *God, he's right. What an ugly sonuvabitch*. Rin hadn't thought it was possible for a mutalisk to be much uglier than the ones she'd already seen, but the scarred bastard up front destroyed that notion. It led the enormous horde like the lead goose in a migrating vee.

Up on the ridge, Shaw launched the *Flyswatter* into motion and charged toward the largely unguarded spire. Rin saw him on the vidscreen, grinning like he got his hand up his prom date's skirt.

"Something's wrong! Look at the scarred one!" yelled Champlain. Rin looked back. It had suddenly looped to a higher altitude and turned, the whole horde wheeling after it like a column of smoke whirling up a chimney.

"They're not following us," muttered Rin. "Shaw! They've stopped following us!"

Champlain gasped. "He's not going to have time to plant the explosive. Look! They're going to beat him back to the spire!"

Rin heard Shaw begin to curse as the horde returned to the spire. The mutalisks reached it before the *Flyswatter* could, and they burst out of their stacked formation into a hovering cloud of terror.

Rin watched as Shaw had to pull a full reverse, slinging inaccurate missiles back at the few mutas that gave chase.

Well, thought Rin, that sucked.

* * *

That night they made camp in a small cave mouth a klick away from Anvil Rock. Rin checked her gear, lingering for a moment on the AGG-12 grenade launcher in the trunk of the LAV. *Also Dad's, like all my guns,* thought Rin. She had brought it on a whim. *Damn thing only has one grenade left in it.* But when else was she gonna get to use it?

She took a vac flask of rich skalet minestrone that Rita and Jasper had made and warmed it on the ancient military-issued coil heater Shaw kept in the *Flyswatter*. While the soup bubbled, they gathered around the dim glow, warming frosty fingers.

Shaw had been silent since his plan had failed, and he was silent now, staring into the middle distances.

When the soup was done, they simply sat. After a few moments, Champlain said to himself, "Hang on..." and went rooting into his tool bag. After a bit of rummaging he retrieved a flask, unscrewed the cap, and took a small swig.

"Took a sabbatical on Shiloh... It's supposed to be the best in the sector—whiskey, I mean."

He held it out to Rin, who smiled inwardly, accepted it, and tipped a dram into her mouth. The smooth, hot burn of the Shiloh whiskey hit her tongue and radiated into her frame, cutting the nighttime desert chill. Rin looked at Shaw and offered the booze.

Shaw considered the flask for a moment and seemed to make a small decision. He reached out, took the whiskey, gave the bouquet an appreciative sniff, and sipped.

"You did fine out there today, the both of you. Something spooked 'em, and that ain't your fault. Don't always know what will make them go." He took another swallow and passed the flask back to Champlain. Then he spoke: "Mutas are born to frenzy. Frenzy for food, frenzy to spread. Frenzy for blood. A mutalisk can smell a single drop of blood on the wind two clicks away."

Rin took the flask as Champlain passed it, but she didn't drink. The light of the coil burned in Shaw's eyes, burned deep. *Like it lives inside him.*

"In a way, the frenzying makes them like us. Gotta... take advantage of what they want. Show it to 'em. Let 'em smell it. That's what makes 'em knot up on each other, crazy and single-minded like that. That's when you wipe 'em out."

Rin sipped the whiskey and felt an involuntary shiver travel up her spine. Champlain had trouble clearing his throat. "Ha—How did you learn so much about them? Not, ah, not everybody knows about the Higgs-Davis paroxysm behavioral model... A handful of my colleagues, maybe, and... servicemen... the ones who... you know..."

Shaw was quiet a moment as he accepted the flask.

"When the curtain was falling on Mar Sara, when it had gotten bad—with the protoss hanging over the lump of glass that used to be Chau Sara and turning their heads toward

her sister—an attempt was made to evacuate the planet. You've both read about it and seen the holovids and all that."

Now he drank, not a tentative sip but a deep pull.

"I was CSM aboard the *Hoosier*, a battlecruiser of some twelve hundred men. We were scrambled overnight to aid the evac effort, no time to properly supply, no time to reload the armory—just into the big tin can with a prayer on our lips."

"You were on the *Hoosier*?!" squeaked Champlain before Rin could jab him with her elbow. "We dusted off with four thousand colonists, making like hell for the evac point, half expecting protoss ion cannons to lance through us at any moment. But we didn't know much about the zerg in them days, didn't know that they came in such variety, didn't know that some of 'em could fly in space as easy as in atmo."

The desert silence had grown thick. Rin was aware of Shaw's breathing and Champlain's and her own, and it seemed a wet, loud, unnatural sound here, where stillness was called for.

"Five thousand souls lifted off of Mar Sara that day. Five thousand cried out as we hit that cloud of mutas."

He paused for a deep, rattling breath, and Rin was reminded again of her dad's old chainsaw sputtering, bound deep in the brush, and running out of fuel.

"Sixty-three of us got picked up in that jump-pod four days later."

"The lucky sixty-three," added Champlain, nodding gravely.

"Lucky." Shaw laughed, a mirthless sound. "Lucky."

* * *

Rin dreamt of Jasper screaming. She ran and ran and hunted, trying to find him. The screaming! The screaming—

The screaming was real, only it wasn't—it wasn't Jasper...

Rin's eyes shot open, and she saw the wings in the dawn sky, beating, beating, and coming fast. She leapt for her dad's AGR-14, saw Shaw scramble toward the helm of the *Flyswatter*, saw Champlain standing with his mouth hanging open.

"Get in!" she barked, grabbing his jacket and yanking him into the LAV harder than was necessary, whirling to dump a clip into the first muta to swoop within range, praying as she heard Shaw's chainguns spin up.

* * *

The attack had been thirteen mutas, and they were lucky it hadn't been more. Rin scowled as she thought about what even *one* of these things could do, set loose in her town.

They'd carved the first nine out of the sky easily enough, and the next two had fallen to laser fire, but they had been too close for a missile strike, and the final two had made contact with the *Flyswatter*. Before Shaw had been able to knock them clear and riddle them with shot, both missile racks had been ripped to bits.

That brought the argument.

"They were hunting *us*, Shaw! They were hunting us!" Rin was packing her gear into the LAV as fast as she could. They'd been foolish to try this. *The best I can do now is hightail it back to town and start an evac, get people safe*, she thought. *Then, if I'm goddamn lucky,*

having ten thousand refugees show up on his doorstep will get Strong's ass in gear.

"Mutas hunt! It's what they do!" snarled Shaw, stripping the last of a ruined missile rack off the *Flyswatter*.

"In packs of two or five or six! You killed them yesterday!" shouted Rin. "They are hunting us specifically, and we are going back to town to get my people safe!"

"I thought I told you to stick to what you know, Marshal!" Shaw growled.

"What I know is that I'm not gonna roll the dice on the lives of my people just so you can tromp around out here, playing soldier, until one of those things gets close enough to polish us off! We're heading back—"

Shaw shot her drive belt. One minute Rin was packing a functioning LAV, a vehicle she'd babied and rebuilt and loved, on which she was depending to get home and save Rita and Jasper and Doc Beele and all the rest, and the next she was loading her possessions into a useless hull. Shaw had taken his goddamn crotch laser and blasted her drive belt to hell.

"You're a maniac. You're a fekk'in' maniac, and you're gonna get us killed!" sputtered Rin.

"The only things getting killed today are those bugs! I've blown a hundred spires to high heaven, and I'll blow a hundred more, and when we're watching that ugly lump of mucus boil into the ground, you will thank me, missy, for having guts where you've got empty air. Now climb in... I'll tow ya."

* * *

And that was how Rin found herself on the ridge, watching Shaw mount another sneak attack. He'd dragged the LAV to the ridgetop and butted it up against some sheltering rocks beside a steep arroyo. Rin had gone along because the desert was three days on foot and

there wasn't a way to carry enough water in her pack... and what the hell else was she supposed to do?

Champlain had said nothing since the morning attack, and he said nothing now, sitting on the hood and chewing his nails as down in the valley Shaw released his decoy—a cheap little robotic glider with a whopper of a noisemaker attached.

Rin barely had time to think, *Decoys. The bastard had decoys, and he let us kite the horde yesterday anyway*, and then the whole thing went south.

The horde took off after the decoy and chased it for a moment, but as soon as Shaw started toward the spire, the cloud broke into three clean segments and struck.

It's a pincer attack. They've got him in a goddamn pincer! thought Rin, and she heard Champlain gasp.

Shaw opened up with everything. The chainguns pounded and the burst laser cut dozens of mutas from the sky, but for every one that fell, a dozen more screeched toward him.

"They're gonna kill him!" hollered Champlain. "We have to—we have to do something! My device—"

He dug into his gear, rooting out the awkward beach-ball-sized gadget. "Please, help me—" stammered Champlain as the horde smashed down onto the staggering goliath below faster than Shaw could scrape the mutas off.

Aw, hell, thought Rin, and grabbed the AGR-14.

They ran along the ridge beside the arroyo, Champlain fiddling with his pheromone bomb. To Rin's dismay it began to emit a high whining noise.

Instantly a clutch of three mutalisks leapt into the air and streaked toward them.

Rin began to fire. She tore through the wings of one muta and watched it crater in a gout of spraying acid, but the others were quickly on top of them.

Glave wurms started pelting the ground ahead of Rin. She fired, and they writhed and burst like popcorn in the pan. She felt the acid splatter the last three fingers of her left hand, and then excruciating pain as her flesh began to cook and slough off.

"I almost have—!" shouted Champlain, and then a muta swooped.

Rin felt as if time slowed as Champlain lurched back, tried to avoid the grasping ovipositor. She watched with startling awareness as his foot caught on the protruding rock, watched his center of balance shift, watched him hang impossibly in the air...

... and then he vanished into the arroyo.

Rin screamed and depressed the trigger and felt hot hate well up in her chest for these things, these horrendous things that shouldn't exist!

It felt good to watch the nearer muta explode as spikes riddled its carapace, good to hear the other one squeal as the spray caught it full in the face and it too dropped like a stone. Rin could hear Shaw cursing on the distant LAV vidscreen as she rushed to the edge of the arroyo.

"Champlain!" she hissed. "Champlain! Brad!" Down below his body lay in an unnatural tumble, motionless. *No way to know*, thought Rin. *No way to know if he's gone*.

She sat back against a boulder and bit down on the urge to scream, cry, something. In the valley below, the *Flyswatter* was bristling, horribly bristling, with those spiked wings. Shaw

fought and fought and staggered under the growing weight, the loathsome acidic busting of mutalisk after mutalisk now breaching the helm, breaching the cradle armor and scalding him within.

Rin knew he was finished. The sheer number of mutalisks was too many, too many for any of them. She saw Scar circling in the air above the grinding, desperate, declining goliath with the tragic trapped man inside. *When did I name it?* she wondered idly. *And, dear God, is Champlain's stupid canny big fish mutalisk going to kill us all?*

Scar dove. The other mutas spread like ripples in a pond. Rin saw Scar sink its jaws into the disintegrating armor plate and tear it free. She saw Shaw exposed to the nightmare of his life. She saw Scar roar its banshee call in Shaw's face, "Tekeli-li!" and felt the tremor run down her spine as Shaw sat forward in the cradle that would be his grave and roared back at the top of his lungs, a primal scream of rage at his tormentor.

It was courageous, and Rin felt a terrible pang of sympathy and affection swell unbidden within her for this dreadful, mad warrior who'd doomed them all, and it was at that moment of keen kinship that Scar plunged a vicious barb into Shaw's chest. She heard the faint impact, heard Shaw's cry end with a wet, sucking yelp, and knew that the mutas were now frenzying over a cooling corpse and not a man.

She was stuck. *My only way out is that goliath. But it's prickling with mutas. Even if I did get them off it, the thing's so badly crippled that they'd be on me before I got ten steps.*

The searing hurt in her hand was getting worse. Rin hazarded a glance at it and dry heaved, fought the urge to be sick, bit her lip at the pain.

As she waited for the wave of nausea to pass, Rin stared at the hated spire, at Anvil Rock thrusting up behind it, at the writhing feast that had once been Shaw.

Mutalisk blood becomes highly corrosive when exposed to atmo, echoed in her brain. Gotta take advantage of what they want, said Shaw's voice at the campfire. A mutalisk can smell a single drop of blood on the wind two clicks away.

Rin imagined quitting. She imagined her poor foolish resort town abandoned. She imagined Rita and Jasper alone when the horde ran out of range boars and game bats and turned west...

She had only one option, and it was no option at all, really, but the alternative made it the only one worth considering.

Painfully, Rin staggered back to the LAV and dug in her kit bag for the laser knife she'd borrowed off Doc Beele. She risked another look at her left hand and saw that the pinky, ring, and middle fingers were little more than a bubbling mass of waste. Rin wedged the strap of her kit bag between her teeth and aimed the knife at her ruined fingers.

Fast, she thought, like a bandage. She dug her teeth deeper into the leather of the strap, felt a rivulet of sweat trickle down her neck. *One... two...*

With a slash and a whiff of carbon, Rin briskly lasered off her own fingers at the base. The pain lanced through her as if she'd plunged the knife into her gut, and her vision was bathed in maddening dots. *I will not pass out,* she told herself firmly, and she bit the strap nearly through while the world swam back into focus.

She opened the trunk of the LAV and dug out her dad's old AGG-12 grenade launcher. She thought about the one Punisher grenade nestled inside it, enough to take out five, maybe six, mutas in a tight grouping on a good day. *Even winnowed down, the horde's sixty-five if it's one.*

The grenade was twenty years old, and she hoped to God the launcher would still fire. *Why was buying fresh grenades never a high priority for me?* There were at least ten reams of

unused QSD letterheads in her office that could so easily have been an additional grenade. *Just a different order form, really*, she thought.

That's no good. Getting punchy. Gotta focus. Gotta focus and start walking.

Slowly and quietly, Rin began to creep a wide circle around the spire, the fallen goliath, and the Anvil. She felt the sweat evaporate off her neck, felt her unprotected skin begin to sizzle as the sun climbed.

Finally, *finally*, she reached the backside of the Anvil.

It wasn't until she got to the base of the thing that she realized how goddamn massive it was. *Scale that makes you feel tiny. Scale that makes you dizzy when you look up, even if you aren't fresh off a self-administered amputation.* The scale reminded Rin sickeningly of the canyon cliffs near town.

I cannot climb this rock, she thought. And then she thought of Jasper and Rita, and wedged her maimed hand into the first crevice.

* * *

The sun poured down on her back as she inched, terrified, up the sheer line of the mesa. *I'm toting a weapon sized for a guy half again my size, and I'm missing three of my best fingers*, she thought. *Perfect for a beginner.*

But she climbed.

The clacking and snicking of the mutalisks tearing at Shaw's corpse began to slow. *Please, boys, please use the whole buffalo. I really do not want to be caught clinging to the side of this bastard rock like a grape on the vine.*

Halfway up, the ground began to swim sickeningly below. Rin felt the bile rising. *No point fighting it.* She vomited. She knew she was dizzy, dehydrated now, dying in the sun.

But she *climbed*.

Finally Rin's hand slapped down on the flat, oven-hot stone of the top (*Dear God, yes!*), and soon her other hand joined it. (*Pull. Pull! Up and over, please!*) And suddenly she wasn't climbing anymore.

Rin scooted along, belly down, reluctant to stand, petrified of seeing the horizon. She crawled to the edge of the Anvil (*Don't look down!*) and drew a careful bead with the AGG-12: Anvil to spire, spire to goliath and whatever gooey bones are left in there. (*Don't think about it!*)

One chance. Don't blow it.

Fighting another wave of nausea, Rin pressed the wound of her finger stumps between her teeth and bit down.

A fresh lance of pain, vision doing the conga. *Don't you dare black out!* she barked at herself. A big squirt of blood, her own blood, burst into her mouth...

Choking, gasping, caught between laughing and crying, Rin rolled her head off the edge...
... and spat a mist of gore into the wind.

The reaction was shocking, a hundred leathery wings ripping the air with a sound like a maglev passing. The horde formed up around Scar and made a beeline for Rin. She clutched the launcher close...

Not yet...

The borrowed mantis screamer screech of the things tugged at Rin's guts, fifty strong and directed at her now. "Tekeli-li! Tekeli-liiii!" Every nerve ending seemed to beg for her to run.

Not yet!

They were closing the distance! Halfway! Half that again! The swirling cloud of wings was resolving now to a single purpose, for a single target, the great mass of zerg flesh flowing as a single undulating creature...

The mutas had stacked. Stacked into one ugly inkblot in the sky. And as Rin stared into the bulk, one nasty creature pulled to the front of the column—a creature with scars webbing its maw!

Rin took a deep breath, dropped her front sight, and fired her one grenade.

Low.

Too low to hit the bastard.

Too low to even nick the horde...

... but just right to sail (*pirouette, really*) in a graceful parabola...

... right into the hole in the top of the spire, which the horde was stacked above.

In a split second the entire mass vanished in a gout of corrosive slime from the exploding spire and the sleeping mutas within. Rin heard their cries rattle with death, saw carapaces and wings boiling away in a midair storm of toxic entrails. She *smelled* the suckers dying. Nothing kills a stack like splash damage.

* * *

The climb down was a blur of skidding and scrambling. The spire side of the Anvil was less steep, but Rin was fading by then, and seeing things she knew could not be there.

She fell the last few meters to level ground—

—and darkness took her.

* * *

Rin awoke to the ka-chunk! ka-chunk! of a limping goliath.

Where? she wondered unhurriedly as the world strolled into focus.

As consciousness solidified, Rin realized she was jostling along in the lab pod on the barely chugging *Flyswatter*. She felt a slight pain in her forearm and looked down to find an IV drip of fluids pouring life back into her.

"Shaw?" she muttered dully, trying to fit the pieces together.

"Marshal Shearon! You're awake!" The voice was sure as hell not Shaw's. Champlain was alive, and he was driving the goliath.

His arm was in a sling, and he had to wrestle one-handed with the unfamiliar controls. Even so, when he struggled his head around to look at Rin, he was beaming with pride.

Rin sat farther up and saw the front half of Scar roped to the chassis. The monster's entrails were smoking gently, but the thorax was intact.

"You got your prize. You got your big fish!"

Brad turned and smiled back at her, and pushed his broken glasses up his nose.

"Yup."

Rin laughed a deep, burbling mountain river of a laugh that surged up out of her, as if her body needed a biological way to say, *I'm alive!*

And Brad began to laugh too.

And pretty soon the *Flyswatter* was weaving like a drunken man as Brad chortled and held his sides, and they laughed together.

As self-control started to reassert itself, Brad snorted, "I came to when you blew the spire up. Or, rather, when you made the big loud noise. I didn't know what it was till I climbed out of that gully. Not so easy with a fractured ulna, but I made it. And there the two of you were, the marshal and the mutalisk, just lying there."

"Well, Brad Champlain," Rin grinned, "my hero."

She looked back at the smoking carcass and sighed.

"I reckon the SRO put their money on the right scientist. I mean, shit, they get their goody, and all it cost me was a few fingers."

Champlain brought the goliath to a halt, looked back, and shrugged.

"I don't know. Maybe they should sweat about it a little. Maybe they ought to have to pay for it with something. Something like, say... a pair of Longbolt missile defense turrets?"

Rin looked ahead at the expression of impish delight on Champlain's face and grinned again.

"Whatever you say, Professor. You're the expert."

And they began the walk home.

The End.