

STARCRRAFT

HEART OF THE SWARM



The Fightin' Sceevees

By Kal-El Bogdanove

The back of Bill "Pearly" Bousquette's neck itched as it had on and off since his first week of service during the previous war. He'd grown up on Choss, a no-account rock that guidebooks flippantly referred to as "New Moonxico" thanks to its absolutely uniform high-desert climate. Pearly had spent his younger days working in said climate, planning the elegant cliff-cities where wealthier men than him took their families and mistresses to luxuriate in the constant sun and dry air, to clear up their "ship croup" and "cruiser pallor" and get to feeling like the billion credits they were worth.

A life out of doors on Choss had left Pearly with a preference for a leathery neck—tanned and dry, even when you were working like a dog and the parts of you not exposed to the sun and wind ran in rivers of sweat. In the service, half the time they put you in a big tin can and flew that can around inside a bigger can, far away from light and air. The harness of the articulator inside the T-280 space construction vehicle made Pearly's neck sweat, and without the sun and wind to whisk it dry, a sweaty neck meant an itchy neck by the end of every workday. Pearly fancied that it itched worse when he was exasperated, and it was itching like hell now as he looked at his men gathered around the viewscreen, bitching to beat the band.

"Forget the mats. How in godless protoss heaven are we supposed to build the goddamn thing in the first place? A collapsible bridger that can support tandem siege tanks across a quarter-klick gap, but light enough to get storked in by a dropship with a full weapons complement. Fekk!"

The man speaking was Vigo "Tuna" Czark. In the world, Czark had been a crane specialist for the fishing fleets of Turaxis II, and up in space he was a fatalist to retire the role. Chewitel "Choosey" Wsoro (blasting man from Old Faithful, cherry-picked out from under the noses of the Confederate Mining Consortium) shook his head in response and clucked. "If it was me, mate, I'd be a fekk of a lot more worried that Raynor wants to start running missions that are gonna have us driving big boys two abreast across a quarter-k wash."

Pearly let his SceeVees whinge awhile as he studied them and turned the problem over in his own head. The men around him were not young; hell, the freshest face among them was already framed with the first gray hairs of middle age. Raynor had tried to give Pearly young men when he'd begun to put together this harebrained unit. He'd sent the best and the brightest right out of Umoja Central University (at least, after the Dominion, the Umojans, and the Combine had drafted their fill). All of 'em were chock-full of theory, but not one had built anything bigger than a model.

On top of it, most of 'em had been so green that they dropped their welders at the first sign of gunfire, and that wasn't the point of the unit. Raynor's Raiders were rebels, trying to fight the whole blasted Dominion with a hundredth of the enemy's resources. They were consistently outmanned, outgunned, and out of time, and yet somehow Jim Raynor'd managed to lead them to more victories than defeats.

With those impossible odds to play, Raynor needed a group of SCV pilots who would be able to take heat, to focus on stomach-churning engineering puzzles even under fire, raising arms to defend their work if necessary. Raynor had sought out Pearly—a man he'd seen complete the weld job on a hellion while small-arms rounds thudded arrhythmically into the back of his T-280—to lead this bunch of madmen. When Pearly had told Raynor that every man he'd assigned to the troupe was insufficient for the task, Raynor had been patient while Pearly fired them all and recruited from scratch.

And recruit he did. What Pearly needed was a batch of serious tradesmen, experts as tough as the No. 10 standard dessert cake in an old war ration. He needed lugs who knew their shinola inside out. He needed thirty of himself, and he'd set about finding them. Pearly had haunted ports and construction sites (and a considerable number of bars) across the sector, hunting every kind, from degreed engineers like him to self-taught plumbers who were so good they could make scat flow uphill on a hot day.

None of them was as young as the average marine, and two out of three had already been dragged from Pho-Rekh to Aiur in the old war. Those facts gave rise to the popular

marine joke, "Be kind to a SceeVee; he might just be your dad!" That had kept the riffraff laughing until they watched the SceeVees build a command center and six bunkers while the rest of the Raiders were hiding from the full-on strafing fire of two banshees. All of a sudden the idea that the SceeVees were mostly mean-ass duffers and long-suffering soccer dads back in the world didn't matter too much. The truth was they could build a snow fort on an August afternoon in Hell with the Devil himself taking potshots.

Maybe that was why hearing them bitch like a bunch of Pridewater fishwives was such an itchy-neck experience for Pearly. He knew that if these men were grouching, they had a damn good reason.

They'd been ornery since Tuesday morning, when First Welder Steiglitz got the letter. Like most of the SceeVees, Steiglitz had a family at home—three boys and a patient wife—and the letter had been to inform him of the death of his eldest. Out of duty, the boy had joined his planet's defense militia and gotten blown to hell by "friendly fire" during an outer-atmo skirmish with the zerg.

Tuesday afternoon, Steiglitz had carved a brand-new raven he'd been jointing into a half dozen lumps of very expensive trash before Choosey and a fiber-pourer named Patel pulled him off his plasteel welding rig.

Pearly had seen younger grunts gripe about everything from the rations to the racks while SceeVees took second helpings and fewer pillows. But ever since the Steiglitz letter, their fuses were a helluva lot shorter.

Pearly thought of his wife and his own boys, both grown now, one running the Canyon Plaza back home, the other designing cutting-edge thrusters on Umoja. They were no less vulnerable than the Steiglitz boy had been, and when he pictured them, the image increasingly was of three figures in an open field, enemies on all sides. Time and distance always magnified that feeling of anxiety, and since the letter it had become a persistent weight in his stomach.

He shoved the feeling aside and cleared his throat. "Okay, listen up. If I wanted to hear *can't*, I'd have asked a Dominion politician. We'll try this again at 16:00. I want all three tac squads to have a logistically viable mat list by then. Any extra time's your own. Spend it on prayer or pinochle; I don't give a damn."

Pearly scanned the men, ragged and creased like a letter reread too often. "Couple of you look like maybe you oughta spend it in the gym." A few of the SceeVeEs chuckled. He slapped his own belly. "Me among you." A handful more grinned. "Dismissed."

Pearly watched as the SceeVeEs milled out, and he reached back to scratch his neck with the stylus from his remote console. He was in charge, and it was his job to do something about this. *Shite*.

Rory Swann set his mug down with a big, round thump. Rory did most things in a big, round way. He had an expansive quality Pearly liked, perhaps because he himself was so contained and never chose to be the one to fill a silence.

Rory was the ship's chief engineer. A few years earlier, the SceeVeEs had pitched in alongside the engineering crew to patch up the *Hyperion* after a particularly nasty engagement. Pearly'd made the best friends of his life while up to his elbows in gears and grease, and Rory was no exception.

The two men, temperamental opposites though they were, had an easy way of getting on. Pearly attributed that in part to the fact that they had roughly the same rank and the same expertise, but their duties never overlapped, as a rule. *We can gripe to each other with total impunity and not risk ruffled feathers*. Usually that meant Rory calling Jim Raynor a "goddamn hotshot" and lecturing for twenty minutes on whatever he and the commander had last locked horns over.

Today might be different, Pearly thought as Rory gushed over the merits of the diamondback assault vehicle for the thousandth time. The fact was, for all their squabbling, Raynor and Swann were thick as thieves. And since Pearly was trying to work out a way to convince Raynor to do something Pearly felt sure he wouldn't want to do, he knew Rory was the man to ask for advice.

Swann was finishing up a big fish story. "—hell, I doubt they'd even let me *land* on that moon again." Pearly chuckled (though he'd heard the story half a dozen times) and thought about how to phrase his concerns.

"Listen, Swann..."

"What's on your mind, bud?"

Pearly took a swig of beer and continued. "You married?"

Swann grinned. "More than once. Why? Somebody looking for a one-armed husband?"

Pearly grabbed a handful of pretzels and laid out the Steiglitz story—noting the grimace that flickered across Swann's face when he came to the demise of the raven—and finally worked around to his main concern.

"The thing is they'd never slack. They'd never let their asses drag. But it's getting to 'em. They're touchy without meaning to be, less brilliant than they used to be. It's like a background subroutine. You might not notice it immediately, but if you're paying attention, you know the CPU's being overtaxed. They need to see their families, Rory. For a few hours, even. They're getting... ragged."

Rory opened and closed the jaws of his bionic arm. "Hmm. Yeah. How could they not be? Hell... Most of the boys on this ship? This is their first war. Young men fight for principle or vengeance. Sometimes for fun. Not the case with you and me."

Pearly snorted. "Ya big liar. You *still* do it for fun."

Swann chuckled. "Yeah, well, maybe me. But not your men. They're in it for the folks at home. You gotta go to Raynor."

"And say what?"

"Say what you said to me. Hell, you're *both* tight-lipped rednecks from some backwater craphole or other. You should know better than anyone: best way with a cowboy is to be direct. Tell the man what you need."

"I hate asking."

"You're not asking. You're telling. Raynor's not a fool. He'll, ah, see the wisdom of the thing. Remember, every Raider who's slugging away in this hopeless hellstorm has one thing in common. I look at you, Raynor—*any* of the men—and I know I'm looking at a regular Joe who got tired of giving everything to a bunch of fascists who wouldn't spend ten fekkin' credits to save his life, nor any other person's. Start with that. Build outward. Like when you assemble an LAV."

Pearly sighed. "You're an optimist."

Rory guffawed. "And you're a strange bastard. You'd go bare-knuckle with a zealot and not bat an eye, but if someone tries to pry ten consecutive words out of you, you're a shrinking violet."

Swann reached over the bar and helped himself to the tap. "The answer's always no if you never ask. Step one is opening your mouth. Have another with me and then go give him hell."

"Can't be done." Raynor said it with the kind of casual confidence that made younger soldiers stand up straight and salute. It made Pearly's hand automatically rub the back of his neck.

"Our position's too tenuous. Takes a certain amount of resources to keep this bird in the air. Most of the boys are busy turning those resources into spent ammunition. Your unit brings in twelve times what any other squad pulls in a year of missions."

"Seven times what the equivalent Dominion engineering corps pulls, with a third of the operating budget," said Pearly. "I know the stats, Jim."

"You're proving my point." Raynor pulled out a bowie knife and carved a large disc off a Shiloh russet that had been perched in the bowl on the corner of his desk. "We can't spare you." He offered the slice of apple to Pearly on the point of the knife. Pearly made a small, polite *no* with his free hand and took in some air. Raynor continued.

"We're sitting in the saddle of a rebellion in full swing. Only way we pay for that is if we keep the Moebius folks happy."

Raynor took a bite of apple, chewed, swallowed.

"Leadership's a fiddly little thing. Budget can be as crucial as balls. Did you ever see yourself where you are now?"

Pearly thought about it. "I guess I mostly saw myself building vacation getaways for rich folk. Ranching when I had the spare minute. Getting fat, with grandkids climbing on my knee."

"Funny universe, isn't it?"

Raynor shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Pearly. We're at a crucial crossroads in this fight. It can't be done. Not right now."

Pearly had once been surprised by three broodlings while doing a field rebuild of a siege tank, and managed to finish off all three with just an arc welder and a particularly heavy spanner. *Why is this so goddamn hard?*

Raynor filled the silence. "It's good you're here, though, because I'd have called you in for a mission briefing today anyway."

"Thought we were already think-tanking a project."

Raynor grinned. "This takes precedence. Don't look so worried..." Raynor slipped a data chip into the tactical console, and a telemetric model of a small moon flickered to life above it. "This one's a milk run."

"It's a there-and-back strip-and-rip," Pearly explained to the men as they stared at the mission briefing.

"Marine support?" asked Czark.

"Commander didn't offer, and I didn't ask. This is a rebellion, not a square dance. This crazy outfit's stretched thin enough already without us pulling able men off the lines to sit around, drink coffee, and watch us drill. Besides, this is a softball pitch. We get in; we get out with the goods."

"The goods being...?" Choosey asked, arms crossed and eyebrows arched.

"Those pinging probes Corporal Griffud launched six weeks ago have been transmitting nonstop. They picked up a valuable mineral vein on this moon. Brass was alerted at oh five hundred. We're in transit through the graveyard and ready for deployment tomorrow morning."

"How valuable is valuable?" asked Czark. Pearly punched a key on the tac console and watched the lode data snap into place and light up the men's faces.

"Good heavens," said Choosey.

"Provided Griffud's little squeakers are accurate," added Czark. Across the circle, Liam Griffud (a professor of exploratory geology, poached from a fellowship at UCU) brushed his sandy hair back from his pale face and steepled his long, thin fingers.

"They're accurate," he said with a smile as small and dry as a raisin.

"So how come no one's sunk a fork in this piece of cake?" asked Choosey.

"The rock is called Gurdlac. Atmosphere supports human life, but barely. It's hot enough to give an old New Moonxican like me a second thought. Intel says the Dominion flagged it for possible terraforming and use as a refugee camp but never followed through. There's no deed on register, no survey 'n surveils. Just a big, warm stone that nobody's taken a second look at besides us."

Pearly shrugged. "Just gotta go in and do our thing. Only hitch is that the Raiders have a handful of asses to kick elsewhere while we do it. We'll get drop-off and pickup, but while the mission's in progress, we're on our own."

"What else is new?" grouched Czark to a general chuckle. "Alright, Sergeant. I'll get Tac Squad A to tune up the MULEs."

"I'll pound out a minimum viable equip and turf it to the pursers," said Choosey.

"One last thing..." Pearly hesitated. "I know we've been pulling more than our share of doubles and we've gone two tours longer than most of you signed on for, without any leave. You'll all go twice as hard as the average plas-jockey regardless. But I thought you'd want to know that I'm... working on it. Dismissed."

The men shuffled work-scarred boots, and scratched stubbly chins, and filed out. A few gave him amicable nods. Choosey stopped and said quietly, "No sweat, chief. If it's humanly possible, you'll get it done."

Then Choosey patted him on the shoulder and hurried after the rest. Pearly sighed as he watched them recede beyond earshot.

Pretty to think so.

The drop from the ship made Pearly's breakfast do gymnastics in his stomach, just like every drop he'd ever been in. It was a serious relief to press down on real soil again, even if he was separated from it by a meter and a half of T-280.

Pearly flexed, working into the familiar feel of the articulator. The standard articulator included a form-molded harness collared to the operator's body. It was capable of reading the user's most minute motions and translating them into those of the SCV mech. The onboard force feedback module (the OFFM—or if you had a zergling climbing your back, the "OFF ME!") generated proportional tactile responses and gave the operator a damn-close approximation of what it would feel like if the enormous limbs of the hulking rig were his own.

Another lifetime ago, Pearly had worked a two-cred contract with an ornery, self-taught wrench swinger from a shite-kicking booney settlement. Man's name was Redell Quinton. They'd become good friends while pounding imperfections out of some of the buggiest feedback modules in the sector. As time went by, they started spending nights off BSing about high-level mods they'd like to patent if they had the cash. It was during one of these bull sessions, half-gassed on Red's hangar hooch (to this day the meanest homebrew Pearly'd ever choked down), that Pearly first outlined a rough schematic for his heuristic, biometric articulator.

Years later, with the full weight of the SceeVees at his disposal, he'd bent to building the thing and having it installed in every rig under his complement. The device learned the nervous responses of each user and gradually made accommodations to improve performance. Now the more hours his SceeVees logged in their rigs, the better their SCVs would respond. As a result, the men grew attached to their particular machines. Pearly, a cowboy at heart, always thought of the horses Choss farmers kept handy for the not-infrequent fuel shortages—of the rider in the saddle, getting to know a favorite mount.

Pearly was not immune to the effect. He plated his rig with salvaged neosteel, juiced its thrusters, and generally babied the huge hunk of hardware.

Now, safely back on terra firma (*or Gurdlac firma*, he thought), Pearly took a few grateful, clomping, knee-bending steps, fired his thrusters over a short burst, and checked the output indicators. Then, satisfied that the rig was operating as it should, he turned and checked the tactical monitor to his left. The steady vital signs of all his SceeVees throbbed reassuringly back at him, an efficient grid of pulsing red dots.

Pearly looked around at Gurdlac. An endless scrub plain rippled with occasional arroyos to the east. A sharp wall of stone rose to a plateau in the west, rived and riddled with slot ravines and box canyons as it stretched ceaselessly to the north and south. The moon was gorgeous and desolate in a way he knew well, a way only deserts managed. And it was a nice day.

That made *this* harder.

"Keep those lids down, boys. I know we all miss fresh air, but this place will pull the moisture right out of you, and we haven't got that much to spare. Keep COMFORTroller setting on high so you don't sweat."

Fat chance. Damn things aren't much better than mass-market air conditioners. When we get back, I am putting a tac squad on improving them, he thought for the hundredth time.

They had the command center up fast. *Not record time* (Pearly tracked their construction records, hoping they'd best themselves every chance), *but a hell of a lot faster than the average gang of Dominion lug nuts.*

They stowed the supplies faster, and by lunch they were ready to crack the mining plans and pick an initial dig spot.

It was just after 16:00 when they tripped the zerg trigger with a *CRAK!* The sound was like a pig-iron trap closing on the leg of a range boar in the scrub outside Quijadas, where he used to hunt as a boy.

One of the MULEs had thrown a claw at around 14:30, and Pearly was helping Czark and the A squad fit a quick repair.

The robotic mobile utility lunar excavators upped the yield of every dig. They were capable of hauling loads that would bring an SCV to a standstill. But they had no brains, no instinct, so Pearly had trained his men to work in concert with the MULEs, correcting unimaginative telemetry and guiding the powerhouse excavators to the places they were needed most.

Plus the damn things ran through power like it was going out of style, and when they went dry, it was up to a couple good SceeVeEs to give 'em juice.

As Pearly was sweating a fresh fitting onto this particular rig, a prescient itch prickled the back of his neck. He grumbled and glanced away from the task at hand.

Across the dig site, Petty Officer Wolfe was sinking a fusion cutter into the sere rockface. Then there was the sound—*CRAK!*—and all of a sudden Wolfe was gone and a

yawning crevice was splitting the earth beneath their feet. The growing gap raced into being around the site like a rapidly failing seam in weak cloth.

One of the red lights to Pearly's left winked out. Wolfe was dead. Pearly's mind raced. *Tectonic fault? No. Too orderly. Perfectly ringing the camp. Has to be deliberate. Has to be engineered!*

Then the first zergling launched itself out of the crack, stabbed its spikes into Cortez's cockpit (*metallurgist from the luxury vehicle factories on Moria*). Pearly looked closer and realized the gap was filled... with writhing zerg carapaces.

Fekk! Gotta form up, rally at the command center and—

But the crevice was spreading, circling the entire area. *If we go for the command center and the gear, we'll be surrounded.* Pearly scanned the field. Choosey was closest to the shrinking path between them and the canyons. Time for a quick decision.

"SceeVees! Form up around Lieutenant Wsoro! Shoot the gap and head for the canyons! Carve anything that moves!"

Pearly slammed the articulator into motion. Already zerglings were swarming over the men on the periphery. True to form, the SceeVees were falling into pairs, moving tactically, without panic, slicing and crushing zerglings as fast as they could come and hauling ass for the vanishing gateway to half a chance. If Pearly'd had a second, he'd have felt proud.

But there wasn't time. There seemed no end to the horde of zerglings wriggling out of that damn crack, and it would be a matter of moments before they were overwhelmed. Pearly saw a zergling land on top of Dean Mozian's rig (*ballistics expert, pulled from indentured servitude in a Cirion sweatshop*) and start digging at the edges of the view hatch. Pearly yanked on his articulator and rammed an arm into the zergling, catching its head in the clamp at the end. He squeezed his fist shut as hard as possible and felt the bug's skull burst through the OFF ME!

He jolted as a zergling thudded onto the back of his own rig, and he pivoted toward Czark. Czark stomped through the thorax of another zergling scrambling between them, and he raised his welder. A hissing whine sounded dimly over the comm as Czark maxed the output and blew the bug off Pearly's back with a white-hot flare.

Four more lights dimmed to join Wolfe's. Pearly's mind ticker-taped their names in time with the clomping stride of his mech.

Clomp! *Addams, plumber from Great Bend.*

CLOMP! *Kobayashi, particle physicist off a roving research fleet.*

They were nearing the gap now, the two MULEs dropping back to absorb as much damage as possible.

CLOMP! *LeFleur, UI architect headhunted away from the Hypercade.*

CLOMP! *Nguyen, structural architect, still worked for the ChariCorps, funneling military-grade armor data to low-income housing initiatives.*

Most of the men were through the gap. Pearly looked back. Czark and the other stragglers were spitting plasma into a great brown tide of zerg.

Now what? Even in the open, they'll drown us in seconds! Pearly clamped hold of Blake (network specialist already pensioned from twenty years at UNN) and slung the other man's crippled rig through the gap. The tide was almost on them!

We need a stopgap or we're fekked! A wedge of plasteel welders could hold the edge, buy the others some ti—

Pearly saw Wenders (*demolitions contractor off of Halcyon*) go down in a mob of zerglings. Another light dimmed.

He saw Czark, rig turned aft, clearly thinking the same as him. *No, not the same, because—*

Czark fired up his fusion cutter and pointed the business end toward the massive pack of explosives strapped to Wenders' rig. Across the distance, Czark caught Pearly's eye. Pearly had just enough time to utter a quiet, useless—

"No—"

And the entire site became a cloud of roiling fire. The blast knocked Pearly's rig into two of his retreating SceeVees. For a moment he lay there, shaking his head, trying to clear the ringing chimes.

Pearly gained his feet. Czark had bought them some time, but it would be a minute at best. They needed to move—

"West by northwest, the narrowest damn canyon we'll fit through! Coordinates on your HUDs! Now *move!*"

Night had fallen by the time Pearly felt confident ordering the company to halt.

They had made it through the gap before the zerg had been able to regroup, and once the SceeVees were out of sight, the bugs hadn't given chase. Pearly knew the still, windless day had kept the scent of rig grease from traveling and probably made them harder to track, but even so, they'd caught a break.

Now deep in the winding slots and alleys of the plateau, they had discovered an enormous box canyon with stepped sides. There were only two ways out, both pinch points. *Be as safe here as anywhere*, Pearly thought, and he gave the order.

The men ground to a halt. Pearly opened a comm channel to Griffud. "Liam. I need a detailed 3-D of these canyons quick as you can."

"Copy that, chief." Griffud's response was followed by a few muted beeps as he bent to the task. Pearly nodded and turned to his other troops.

"Alright, form up."

They did, wearily but without complaint.

"We lost some friends today, and we're all beat from this march. But I'm going to need more from you before we can rest."

"What the hell was that, Pearly?!" It was Eddie Rimes, a transpo captain out of Tyrador.

"It was a trap." Choosey spat the words. "I know a trap when I see one. We've set plenty for those Dominion dogs, haven't we? We got sent down here to mine a goddamn punji pit."

Rimes plowed on. "But how could they know? How could they know we were going to come to that spot?!"

"They didn't."

It was Dave Warner, who'd spent three years working counter-biological engineering strategies for the SRO.

"Trap wasn't set for us. Trap wasn't set for anybody. Or maybe I should say it was set for anybody who doesn't crawl around inside a carapace. We got reports of this in Special Research Ops, called them *tripwires*. Basically, zerg find a rich haul, and instead of mining it, they dig in, fill a cavern with creep, and go into a short hibernation. Like a frog in a pond."

"BullSHITE! Frogs don't explode out of the ground and tear you to shreds, mate!"

Pearly'd had enough. He hopped up on a nearby rock and hollered, "Alright, stow that!"

The SceeVees stowed it.

Pearly sighed. "I'm not gonna sugarcoat it. We're in trouble. We were running this thing stripped down to begin with. Now the food and water are sitting in the center of a deathtrap. We're out of range of the *Hyperion*, and we're not expecting her back for two weeks. With what we got in hand here..."

He fell silent, and Griffud finished his thought.

"Not even close."

"So... I need ideas."

They were quiet. It was the first time Pearly could remember asking his SceeVees to brainstorm and not getting bowled over with twenty competing plan As. They needed more than planning now. They needed more than leadership. They needed inspiration. He thought of what Swann had said.

Inspiration from a man who hates using more than ten words end to end. Dammit. Goddammit.

Then Pearly thought of Lynn-Ann and the two boys. He thought good and hard.

Step one is opening your mouth.

"Okay," he said, not really knowing what would come next. "Okay, listen..."

They did.

"Way I see it... this... this is an engineering problem like any other. It's transpo of dangerous materials. It's resource management. It's..."

"It's plumbing," finished Choosey.

"Right!" said Pearly. "The messy kind. Think about it. We got crap where we don't want it, and we got to get it to flow somewhere else. So. What have we got to get *that* done with?"

"Well, to start, we're all wearing massive construction vehicles," Griffud chimed in. "That's got to count for something."

"So what do we do with them? C'mon!"

"Normally we build things, but we haven't got any materials," said Rimes.

Pearly scratched his neck and looked around. Then he snapped his fingers.

"The hell we don't. Clearly you've never been to Choss to see my masterpiece."

Rimes stared back for a beat; then he laughed. "Cliffs. You bastards carved all kinds of things out of your cliffs—"

"Whole resorts, practically vertical cities," finished Pearly. "Listen, you bunch of lugs." He strode out into the center of the canyon. "We are standing in the middle of one big building supply. Those wriggling bastards think *they* can build a trap? They are up against the crankiest crew of ass-kicking wrench swingers in the goddamn sector!"

Pearly turned and walked among the men.

"So you're tired. I'm tired. I'm beat raw from running, from fifty years of lugging, from seeing my world bled by the Confederacy and the Dominion, and from two goddamn wars too many! I'm tired and I'm mad as hell, and you should be too, because once again we're shouldering seven times the shite of any other unit in the sector! But you know what? I'm glad! I'm glad because when I get back—back to my boys, to my home, to my wife—when I get back, I will have earned it like no man could who wasn't here in this ravine tonight.

"So if you're tired, good! You're angry? Better. A tired, angry, unwashed, half-fed SceeVee is worth ten soldiers running on eight hours and three squares. They give us a

spoon, and we dig them a bunker. They give us a twig, and we build them a fort! They give us this big, lonely hole in the ground, and we will carve an engine of death that will crush these bugs so flat you'll wish there were even more of them just so you could watch 'em die. And I promise you this...

"Boys in the mess hall on that ship, boys in bed all across this sector, will piss and moan and feel sorely cheated that they were not here the day sixteen tired lugs wiped out a hungry xeno army!"

"Hell yeah!" shouted Drew Roder (*ten years wildcatting on frozen Zenn*), and some of the others laughed and clapped.

Griffud's voice piped quietly over Pearly's comm. "3-D is up for the whole range." Pearly immediately brought the model up and located the canyon. He studied the flickering picture of twisting ravines, then highlighted a handful of points and bounced it to the entire unit.

"See? It's gonna be even easier than we thought."

A few more grunted a hearty assent, and Pearly caught at least one "damn right."

"Choosey, can you widen the entrance with the explosives we have in hand?"

"I can do a lot more than that. But I got one question, chief. How are we gonna get the wriggling bastards in here?"

Pearly sighed, thought again of his family.

"Only one way I can think of..."

They worked through the night, taking their time, doing everything right. They had just one shot at this. But then, the SceeVeEs were used to those parameters. They'd built

slingshot launchpads where a centimeter in the wrong direction meant a dead pilot. They'd drawn up minimum viable equipment lists where an extra kilogram of neosteel armor would bury the airship in a mountainside, and a kilogram under would spell death by hydralisk.

In a way, it's nice to have our own lives in our hands rather than the life of some earnest kid.

The thought crossed Pearly's mind as he surveyed the embattled camp at sunrise. The other SceevEs had all balked when he said he'd be the one to go, but Pearly had insisted. Griffud (cursedly, mercifully scientific 'til the end) had pointed out that Pearly'd won the annual T-280 obstacle relay three years running. Even if that hadn't been the case, Pearly felt he'd let too many good men take a bullet for him on this mission already.

Looks quiet.

Aside from the massive crevice and the unmistakable gooey creep, the camp looked much as it had the day they built it. Peaceful. Deserted.

Yeah, and if you believe that, I've got a bridge to sell you. Pearly chuckled. *Actually, I do. I've got bridges to spare.*

Pearly's laughter brought Choosey's concerned voice across the open comm. "Sir?"

Getting punchy. Gotta stay focused. Pearly reined it in and said quietly, "Nothing, Choosey. How we doing back there?"

"Finishing solar recharge on the rigs. One minute to thunder, chief."

This could be the day, Pearly thought. *Hell, I've dodged more bullets than an old lug has a right to. Two wars, countless lawless worlds. If I can save the other guys...*

"Be a good way," he said aloud.

"Thirty seconds, chief."

But if this is gonna be it... Pearly reached out and tapped the controls. The hatch opened with a hermetic hiss.

"Chief?!"

"It's fine, Choosey." The arid wind of Gurdlac swept into the cockpit like a lover's kiss. Pearly shrugged off the harness and felt the feather touch of that breeze reach him. He felt the sweet, dry air, the warm sun. He thought of his boys. *Good boys. Men now, really. Good heads on their shoulders.*

"Fifteen seconds, chief."

He thought of Lynn-Ann, with her long honey hair and her slim, tan body. A frontier girl from Choss. He'd been with a fashionable city kitty in college, and during seventh-term break he threw her over for Lynn-Ann, whom he'd not seen since grade school. Lynn-Ann, the grubby-kneed tomboy down the lane, who'd budded into this desert angel. Lynn-Ann, who smelled of agave, and of sage, and of something indefinable that was better than both.

Best choice I ever made, Pearly thought.

"Five..."

He took a deep, lung-stretching breath.

"Four..."

He ran over the plans...

"Three..."

Searching for a fault...

"Two..."

Running the variables...

"One!"

He grabbed the articulator.

"SceeVees charged and standing by!"

He felt the drill spin up through the tactile array.

"Any time, chief!"

He reached up and touched his neck, whisked dry by the wind...

"Chief?"

Pearly tapped the controls. The hatch slammed shut—

—and Pearly drove the drill deep into the ground!

The reaction was instantaneous. Zerglings exploded out of the crevice in a tidal wave of writhing limbs. Their massed hiss reached Pearly a split second ahead of the full realization of what he was doing.

"Shite."

He turned, fired his thrusters, and fled as if the Devil himself were giving chase.

Pearly passed up the canyon opening they'd taken the day before and opted for a wider slot a half klick down the wall. They'd traced the telemetry Griffud had pulled up and realized that the box canyon's other exit widened substantially after a few meters. It had been child's play for Tac Squad B to modify the pinch point.

It'll be nice and inviting, thought Pearly. I hope.

The first zergling took about three minutes of hauling ass ("*hell-bent for leather,*" Lynn-Ann would say) to reach him. He was ready. A quick swing of the fusion cutters, and the zergling tumbled to a stop in two pieces, got trampled to jam seconds later by the horde.

But Pearly'd lost a half step, and the little bastards were, by God, fast.

He caught another one in his clamp and hurled it ahead of him like a shot put so that he could grind it to bits with his next few steps.

But the third zergling got its teeth into the motivator on his left arm before he fried it plasma-crispy, and the fourth made it up onto his back.

Pearly felt the servos slow with the added weight. *No good. Gotta shake it.*

He tore open the control box on his right and made a quick live patch. The skin of his T-280 ran white-hot with the current, and the zergling squealed and skittered off.

Pearly checked the meters. Just enough juice to make the endgame if he didn't use his thrusters. *Can't pull that trick twice. Gotta get some breathing room.*

They hadn't left camp with much, but the men had been lugging a handful of demolition packs and a few odd meters of conduit. They'd needed most of them for the build, but with the tiny bit that was left, Dean and Choosey had worked up three little surprises. Pearly was carrying those surprises now. He reached for the first oblong device and tapped the control panel to activate it.

This was tricky business. Too big a deterrent, and the horde would give up the chase. Too small, and they'd swamp him. *It's the whole thing in miniature,* Pearly thought. "*Engineering's in the details,*" he remembered a professor telling him once. Pearly suspected the man hadn't been talking about kiting hostile xenos. Probably thinking about writing grant proposals, maybe publishing your yearly technical manual.

Hell, I'd rather be doing this.

Pearly turned his head to look at the horde. *Bad idea. Goddamn. There's a metric fekk-ton of 'em.* He crossed his fingers and spat like he'd seen his father do a hundred times for good luck, then heaved Choosey's toy into the wave of bugs.

CHOOM! The concussion grenade sent up a little mushroom cloud of dirt and tumbling zerglings. He heard the others hiss and squeal their squeals of bloodlust.

Sonnova zealot, it's working! He'd bought himself a hair of distance, but the horde of zerglings showed no sign they'd lost interest. *If anything, I pissed 'em off. Good. Always better to go in against an enemy who's rattled.*

He'd made the canyon now and gained some ground as the zerg closed ranks (such as they were) to fit the tighter confines.

Pearly killed two with the fusion cutters and impaled another on a convenient stone spike. But the rest were closing again, and he couldn't risk any more of them climbing on and weighing him down. He readied the second grenade.

CHOOM! OOM! Oom! Oom-oom-oom. The sound dopplered surreally up and down in the acoustics of the canyon.

Pearly looked back. *Not good.* The blast had slowed them less this time, and a few had simply scrambled up the sides and continued at a full gallop. Still, he had a little more breathing room.

Pearly checked the telemetric data. Damn. So far to go, and he was already through the second surprise. *If I survive this, maybe they'll just retire the obstacle relay.*

He'd killed the COMFORtroller to save power after that hot patch earlier, and now it was as blazing inside as outside, but a hell of a lot less dry. *Scratch that. If I survive this, I'm going to devote a whole tac squad to developing a better sweat-wicking fiber.*

Another zergling closed the gap, and Pearly managed to put the drill through it, but not before the bug had torn out the control circuit for the whole right arm.

Pearly was close now. As he rounded a bend, he saw it, the straight shot downhill to the endgame. He was gonna make it!

That's when the first zergling hit his back. He cursed and took a stutter step to the side, ground the bastard into the canyonside. But it slowed him, and he'd forgotten about the zerglings running along the nearly vertical walls. He'd barely gone three more steps before another bug pounced.

Then another.

And another.

He shook and clawed with the remaining live arm on the T-280 and tore off one of the little bastards, but it was replaced by a fourth. Their sickles stabbed away at the plasteel of his view hatch. The servos whined and groaned, and his forward momentum flagged dramatically. He could see the goal a few strides away, but it was impossible. Impossibly far.

The rest of the horde would be on him in seconds. He couldn't use the hot patch again; he'd be rooted to the ground like a stone. Not enough juice for thrusters, either.

Cracks began to spiderweb across the view hatch.

Only one chance. Crazy. But he had to get them past the pinch point—

CHLINK! A zergling sickle came through the plasteel, and he felt the burning pain as it stabbed deep into his shoulder. Pearly hollered and gritted his teeth.

Now or never!

He tapped a control with his good arm...

... and the world went white as the final concussion grenade—still strapped to the back of his rig—detonated with a POP!

Pain.

Pain in his shoulder.

He wasn't dead.

Pearly opened his eyes. The blast had thrown his rig practically to the far end of the canyon. The pain in his shoulder was from the zergling sickle, still stuck there, separated from its owner by the explosion.

He peered through the shattered view hatch.

The entire zerg horde was *pouring* through the pinch point and headed—

Right at me.

Pearly cursed again and yanked on the controls. The T-280 was a mess. All the motivators in one leg were blown. Didn't matter. He still had the other leg and one arm, and he got the thing up. He realized that Choosey and every other voice in the corps were shouting over the comm for him to "goddammit, move your sorry ass!" And he did.

He lurched, and dragged, and pirouetted like a drunk, and somehow—*somehow*—got that sorry ass to the wall where Choosey's tow chain was dangling, jammed his clamp around it, and felt the tug in the OFFM as Choosey and Griffud hauled him skyward!

And Pearly heard the sound—a freight train filled with bees, hitting a bridge abutment—as hundreds of zerglings piled into the canyon wall below him.

They scrambled—*oh, they scrambled*—at the wall, which had been sheared just sharp enough. "A zergling can climb a nearly vertical surface," Warner had said. "Nearly."

And they hissed—*oh, they hissed*—as Choosey flipped a toggle and activated the precisely placed demolition charges in the cliff walls so that the widened pinch point vanished with a crisp *bang* and a small cloud of dust. "Easy peasy lemon thingy," Choosey had said.

And then zerglings began to die.

They died as delicately milled stone floors dropped out from under them and sent them tumbling into pits lined with meticulously sharpened conduit spikes.

They died as columns of elegantly turned rock thundered, balletic, down perfectly machined ramps and ground the bugs to a sticky paste.

They died in sand traps, and pitfalls, and snares, and rockslides, and when they'd been winnowed down to a handful, the last few died with their heads crushed by the servo-actuated loading clamps at the ends of the arms of a tight phalanx of fifteen hungry, tired, ornery old farts. Pearly let them handle it. They'd earned the satisfaction.

Lieutenant Hathaway was nervous as the dropship shuddered through the thin, dry atmosphere of Gurdlac. It wasn't the drop. In his short career, Hathaway had dropped onto worlds much less hospitable than this. And he'd stared into the maw of an angry corruptor and squeezed the trigger on his gauss rifle and saved a dozen soldiers. It was how he'd earned his bars.

But somehow, whenever he had to deal with the SceeVees, he wound up feeling like a kid who'd been caught playing with Dad's power tools. He wished he'd pulled another assignment, but there it was: when Jim Raynor asked you to do a job, you did it.

The ship landed without fuss, and Hathaway got out to survey the dig. He blinked. There were Sceevs scattered around the site, sitting on crates, playing cards, reclining in open T-280 cockpits with their hats down over their eyes, napping.

But that wasn't what had Hathaway staring. The whole camp was ringed with zergling skulls on sticks. Crushed ones, cracked ones, some hastily reassembled with construction adhesive. Hathaway stared at these, and at the claw marks scarring the recently built structures, and at the T-280s jury-rigged back to working order with scraps and bits and—was that a beer can housing that motivator?!

"Took you long enough, mate."

The man who spoke was "Choosey" Wsoro, Hathaway knew from the mission briefing, but he didn't respond; he stared. Choosey waited, then looked around and chuckled.

"Oh yeah. That. We had a little problem with some zerg."

Hathaway stuttered. He opened his mouth to speak. Closed it. Opened it again; closed it. Twice more. Finally he managed, "How? That is... you're lucky... I mean... Were... were you able to mine anywhere near the, ah, four hundred payloads you were sent for?"

Choosey laughed. "Of course not, kid."

Hathaway groaned quietly. Raynor wasn't going to—

"We mined eight hundred payloads."

Nearby, Pearly grinned.

Jim Raynor answered the knock on his door.

"Come."

Pearly entered and found Raynor staring bleakly at a tactical readout. He closed it and rubbed his eyes. "Hey, Pearly. How's the arm?"

Pearly set his toolbox down near the door and stepped into the room. "Good as new. Rory's disappointed. I think he thought we were going to be able to coauthor a digi-tome on one-armed engineering," he joked.

Raynor grinned. "Too bad. Could've taken that act on the road."

"I've seen plenty of the road, Commander."

"You and me both. What's on your mind, Pearly?"

Pearly took a deep breath and got ready to say ten words. More, if it came to that.

"SceeVee Special Engineering Corps has an output seven times that of an equivalent Dominion unit."

"Eight," replied Raynor. "I ran more... recent numbers."

Pearly smiled ruefully. "Yes. I guess we've gotten awfully chummy with Prince Valerian while my guys were down on that rock."

Raynor inhaled sharply. "Yeah. I've had to make some odd calls. But this fight we're in has taken a turn! So if you're here to—"

"I'm not. I want a realistic path to peace. There's some clear advantages to this thing. And that's an engineer saying that. We trust you."

"I appreciate—"

Pearly pushed ahead. "Still... those numbers. Dominion times eight. We do it. And we get you a road or a bridge or a building any damn place you want it, and we can do that

because the unit is made up of grown men, Jim. Not bright green, wet-eared pups like the ones that are blowing each other up all over the goddamn sector. Men with families."

"Pearly, no one is—"

"I'm not done. We make those numbers not in spite of the fact that we worry about those families but *because* we worry about them. It's better motivation than any stimpack. But it takes a toll."

Pearly paused and pulled out a remote console. "This is the maintenance schedule for the machines in my jurisdiction. There's an itemized list. And it includes the name of each man under my command. They require maintenance. It's a rolling schedule. And it's tied to the nav plan you have filed on the bridge. We'll never be more than four men down at any given time. You can sign it..."

He extended the console to Raynor.

"Or you can find someone else to run this corps."

Jim Raynor looked back at Pearly from behind tired cowboy eyes. It was quiet. Somewhere in the ship above them, something clattered to the deck.

After a long moment, Raynor took the console. "Okay."

Pearly met his gaze. "Okay."

Pearly turned to leave, but Raynor added, "There is one thing..."

"What's that, Jim?"

"Remember the bridging vehicle I had you working on? Might have figured out a mission for it to make its debut."

Pearly nodded.

"How do you feel about building a small, discreet encampment... on Char?"

Without turning back, Pearly grinned and reached for his toolbox.

The End