

Bugging Out in a Hurry

by Kolik

“Maxim 3: An ordnance technician at a dead run
outranks everybody.”

— Howard Tayler, *The Seventy Maxims of
Maximally Effective Mercenaries*

Quill peered at his target through his binoculars: a small, grey rectangle sitting atop the edge of a cliff. The building was a few stories tall, and he couldn't see more than one or two windows from his vantage point at the bottom of the hill. He had found it thanks to the intel his client had provided, along with instructions on how to find the communications panel and attach a listening device. The man currently occupying the safehouse was alone (Quill's sensors showed a single heartbeat in the entire building), presumably trusting the planet's isolation and his network of spies, shell companies, and mercs to ensure nobody except him ever learned of it in the first place. Apparently the feud between this man and Quill's client had been serious enough for him to retreat here.

Quill shook his head, ruffling his deep blue and green plumage, and got as close to a chuckle as his species could. He was usually skeptical of jobs like this, but his client had promised to pay well: all he needed to do was plant the bug and leave. Easy, even if the walk hadn't been. There was a lake at the bottom of the hill, far enough away to be barely visible through the humid haze. He'd had to park his ship at the bottom on the far side to avoid the house's impressive sensor array, and it had taken him the better part of a day to get this close. Quill stowed his binoculars and started creeping the last kilometre up the hill through dense jungle foliage.

Once he reached the top, he took a final look around. Nothing except the dull buzz of insects. He stepped out from his hiding spot.

Exactly forty-five seconds later, running for his life, he was wondering why he'd been dumb enough to take the job in the first place. Another railgun slug tore through a tree a few metres away. The slug had broken the sound barrier several times on its way over, so it wasn't until he'd heard the fw-thump of its impact and turned around to see it that he felt the lurch of compressed air that followed. The effect was akin to being thrown head over heels by a dozen men, all of whom were punching him.

Quill squawked, flapping and desperately trying to right himself in the air before he drifted too high. He didn't like running and certainly wasn't built for it, but giving up the jungle foliage's meagre cover would be suicide.

A metallic voice boomed from somewhere behind him just as he landed and started running again: “TRESPASSER, YOU HAVE FIFTEEN SECONDS TO SURRENDER. ACCURACY MODIFIER INCREASED TO TEN PER CENT. NINE OUT OF TEN DENTISTS WOULD NOT RECOMMEND ME.” The message was punctuated by the dull roar of the guard robot’s engine. Quill had taken one look at it – a large metal cylinder with several guns and sensors attached, sitting atop caterpillar treads – when he had set off the alarm attached to the comm panel, and realized he didn’t have a hope in hell of disabling it. His client would be angry he had failed, but fuck him.

Quill felt panic setting in, but something in him was still smart enough to form a plan: he couldn’t fight the robot, and he couldn’t outrun it. He needed to fly – his instincts were screaming at him to take off and escape the dangerous ground – but flight under his own power would leave him a sitting duck for the robot’s weapons. The railgun fired again, but this time it went high and the sonic boom shoved him to the ground as surely as a boot on his spine. His body fell on top of his gangly bird’s legs, with a squeal of pain that was covered by the sound of every leaf and vine around him flapping wildly in the wind.

“TRESPASSER, YOU HAVE FIFTEEN SECONDS TO SURRENDER. ACCURACY MODIFIER INCREASED TO FIFTY PER CENT. WOULD YOU BET YOUR LIFE ON A COIN FLIP?” Quill forced himself back up to his talons and started running again. So what to do? There was a mountain at one end of the cliff – a great spire of pale stone that was at least twice as tall as the hill surrounding it. The only thing that would potentially let him live through this was getting up enough speed to double back on the robot and escape its sensor range. The only way to do that was to make it to the top of the spire, dive off, and build up enough speed to fling himself back around to his ship in a desperate glide.

The climb itself would have been unremarkable normally, but he had never combined mountaineering and live ammunition. It was his best bet – and his only bet.

The terrain grew rougher and steeper the closer he got to the spire's base. Enormous roots grew out of the earth like black, gnarled hands, and he had to switch from a flat-out run to a series of quick, precise hops. The trees were taller and smoother than the ones he had passed a moment ago, and blocked a lot of sunlight. This time the railgun tore through the growth underneath and uncomfortably close to Quill, sending him into the air in a hail of wooden splinters. A few of them lodged painfully into his underbelly.

The robot did not care. "TRESPASSER, YOU HAVE FIFTEEN SECONDS TO SURRENDER. ACCURACY MODIFIER INCREASED TO SEVENTY-FIVE PER CENT. WORSE THAN A GAME OF THREE-CARD MONTE NOW." Its voice was loud enough for Quill to hear the grainy quality of its speakers.

Quill flapped once – oh *dammit* that hurt; he must have nearly dislocated something – and got his bearings. There was the robot at the bottom of a small ravine, implacable and larger than he remembered as it crushed vines and small mammals beneath its silver treads. There was a swell in the ground, then a flatter and open field beyond it. Those were all that separated him from his climb. In a heady rush, he realized he had no time to waste on the ground. With another painful flap of his wings, he flew towards the spire.

The robot's engine screamed as it powered up the swell after briefly losing sight of its quarry. When it reached the top, it scanned again just in time to see Quill landing on a ridge halfway up the spire. He tumbled to the ground, heart hammering, and heard the robot's ultimatum. "TRESPASSER, YOUR LUCK HAS RUN OUT. ACCURACY MODIFIER INCREASED TO ONE HUNDRED PER CENT. THE HOUSE TAKES THIS HAND." Quill glanced back and saw a rack of missiles slide out of the robot's side, orange tips pointed at him.

This had better work, he thought, digging around in his pack for the one gadget he'd brought that might be able to do something. The missiles launched, howling through the air towards him, and just as they made the final lunge at his perch, Quill threw a small bronze disc towards them. It was a

jamming device – against fire-and-forget missiles, it would do nothing, but if the missiles relied on a locking system, then it would overload their sensors with garbage data. He hoped the robot had not been bluffing when it announced his fatal odds.

It had not, and the missiles did have trackers, and the jamming device did scramble them. They were so close that their course barely diverted away from Quill, but it was enough to save him. The explosions rocked through the stone face a couple meters above where he was. He felt like the entire world had grabbed him by the collar and shaken him down looking for pocket money. The ringing in his ears faded after a second, but the shaking didn't, which confused him until he opened his eyes and realized that the sky was moving.

No, wait, that was him. He was moving. He looked at the ground beneath him. It was still rumbling. He looked to his side, where the robot still had a clear line of sight to him. It had turned around and was desperately rolling back the way it had come. How odd. Finally, he looked up at the spire and realizing the top half of it had broken off. It was falling down in a manner that would painfully kill him if he stared any longer.

“Oh.” He desperately leapt to the side just in time to avoid the first ten-tonne block. For the umpteenth time in the last few minutes, he was buffeted by displaced air. This time he almost enjoyed the feeling of his wings being wrenched in their joints.

Once the dust had cleared, he performed a quick scan – this time looking for robot AI cores instead of heartbeats – and found one. It was buried under close to a hundred tonnes of stone, and was fading quickly. Quill figured it was time to leave. In half an hour he had retreated to his ship and punched in the ignition sequence.

He didn't quite relax until he was well clear of the planet's atmosphere. Almost as soon as he was, a communications request appeared on his monitor – his client, no doubt eager to hear of Quill's success and eager to know that his side had the upper hand. He sighed before rejecting the call and enabling his signal jammers.

“Last time I take a job from an anti-skubber,” he muttered.