

"Is it just coincidence that the name Mars was ascribed to that wandering star? For it is a planet of war. Not a war between creatures or men, but between the stars themselves.

It is a war that Earth tasted at Chicxulub, Barringer, and Vredfort. Earth is coddled, though – the atmosphere gently smothers us, forcing so many would-be conquerors to simply shine brightly and dissipate into dust. The flora of Earth encroach upon any wounds, briefly covering them as plate tectonics strike them from history.

What of Venus? She is at war with herself, with her protean ground. And of Mercury? He has scars, no gashes. And Luna? She does not stand alone. What about Jove, Saturn, and the rest? They are not of the same kind.

Mars is besieged. Unlike Earth, the tyrannous sun stripped him of his blanket. Countless interlopers have come and ravaged his surface with no deterrent but his soil and rock. The planet is stained with the blood of asteroids. It is scarred by the legacy of a long-dead mantle, with Mariner Valleys – up to ten million metres deep – dominating a fifth of the planet's side, cutting deep into Tharsis; a plateau of dead mountains which touch the fabric of heaven and faults which stretch out beyond the scope of the imagination.

Mars clings to the southern half of his planet, with a fingertip the size of a continent pressed down as far north as Alba Mons. It was not always this way. He once held it all, but then he was assigned a bride. The union of Theia and Earth produced an eternally merry dance. Mars saw half of his domain blasted out into the vast and cold void of space, and ever since he fought to reclaim that which is his. See where north and south meet, and where the Mars attempts to rebuild that which was lost so long ago; mesas, cliffs, and canyons mark a reclamation of the empty lowlands which will never be complete.

But despite the immeasurable craters and cuts endured by Mars, it still lives. The mud volcanoes of Acidalia spit out material from deep within the crust. Water moves to flow from the edges of a thousand craters and cliffs when it so desires. The planet even breathes, inhaling and exhaling millions of tonnes of carbon dioxide as it barrels through the void of space, exposing its poles to the heat of the Sun.

Mars was not simply the God of War to the Romans. From his loins sprung Romulus. In his temple boys became men. His spear quivered when Rome faced new dangers. He was not just a God to the Romans – he was their father and embodiment. While the Greeks feared and despised Mars, Mars was its soul and guide of Rome. And so Rome was the soul and guide of Europe, and so the world of man.

And now he must reckon with a new interloper in his realm; one he has created. One which doesn't seek to simply cut and bruise his scarred and cragged hand, but ply it off with a million concurrent wills and supplant it."

Diana blinked and turned her gaze away from Mars for a moment, before trying to focus once again on the spectacle outside the window and envision it again with the novelty she once had. The fact she was familiar to the sight of Phobos and Mars in the window of Weinstein Station didn't make the view anything less than spectacular, but the very novelty of the experience always made the first time the most breathtaking. Phobos hovered large in the lower-right edge of the window – dark, grey, and covered in white streaks. The lights of the miners and their equipment could be seen on its dark side, and the light side was dotted with comparatively tiny structures and entrances to the excavated part of the porous rock.

Just in the corner of Phobos, one could see the lights of the elevators. A cluster of pods – filled with resources, goods, or even (increasingly rare) passengers – snaked up the tether from the surface of Phobos and up towards the vast expanse of space, stretching out six thousand kilometres to the vast and empty expanse of space. There were no new pods arriving on the elevator from the planet proper – at least as far as Diana could see. The outline of the elevator became thinner and more difficult to discern by her eyes as it converged towards Mars, with even the bulges of the pods becoming so minute that it became pointless. She thought every now and then she could see the docking platform flying with the moon over the Martian atmosphere, but it was likely just an illusion.

Some of the old Madigan International imprints were etched on the facilities of Phobos and on the exterior of the station. It was easy enough to look up and see the other end of the Torus and discern the old logo. Occasionally a member of personnel used to head out on an EVA and weld a panel with the Confederation's coat of arms atop them, but it seems they had mostly given up since the last time Diana had been here. The torch and star was a rousing design, but not enough to sacrifice rec time for.

"Di."

She turned around and nodded at Central. He'd long since stopped bothering to let people call him Atkins, and he seemed to relish in the coopting of a job description into an integral part of his identity. It was difficult not to spot him on the station, with his loud red jumpsuit and plethora of badges pinned on his chest and solders. He didn't bother to salute her – she straddled that line between civilian and military unit too finely to fall into any one set of protocol, although it's questionable whether armed officers of the Confederation even cared much about protocol. After all, it was not material demands or insecurities which pushed men like Central into the Confederation Defence Forces – it was devotion to an idea or a man. No man who was in it for the dollars would choose to spend his time on Weinstein or atop Olympus Mons instead of a real job. Then again, no man who was in it for the dollars would be wise to be on Mars.

"Central," Diana curtly said, placing her hands in her pockets, "I didn't see you at the ceremony."

"Tracking station. We're doing some calcs on a few boulders that may hit."

"Anything to be worried about?"

"Just don't plan a trip to Madim anytime soon."

Madim Valley was empty, anyway. She followed Central as he began to walk away, with him tapping on his wrist computer as they walked through the atrium.

"Do you have any assignments?"

"Are you serious?" He didn't look at her, but his incredulousness was apparent.

"Yes. I would prefer getting onto something useful."

"You just come back from the belt – after **that** performance – and you want to fly around doing monkey work? I thought you were smart."

"We didn't win," she said, gazing downwards.

"Is this because the belters got cold feet? They're nervous and torn. They'll sway round again when Yang and the gang try stuffing them with their people and get reminded why they co-signed the declaration."

"You think we can survive without them?"

"I know we can."

"And the manpower shortage?"

"You really don't appreciate what's happening, do you?" Central stopped, stashing his computer beneath his sleeve. "We're winning. Their fleet is crippled. There's no way they can penetrate the batteries. We've won what we wanted, all we're waiting on is them realising that."

Diana shook her head, but chose not to reply as she walked on. Central continued after a minute of silence, his tone somewhat soft.

"He's been wanting to see you."

"He has?" She responded blankly.

"You've been on the station for a week. Why are you avoiding him? It's not like you at all." Nobody seemed to hear their conversation as they walked on by, the staff being more preoccupied with the minute and mundane – a janitor was trimming some plants, a technician examining a panel, and a guard grilling a boy of probably no more than fourteen.

"That boy is young," Diana noted as Central swiped the next door open.

"Eh? That's Brannigan's boy. The father is on Minerva Four, so we're housing him," Central shrugged dismissively, "I don't like it too much, but **he** personally authorised it so it flies." He tilted his head upwards.

"That sounds like him," she acknowledged.

"You didn't answer my question."

"Mostly because I don't want to answer it and I have a choice. You don't."

"Wha-..." Central's face scrunched up for a minute, before he sighed and walked up to the door to the tracking station. "We may have something on the surface. It's a waste of fuel and power sending you there, but since you're a hero we can probably justify it."

"I would prefer it if you didn't call me a hero for Camilla," Diana said.

Central didn't bother replying to her. The tracking station was somewhat cramped. In contrast to the wide open spaces of the atriums and residential corridors the tracking station was a series of dense and tightly-packed terminals in lines, with Central's platform raised a foot or so above everyone else in the centre. There were no windows here, only a visual cacophony of images, trajectory plots, and comm chatter. Diana stood over central as he sipped his glass of hot water and logged in.

Diana recognised a few faces in the room. Some of them had been on the Mephistopheles; Sankoh, Preston, and Bolger. They glanced briefly at her from afar, averting their gaze before they thought she had spotted them looking. Central tapped at his terminal impatiently. Many of the faces on the floor seemed newer, and the familiar faces looked heavier and older. The stress at working here was great.

The tracking station on Weinstein was not the only tracking station on Mars, but it was of great tactical importance. Its proximity to Phobos meant that it was not an ideal target if the United Nations Space Fleet suddenly managed to assemble the ships and the backbone to try and take Mars. The last thing the UNSF wanted was collateral damage – the war for them was about saving face, so it would be completely counterintuitive to blow up a few hundred miners through recklessness. The civilian death toll at Camilla had humiliated them enough for a long time. Diana had been wondering ever since that battle whether the belters would have changed signs regardless. The worst thing possible is if she had hurt him...

“Alright, alright, here we are,” Central said, his terminal online. A map of Mars appeared, with all the overlays and annotations a senior military officer could want. He instead opened his inbox and trawled around some messages. “We have a problem at one of the facilities in Acidalia. A bunch of Thorium diggers have went on strike. Someone from Newton was going to drive up there to negotiate, but it would work out better if we got someone there fast.”

“Do you think I’m qualified to break up a strike?”

“Why not? The guy from Newton can head to Fesekov and drive the rest of the way at a second’s notice, if we have to. There’s no way you can make it worse. Only a chance we can get those guys to ship their goods to civilisation quicker.”

“Aren’t they willing to talk remotely?”

“No. I think it mostly comes down to recognition; they’re so far from any real settlements that they just want someone to acknowledge them.”

“Collective attention-seeking?” Diana smiled slightly, shaking her head in derision of Central.

“Do you want it?”

“Are there any alternatives?”

“Not that I’m willing to give you.”

“Is this a uniformed job?”

“No. Feel free to take your own belongings down.”

Diana nodded and stepped back from Central. He did not say anything as she left the tracking station, and headed outside to the corridor and beyond it to the locker room.

It had been too long since Diana had worn her own clothes. The last time she did so was when she last saw him. He’d offered her the chance to dress how she pleased, but they both knew the necessity for her not to get special treatment. The Confederation was too young and its ideals so incompatible with favouritism that she knew that regardless of how they felt, she had to as great a model as is possible. They had taken the liberty of bringing her belongings to Weinstein and putting them in the locker room. She had been discharged, and like most things in the Colonial Confederation her continued association was strictly informal. The bureaucracy was yet to strangle this nation. For now, anyway.

She swiped open her locker, and nodded at the collection of items. Everything was as expected – just the clothes she had on her back when she enrolled, plus everything in her pockets. She stripped off her officer’s uniform, and proceeded to slip on her underwear, then her combat trousers, nylon shirt, and boots. She donned her synthetic leather jacket, briefly checking all the compartments were as she remembered. They were.

She looked simple and utilitarian. Just as she preferred.

The racks of the locker were adorned with the usual items she carried. Small screwdrivers, various electronic components, a few small tools. She unceremoniously placed them in her pocket. Her pistol was also staring at her, along with her holster. Diana took it and gave it a quick inspection – it seemed like nobody had touched it. She strapped on her holster, before sliding the gun inside; covering it with the bottom of her jacket. If Thorium miners were striking they must have had a legitimate reason – and a reason for her to be cautious.

She took her old wrist computer and proceeded to unclip it and strap it onto her wrist. It gave the familiar beep, before the spartan interface appeared; a simple array of white characters and symbols against a plain black screen. Just as she preferred.

There was only one other item in the locker. A ragged and dog-eared book; her old journal and writing pad. A small and unfamiliar note was poking out the corner – she bent over and pulled it out.

“I hope you’ll visit. Sorry we can’t stay in the home on Newton – too dangerous. I miss you more than words can say.”

She paused for a moment, staring at the note and the book. **His** note. Her book. She squinted, and felt a sudden surge in anger. Without a single word she shoved the note back into the book and tossed it into the locker. She slammed the door closed, and glared at it for what felt like an eternity before turning around and heading towards the exit.

Of course, she had a variety of vehicles to choose from. That was her right, considering who she was and who she was with. What was his was hers. Everyone on Weinstein knew that – she was Madigan’s girl, she gets full reign. It was inevitable that everyone in an environment like the station would know, the way gossip got around. She also won the Battle of Camilla, so she was also entitled to all the deference a war hero gets.

Diana found that she often had three reactions out of personnel during the past several weeks on the station. The first was one of neutrality and apathy – someone who had not paid attention to gossip and chatter, or someone who clearly hadn’t connected reality and lurid fantasy together. The second was one of admiration and deference towards a space commander, smiling and considerate to a discomforting degree. The third was the bitter and angry, one so sensitive to the notion of privilege and favouritism that they saw it where it either never existed or was so benign.

The third was the one who greeted her out of the elevator. He didn’t salute at her, merely gave her a curt and dark nod and carefully guided her through the hanger. He was a man with a moustache, a vaguely Indian or Pakistani look to him. Since the tyranny of international English had long since eliminated any regional differences in speaking, guessing someone’s origins was too difficult. That was probably one of the reasons nobody seemed to care about it.

“Yours is the NG24?” He asked quickly, navigating towards an exposed lift and gesturing at her to enter.

“Yes, please.”

“These are valuable vehicles. Is it Confederation property?”

"I believe it is privately owned."

"Do you have documentation from the vehicle owner?"

Diana never showed exasperation, just that same stoic and neutral look. He looked vaguely disappointed as she handed him a pass, with that distinctive signature on it. The lack of surprise as he examined the card confirmed it – he knew who she was.

"This is in order," he said quickly, handing her the pass back. The lift was slow to rise; with gravity being this low towards the centre of Weinstein and having such a large differential with every unit of space, it paid to travel slowly. Diana clutched the rails carefully, conscious of accidentally launching herself up. She stared up, and stared at the cockpit of a ship above her as it proceeded to slide towards the airlock.

"Are you informed about station entering and exiting protocol?"

She nodded.

"Have you had the trajectory to Phobos validated?"

Now he was being petty. She nodded.

"Please show me your trajectory plot."

She blinked once, before rolling up the sleeve of her jacket and extending her wrist towards her. She tapped the screen, before opening the Orbital Mechanic Calculation Interface. She half-expected him to ask her instead for a hand-written version, but he seemed contented with carefully examining her interface. And then her hand. He pulled his head away as the door clicked open, and gestured her across the gangway.

"You are not married?"

"Do I need to be?" She replied curtly.

"I had taken your surname down as Madigan. If you are not Governor Madigan's wife, then..."

"You knew very well I wasn't his wife. You also have a surname for me in your records. Would you like me to file a complaint?" She was curt, with no malice in her voice.

"I apologise, but I am a Space Traffic Technician," he said without looking at her, "not a gossipmonger. I could not care less about your marital life. Please calm yourself, Miss."

He did not press the point, however. She held a hand in her pocket, curled in a fist. Either a recipient of undue praise, or a target of exaggerated ridicule. All while having the prospect of facing him on her mind. She was glad to get off the station. The only reason she was tempted to stay was Central, but he had the operation under control. She needed to witness what she had been fighting for.

After another silent lift ride, they proceeded to walk to the vehicle. The NG24; or the Beetle, as everyone who didn't speak technical lingo called it. It was one of the most versatile Martian vehicles there was, which was why it was so rare. Not many people needed a vehicle that could ride the Maglev lines, drive on Martian terrain, and fly (albeit very limitedly) space. Not unless they were military. Or Madigan's girl.

It had a compact cabin – fit only for one person. Its metal wheels were all mounted on long and mobile joints which were receptive to the ruggedness of the Martian terrain. And also capable of shielding themselves and folding away for the best re-entry profile. Four circular headlights were ruggedly mounted atop the cabin. The suit and suitport was at the back of the cabin, covered by a metal canopy.

For security, and protection against dust. On the side lay a small cylindrical port – a standard dimension docking port. The cabin offered a wide field-of-view, allowing virtually unimpeded vision at all angles; the controls of the vehicle sat at a bulbous outcrop at the front of the vehicle, with windows all around it, with even the structural seams that held the thick transparent sheets in place. As anticipated, it was all perfect.

She approached the vehicle, and popped open the hatch. She took off her wrist computer and plugged it in, making sure that its onboard computer was operational. The computer displayed the trajectory as shown on her wrist, and finally the technician gave her the thumbs up and closed the hatch. She rested her head back against the seat, and evaluated the cockpit.

A shower, toilet, fridge, and a bunk was in the back. And a stack of books – his own addition, no doubt. This must have been his private vehicle for when he used to take his private trips far from the colonies. She occasionally shared it with him.

The technician nodded, and the Beetle's platform began to move; it advanced towards the airlock. She did her belt, and then made sure to put on her goggles. Just in case. The door to the airlock opened, and she took one look back at Weinstein station. The door shut behind her, before the terminal indicated that depressurisation was occurring. She reclined back, and let the technology do its work.

The door to the station sprung open, the vastness of space embracing the Beetle. The computer began to fulfil the actions the OMCI had given it. Small methane/oxygen rockets at its rear and base fired, sending it off Weinstein station and putting it into the orbit of Phobos. Carefully and elaborately it orientated itself to face the asteroid. From the cabin it looked like Phobos was spinning, and the Beetle was stationary in space; not unless one looked for other frames of reference in the background. Gently and slowly, Phobos span its slow dance. Its lumpy, streaked, and crater-ridden surface interrupted by the occasional man on an EVA or piece of equipment sticking from the ground. Like two proverbial poles of the asteroid-moon, the space elevator terminals rose out from Phobos, almost like Phobos was a kebab impaled upon a thin and endless cosmic string. Slowly but surely, the Beetle converged towards Phobos – looking for the Maglev bay.

Whilst the space elevator served as an efficient way to get material off Mars, it still was time-inefficient. It took two days to ascend the six million metres from where the docking platform brushed the top of the Martian atmosphere. For those who wished to go down, all that was necessary was to reduce their velocity to dip down into the Martian atmosphere. Like a plane which was suddenly unable to travel forwards, an orbiting body will fall to the ground without the momentum to carry it forwards. All that was needed was a push against the orbit of Phobos. Depending on what direction one pushes and how intensely, one can land anywhere on the planet.

Since Phobos orbits at two million metres a second, it would require significant amount of fuel to burn against this. Hence the Maglev lines. The same side of the moon always faces Mars, meaning it was trivial to build a line in the same direction as the orbital path. With electromagnets firing the craft like a gun, it would descend to Mars. Most of the fuel would be used in making sure that the craft softly landed on the ground, and didn't enter the atmosphere so fast as to provoke the wrath of re-entry heat.

Phobos stopped rotating, and the Beetle gracefully hovered towards the Maglev port. It grew closer. Closer. For a moment, Diana feared that a system or the locking mechanism had broken. Then vehicle clicked into place.

The computer indicated its trajectory after firing, set to place Diana less than five kilometres from the plant in question. Reentering the planet had become routine to many of the Phobos miners and military personnel, but the sensation and fear evoked by the experience was always the same. The sudden acceleration, the plunge through the atmosphere, the vastness of the planet. It was overwhelming.

The countdown began.

“Central, we’ve got something.”

Central sipped his now-lukewarm mug of water, before standing up and heading towards Preston’s station. The poor kid was twenty-five at most, and most of his hairline was already gone. A look into Preston’s eyes told him this wasn’t the norm, this was...

“Central, we picked this up thirty minutes ago. It’s a ship.”

Central blinked. His heart raced. He reached forwards, planting his hands on the edge of the terminal.

“What do we have on it?”

“Only based on what the passive transponder was telling us; that’s how we picked it up. It’s a mining ship – the *Bonaparte*. It doesn’t look like it has any rotational control. Actually, it doesn’t look like it has anything.”

“What, it’s dead?”

“Looks like it. We plotted back the trajectory, and it seems like it came from the belt. Near Euthyphro.”

“Wasn’t there a skirmish there?”

“Yessir.”

Central relaxed.

“Reported missing?”

“Yessir. All hands went with it.”

“What do you think?”

“Seems like a closed book, sir. Something nasty happened while they were burning to come to us, and they’re adrift.”

“Good spot. Where is it headed?”

“Looks like a direct impact on the surface. It’s headed for Alba Mons. Eastern flank. I’d have an ETA on it of three hours.”

“Alright, tonnage?”

“No idea. Depends if they’re hauling resources or not and their fuel. Dry mass is fifty tonnes.”

“What’s your call, Preston?”

The young man paused upon being asked the question. He squinted, before turning towards his screen. The wealth of information danced across his eyes.

“Shoot it with the batteries, sir. It’ll be passing over them, and it’s best to make sure it doesn’t hit a settlement. Anything inside of value will be useless when it hits the ground, anyway.”

Central shook his head, and tapped the boy’s shoulder.

“And cause a scare at the batteries and a load of rumourmongering? The last thing we want is a load of rumours that we’re shooting down enemy ships. The chances of it hitting anything are negligible, don’t think on that.”

Preston eagerly nodded, clearly taking mental notes as Central spoke.

“You need to be careful at times like this not to do the strategically dumb thing. I’m sure a salvager somewhere will have his day made by this, anyway. We owe it to the little guy, eh?”

“Yessir.”

“And we need to save ammunition. There’s a war going on, you know.”

The two laughed.