



ANNIHILATION PLAN (MARS WARS BOOK 3)

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Prologue

2237 A.D.

If you're a common citizen, possession of a telescope or a plasma pistol will get you arrested and sent to an Earth First Faction reeducation center.

You wouldn't be a Day Student, either.

No, you'd be an Overnighter.

Your chances of survival steadily decline with each passing day as an Overnighter.

Maybe it'd be the cut rations and water and lack of climate-controlled shelter. Maybe it'd come from the steel-toed boot of a sadistic guard.

The words are synonymous.

And qualifications for the job.

The punk kids who are allowed to roam in small gangs might find you *interesting*. They have unfettered access to Overnighters.

Instead of a telescope, you might be inclined to tap into one of the thousands of Earth satellites for space views.

But unofficial access to satellite images will also have EFF thugs kicking your door in and hauling you away.

Again, as Overnighter.

Fortunately the EFF has not had the tyrannical vision of establishing curfews after dark for non-rebel zones. Anyone with a single free-thinking synapse in their head does not need to risk imprisonment, reeducation or death to simply gaze up at the night sky.

There, a beacon burns.

With the enhanced human eyes of genetic manipulation 'required' to save Earth resources, it is even more evident that something astronomical is taking place.

Mars offers a new visage to the solar system. Ribbons of black travel across it, laced with white and blue. When open areas appear, the steady red viewed from afar is often usurped by livid crimson, reflecting the rage bursting to the surface.

Mars in the throes of resurrection.

Long dead cores at the center of the planet are molten and churning once more as a result of the thermonuclear bombs of Detonation Event, creating a new magnetosphere to ward off the solar winds, and enough geologic activity to change a world.

Sub-Martian chambers fill with magma. Old volcanoes shudder and quake into new life and erupt, heaving tons of ash and lava into the thin atmosphere. Networks of new volcanoes burst forth. Fault lines rupture surface crust for the first time in billions of years. Continental divides form and clash and grind as plate tectonics begin. Volcanic lava geysers burst miles high along these, giving way to rivers of lava that cool to tubes.

The planet's eons-old placid surface is criss-crossed by lava tubes and increasing lengths of flowing lava. Marsquakes.

Yet there are areas where the necessities for life also spew forth.

Long conjectured glacial ice imprisoned in the crust by frigid temperatures is now melted and spewed forth as lava steam, geysers and streams and rivers. New geothermal pathways jettison these and ice floes land in lava lakes and rivers or naked upon the surface to react to wildly fluctuating temperatures.

There are places where meltwater does not freeze, even at night.

Water runs alongside lava rivers. It splashes into the molten rock and hisses away as steam into the atmosphere, prevented from escape by the core-powered magnetosphere.

Water vapor forms white clouds to drift by with the dark ash. Winds increase.

Snow falls.

Clouds and the magnetosphere are trapping more and more heat. Sunshine finds water vapor clouds over certain volcanic regions.

Rain falls on Mars.

Volcanism and sun raise the day temps well above thirty-two degrees Fahrenheit in some regions.

If you did happen to have a black market telescope, or proxied your galaxy net address well enough to pirate your way to satellite images of Mars, you'd see a damaged but operational Mars Orbiter 1, alive with 'rebels.'

Still trying to survive.

You may also catch a glimpse of superheated propellant as the EFF sends armed planetary shuttles on an attack route to relieve the rebels of their existence.

If so, you'd be witnessing Mars Wars.

Terra forming Mars comes at a price for all involved parties.

People suffer.

Mars suffers.

Even one of the Martian moons suffers. The smallest of these, Phobos, was sheared in half by the spatz cannons of MOS-2, creating Phobos 1 and 2.

Phobos had been close enough to Mars to orbit the entire planet three times in a single sol cycle, also known as a day in Earth speak. Close before: now asteroids are summoned by the planet's gravitational pull, further pounding and exploding into the surface.

The Martian gravitational field summons Phobos 2.

An impact of this size is a life-killer, and a *life-preventer*.

The MOS-1 Leadership Council now faces another situation on top of the daily pressures of war and space survival.

Should they allow Phobos 2 to collide with Mars as a grand-scale fiery object, or use the waning energy of their Cyclops spatz cannon to divide it into smaller sections and lessen the impact to future habitability?

Repairs are underway on MOS-1, but how long will the orbiter remain functional enough to support seven thousand rogue colonists, or 'rebels' as the EFF define them?

They have to have the fallback option of living on Mars.

The dust and ash from a single massive impact on the Red Planet could linger for centuries. There is no guarantee a series of smaller yet substantial impacts would do any less.

The MOS-1 Space Atomizer canon, Cyclops, was severely damaged in the battle with MOS-2. It drilled tunnels to the Martian cores for Detonation Event, two years earlier. It is the only instrument that can lessen the impact of Phobos 2.

The engineers determine they have enough material to patch the Cyclops, but the nuclear fusion engine only temporarily. It would take a year to make the system operational again.

When will the EFF attack again?

Mars Wars have limited their options for survival. Earth is currently not an option. Centuries in space waiting for the planet to clear is unappealing. If they ever want to colonize Mars, they must atomize as much of Phobos 2 as possible prior to impact with the surface.

Engineers work feverishly to repair Cyclops.

The massive objects gain momentum toward the planet.

Chapter 1

2237 A.D.

Nothing like being one of Death's minions, Ry Devans thought, slowing his jets to keep pace with the next orbiting body.

The livid and bruised face of Mars leered over his shoulder, as if recognizing a twin beneath the ruptured face shield. Devans unlocked and gently removed the battered helmet. The young woman's hair cap was partially torn, allowing the escape of blonde tendrils marred by red.

A stream of droplets trailed away.

The side of her head had met more than the inward crush of the helmet, though Devans couldn't locate the culprit among the surrounding debris band. The atomizer blasts from Mars Orbiter 2 had sheared off tons of MOS-1 structure, and they had done the same to their attacker. Any of it could have done this.

She could have perished at any point along the battle timeline. From the initial strikes of the Earth First Faction, through the ensuing explosions of the fusion engines and processing pods, to the space ejaculate orbiting at a variety of deadly speeds and directions.

Whatever the case, she had been unable to avoid her demise with the space suit's ion jets.

She hadn't even fired them up, from the readouts of her backpack.

Probably swept out during the early strikes, he surmised.

Good enough for now, old man. There's more to do.

Yeah.

So... do the thing.

Gimme a sec.

You're not new to this, fly boy. Seen it a hundred times, minimum. Past wars. This Mars War. Same results, different people.

Truth.

Then why the stasis?

Not sure. Bounce out and I'll deal.

Truth, this was at least his tenth young female of this salvage mission, and determining cause of death wasn't his job right now. The documentation workers of MOS-1 were already at it, reviewing footage to match incident to loss of life.

Grinds on a mind, though, Devans thought.

He contemplated the half-crushed and blood-smeared helmet, then drew back and hurled it at the Red Planet. The helmet spun backwards as it flew, tiny and shrinking against the girth of its planetary incinerator. Though orbiting at four miles per second, as they all were, the helmet appeared to move in a slow glide toward its fiery doom.

“PS-17 co-pilot to pilot,” came through his helmet speakers.

“Devans. Go ahead, Gwen.”

“We could have melted it down, Cap.”

“I know.”

“We have two metal processing pods up and running again, and a...”

“Third one coming online in the next day or so,” he said. “For some reason I’m on the Leadership Council too.”

“Huh, as if you weren’t one our ranking advisors.”

“Oh, I get rank sometimes.”

“Telling me.” This was from Alicia Hamilton, a couple hundred feet away in the debris band, stripping the space suit pants from her cadaver.

“At least our water and air processing pods are still squeezing juice from the asteroid rocks and decoupling Mars CO2 with gusto,” Trent Wagner noted, from a hundred feet beyond Hamilton and performing the same grim task.

“Freaking optimist,” Devans said. “What else, Gwen?”

“Nothing. Not trying to be a pain. This is, uh, my first battle aftermath.”

Devans grunted. “I’m the only one up for a promotion to Major Pain. The strangely silent Comm and Nav Officer behind you in the flight pit is not, nor are these other two out here in the death zone.”

“You rang, Major?” Shannon Burroughs said.

“Just checking for a pulse.”

“Still there. Always there.”

He wondered if she had invoked the motto between himself and his Army buddy Fresno deliberately or not. Didn’t matter.

“Always there,” Devans said, but instead of feeling a little better, he felt a little worse.

Stow it for now, granny, he could hear Fres say. *And pick up that butt.*

Ghosts are supposed to be quiet, old man.

Not this one!

Devans was about to retort when flashes in near space tugged at his gaze.

Half-way around the planet's upper orbit, laser flashes zapped in and out of existence, bright against the backdrop of space but dimmer than they would have been prior to the battle. This was the work of MOS-1's only heavy artillery, the Cyclops Space Atomizer. Its waning beams ate into Phobos 2, decoupling molecules, reducing size.

Even in battle where anything goes, he hadn't seen this one coming.

The Earth First Faction had deemed it necessary to spatz Phobos in two while the outgunned MOS-1 played cat and mouse on the other side of the small moon. Phobos 1 still traveled an acceptable orbit, but Phobos 2 had taken a jag toward Mars.

Even at reduced power, to Devans the cannon could have been the arm of Zeus, flinging lightning bolts into the ranks of a Titan army.

Daniel Shakuri of the Leadership Council and the Cyclops crew had their hands full, trying to atomize as much of that half moon as possible before it plunged into Mars. Impact was unavoidable; their job was to minimize the repercussions. Otherwise the unanticipated and frankly astounding gains of the newly volcanic Mars would be set back for centuries.

Nobody inside their made-made bubble had centuries to wait.

Should they have saved their damaged canon as a weapon against more EFF strikes and let Phobos 2 do its damage?

Maybe.

Calculated risk.

The EFF wasn't building any more orbiters and mega spatz canons, as far as they could tell from galaxynet hacks. Billions spent on a new orbiter just didn't link with the whole EFF-hate-space mantra.

"Status, Cap?" Navigator and Communications Officer Shannon Burroughs, prompting him to move his butt.

"Status is as status does, ShanBurr."

"Prophetic."

"You're welcome."

"Trent and Alicia are passing you in number."

He glanced at the other two space suits working the bodies in this area. Trent was brother to co-pilot Gwen, and Alicia Hamilton had been his engineer and security lead since his first flight of PS-9, five years ago.

Seemed like decades. Time passes strangely in space and war.

“Yeah, well, they’re younger,” he said. “They’re supposed to do more.”

“Eyes on the prize, CapD,” Trent said, trying to be light about it but still coming off somber.

“Buy you a lab beer after we dock back in Columbus Bay, Ry,” Hamilton said.

“I never got one after that MOS-2 arena fight with your ex,” Devans said.

“Truth. That’s two I owe.”

Ouch, didn’t mean to bring all that back, he thought.

“Nah. Forget it, Ham,” Devans said.

“Don’t go soft on me, toothless old man!”

“So not truth,” Devans said, clacking his teeth together.

“Yeah, which?” Hamilton peeled the upper body suit from a man roughly her own age and handed the material to her accompanying drone. Then slipped a steel cable on the man’s wrist.

“Both, asteroid-head.”

Hamilton was also sounding a little like Fres these days.

“Okay, you buy yours and I’ll buy mine, got it?” Devans said.

“No. I still owe you one. But how about you ask your butt if it can get back to work sometime before the sun goes nova?”

A lot like Fres, Ry thought.

“Hold for answer.”

Hamilton grunted in disdain.

Perhaps seeking more excuses to avoid his task, Devans turned to Planetary Shuttle 17. It kept pace on ion thrusters just beyond the debris ring, the nuclear fusion engine ready but not active. At the apex of the flying-V design, the shields were pulled back to reveal the transparent panes of the flight pit. He deemed this something of a risk, with all the local debris, but Gwen and Shannon were constantly scanning. Besides, MOS-1 was close enough, should they have any trouble.

His co-pilot and past rescuer from Detonation Event stood in her faux corset and pants. Tattoos adorned her lithe arms. Her hair was shorter than when she'd hijacked a planetary shuttle and rescued him and his crew from the freshly detonated Mars.

Part of the new mother thing, he supposed.

Alongside her was Shannon Burroughs, long hair braided like some Viking queen.

"Give the helmets to the drone from now on?" Burroughs said.

She had couple more years' experience with Ry than Gwen and Trent. Only Alicia had more.

"There's no shortage of graphene, steel and acrylic floating around out here. The suit fabric takes us longer to weave and sew," Devans said, turning to the deceased again. Killed In Action was more apt, but this one had never gotten close to firing a weapon at the enemy.

One of her eyes was half-lidded, but both stared into eternity.

"Maybe we should swap for a while," Gwen Wagner said.

"Nah, all systems green here," Devans said.

"Truth?"

"Not really, but almost."

Like he *almost* wished the three thousand KIAs floating around out here were merely celestial bodies that had drifted in to survey the damage to MOS-1.

Almost.

Why not wish on it?

They had tried everything else.

The thousands of twinkling lights beyond the Red Planet provided an abundance of stars to wish upon.

Yet despite the belief among his fellow rebels that he gulped tall-boy shakes of space madness for breakfast, the truth was Ry Devans – the most wanted man in the solar system and perhaps galaxy – couldn't atomize reality.

He couldn't decouple the molecular bonding between reality and his mind. Not with a Space Atomizer, and not by wishing it so.

Actually, a spatz gun in a low-pressure atmosphere like Mars or the vacuum of space *could* decouple his mind from reality.

... but only forever.

Not optimal, of course. He'd come too far for that kind of thing.

All of these stars – all of the *billions* of stars in the universe – were as impotent as spent plasma rounds.

Death's minion held far more reality than any wishing he could do.

Gallows humor was a leftover from his combat days. He had hoped those days were done.

But hoping was the little cousin of wishing.

Devans freed the floating woman's hands from her suit gloves and handed them to the drone flying in synch alongside him. He then unfastened the doubled-layer zips and pulled one and then the other of the woman's arms free.

Now dressed in a floating shirt and leggings while drifting through space, he took the grasping clamp offered by the drone and slipped it over her bare wrist.

She had been in her early thirties. Her identification chip was still operational, but he did not enter her name into his own memory banks. He did not want to know her as deceased. He did note her roles, however. She had been a mother and wife and she had worked on MOS-1 as a molecular scientist.

Mars offered a few winks here and there when the clouds parted enough to reveal the surface.

Devans said a brief prayer to God or the galactic spirit or anything out here in Mars space willing to listen.

"How many's that, Burroughs?"

"Forty, Cap."

Gwen kept PS-19 equidistant among the three flyers.

The debris would be recovered by the drones for re-purposing.

No one on MOS-1 wanted human bodies to be stripped of their space suits by drones.

The machines would take them to Mars entry, however, for incineration.

Devans flew just past the next drifting form. He twisted into a one eighty to allow the ion jets to act as space brakes, then angled the small funnels to keep himself at the same rate and direction as the deceased.

He held an arm out and touched the suit.

The helmet had been atomized on a diagonal. He could not determine the gender of the victim inside. The identification chip was either gone or damaged.

This one's even worse than the last one, he thought.

A glow spot grew in the corner of Devans' eye. At first he thought it was notification of a mindtext, as they came with tiny dots in the periphery. But this was on the wrong side of his mindtext queue.

“Ry, duck and move! NOW!”

He knew Burroughs' tones well enough to react first, ask later.

His hand blurred to hit a double max jet burst downward and sideways.

A concentrated cluster of laser beams lit up the inside of his helmet and hummed through his suit speakers.

He didn't stop there.

He arced up and he drew the spatz pistol holstered at his side.

Where, where?

Another flash and he hit a jet burst upward this time. The beam went low, anticipating a maneuver similar to his first.

“Crew, back to ship!” Devans said. “Gwen, fire a volley at the origin.”

PS-17 shifted and fired, the beams trailing out into darkness.

“Shannon, where the hell is it?”

“I can't see it!” her voice was frantic. “INCOMING, RY! Go, Go, Go!”

He zipped away on a spin, returned fire though he had yet to make visual, even with the face shield's enhanced zoom.

“They must be cloaked,” he said, dodging two more beams.

PS-17 lit up the originating area with a barrage of streaking plasma rounds. He saw a single splatter that had appeared as nothing.

He aimed and fired at it, shouting coordinates.

“Get in the ship, Ry! They're after *you!*”

If true, then PS-17's shields were as about as impervious as human flesh to a spatz beam, and he'd be putting the crew at greater risk. However, his little suit jets were micro thrusters compared to the fusion engine of a shuttle, and the crew and all the 'rebels' of MOS-1 had already been hurled into the risk vortex that accompanies war.

The space crazy had an answer.

“Nah, I'm good out here.”

He ignored the curses that followed.

He barrel-rolled, ducked behind a cluster of graphene beams and fired his spatz pistol in a star pattern.

Two side panels appeared among the stars and blackness of space.

“Mark and fire, Gwen,” Devans said.

“Marked and firing!”

Yellow streaks of plasma rounds burst forward from the darkness and tore through the gap toward him.

“Gotta bail,” Ry said.

He maxed his jets and shot a thin laser beam into the cloud of oncoming rounds. Several rounds vanished, but the others streaked greedily forward.

Chapter 2

The door to the genetic research lab of MOS-1 vanished into the wall, revealing a security guard and two lab workers. The guard's hand withdrew from a hallway alcove at shoulder height. The three were engaged in conversation about the orbiter's rebuilding efforts, and had taken a step forward when they halted and fell silent.

Before them, in the workstation section of the lab, was the savior of the human species.

Karen Wagner, MD.

The second most famous person in the solar system.

Prior to the Earth First Faction revolution, it would have been reasonable to assume the woman who had prevented humans from taking a nosedive into the extinction abyss would rank as *the* most famous person in the solar system...

... but the EFF's animosity against Ry Devans was apparently insurmountable, so that title belonged to him.

Not that Wagner cared what the EFF thought of her.

Ever.

Particularly in the aftermath of battle with the EFF orbiter.

This was known information to the new arrivals to the lab.

The geneticist who had saved *Homo sapiens* was busy sweeping pieces of light fixture cover and glass shards into a pile near her workstation cubicle of the outer lab.

The new arrivals had seen Dr. Wagner thousands of times, and she was known to move between lab analysis and sample work to a mundane task to switch mental gears.

What they hadn't seen before was Dr. Karen Wagner whispering to herself while sweeping the same floor tiles again and again with the broom, barely moving the edges of the small debris pile.

... beneath a fractured ceiling light that had been whole the night before.

Though the air temperature leaned a little cool, a sheen of sweat covered her bruised and bandaged face. She took no notice of the new arrivals, or that the door had opened.

Two light panels were flickering above the small cluster of workstations, and two more kept flickering on and off farther way in the main lab. Those closest created a strobe light, capturing Wagner's movements in a series of freeze frames.

"Karen?" Kiley's voice normally came with vigor and a little sass, but not this time. Now it was soft and more than a little fearful, and not due to battle injuries.

They all knew that Post Traumatic Shock Disorder, space crazy, war anxieties – however it was classified, all of it was swirling around in the manufactured air of MOS-1.

"Doctor Wagner?" Jenra said, pulling her hand from the alcove and resting it on the hilt of her stun gun as she peered around. "Everything okay in the lab here?"

No response, but more whispering.

The guard frowned.

"Hey, Karen?" the tallest of the three new arrivals said. Terrill's deep voice easily carried into the workstation area and to its sole occupant.

Not so much as a greeting or head turn in their direction.

Sweeping.

Whispering.

Something about formulas and timelines. And how she could have been 'so stupid.'

The hologram displays of the workstation showed a variety of bar charts and graphs, with algorithm code Karen had written. One of the displays had a jagged line that pulsed red.

The guard, Jenra, wore a black and grey jumpsuit, with a holstered plasma pistol and stun gun at her side. Beside her stood two lab workers in white jump suits.

At six feet, two inches, Terrill's parents had ignored societal pressure of genetic manipulation and allowed for height of historical scale. He kept lean, however, which was in line with societal norms to help save on Earth's resources.

Leaning on a cane beside him, Kiley was of the more acceptable and genetically modified five foot five, and with the standard large eyes compared to humans of centuries prior. She liked to think of herself as tall for a woman, however.

"Thought we had everything clean before we left last night." Terrill wriggled the long fingers jutting from the cast across his chest in a sling.

"We did," the woman in the white jumpsuit beside him said. Kiley leaned on the cane.

"The shift report had it down as functional and clean," Jenra said. "You two must know this lab is top priority - you've worked here since exodus from Lunar One. Since the revolution even. You know the Leadership Council made this lab pretty much top priority – only the orbiter

structure and life basic pods beat it. Good thing the main lab was spared from the enemy's spatz beams."

The guard peered round the lab again. Her gaze returned to the sweeper. "Dr. Wagner doesn't seem to be listening to anything from the ear implants. If she'd let me know, I could have sent in a cleaning drone."

Beyond Karen, ringed by transparent acrylic walls, was the main lab. Housed there were chemicals, viruses, bacteria, Martian microbes, and mice. There, another light fixture flickered on and off.

Karen Wagner's whispers grew to mutters now. The plastic strands on the functional end of the broom squashed against the floor as she swept.

"I think I should inform dispatch." The guard's hand crept toward the badge on her chest.

Kiley put a hand to Jenra's arm. "No, no, hang on. We've got it."

Terrill nodded down at the guard. "We'll call you if it reaches that level."

Jenra appeared uncertain then backed into the hallway. "Okay. Networks should have the access network back online soon. But just in case, you guys know how to use the interior lever for the door, right?"

"Yes," Terrill said, shrugging to adjust his sling and the cast of his arm.

"If it's not online, just give a shout over the comm or mindtext and let me know when you're on the way out so I can log it."

Kiley stepped with the cane into the lab. The white bandages across her cheeks and forehead stood out against her dusky skin. "Thanks Jen. We'll let you know. How long has the boss been here?"

The guard peered inside, checked her arm computer for the time. "She was here when I started my shift four hours ago."

Jenra drew back into the hall and cranked the door shut.

Terrill approached and eased a grip onto the broom. He steadily pulled it away from Karen Wagner. "Karen, I'll take it from here."

Karen's hands continued sweeping motions, until Kiley took them in her own. "What's up, Karen?"

Finally, there were blinks of transition from weary eyes normally bright as stars with intelligence and wit.

"What? Sorry. When did you guys get here?" Karen said.

"Just now. Looks like you've been here since we left last night, judging by appearances."

“Judging. Yes, judging. Time will judge but no one will be left to know.”

“How about we walk you to your living pod for some rest now?”

“What – no! There’s no time!”

“There’s time.”

Kiley held Karen’s hand in one of her own, and worked the cane with the other as she tried to ease her supervisor toward the door.

“You don’t know!” Karen jerked her hand away.

“What is it, then?” Terrill said, in his deep voice. It too was softer than the normal banter tone they took with one another.

Kiley and Terrill exchanged a look.

“Take some breaths, Karen.”

“Here, let’s sit down in the break room.”

“NO!”

Karen balled a fist and pulled it back, ready to swing on the large man.

Terrill stood like a rock formation on Mars, pre-Detonation Event.

“Karen, no!” Kiley said, she moved to intercede but was too slow with her cane.

Karen was a pretty good striker. She’d had training, as had everyone on MOS-1. She had also survived several minutes against a cyborg in the arena cage of MOS-2 after her abduction. Not many could match that.

Her arm streaked out and back and Terrill’s head snapped back with a crack. He grunted and staggered a little. When he straightened again, blood started from one of his nostrils and his tears spilled from his eyes. His free hand went to his nose.

Kiley stood between them now, her cane raised as a barrier. “Karennnn...”

Karen gasped at the sight of the blood. She slowly lowered her fists.

“One way to get you to stop sweeping,” Terrill said, sniffing and wiping.

“Oh my god!” Karen cried. “Terrill, no – I’m so sorry!”

She grabbed tissues from one of the workstations and hooked an arm around Terrill’s torso as she dabbed at his nose. “I’m a monster! I am so sorry!” Tears traced down her cheeks from red eyes that were already dry.

“I’m okay, boss. I won’t file any complaints,” he took the tissue from her. He tore some off and rolled it, then stuffed it in the bleeder.

“Go ahead, give me shot,” Karen said, bracing her legs wide. She tilted her chin up.

“Not doing it,” Terrill said, shaking his head.

“Karen, that’s even more crazy,” Kiley said. “He could put you through the hull.”

“Fifty percent power,” Karen said.

“What’s fifty times zero?” Terrill wiped his eyes and swapped out the blood-soaked tissue for another. He put his good arm around Karen’s shoulder and squeezed. “Let’s not make a habit of it, though. Your knuckles are hard.”

Karen hugged him, wheeled her cubicle chair over and had him sit with his chin tilted up. She swapped out his tissue and got more. “What I did was horrible,” she said, swiping the tear trails away from her cheeks. “Maybe I do need a trip to the infirmary.”

“What happened in here?” Kiley said, getting the dustpan and dispatching the debris pile to one of the trash bins.

“I may have thrown something at the lights,” Karen said. She patted Terrill’s arm and disengaged, drifted back to peer at her workstation holo-displays.

“Twice?” Terrill said, peering through the lab walls to the other fixture.

“Yeah, here and over at the mouse cages.”

“Our favorite H-8?”

“And H-9 this time.”

“We cut back on the Myrev1 on both of these cages,” Kiley said.

“Right. Those two groups received no booster serum to offset the original Martian microbe - slash plague - M274S34. Mars Plague as we call it now. Adults used to benefit from resistance to disease and virus.”

“Uh oh.”

“Used to?”

Kiley and Terrill observed the real time window of the cages. In them, seventeen mice in each cage moved among the faux wooden chips and through the tunnels, ran on the wheels or tussled with one another. Some burrowed; some drank from the suspended tubes.

Ignored by the rodents were the three mice in each cage that were on their sides and bellies, unmoving, eyes mostly shut.

“What happened to them?” Kiley said. “Old age? They don’t look bad, except for the death thing.”

“Those are just the most recent deaths,” Karen said. “Five more preceded them.”

Karen pointed to a display on the other side, where a video of a dissection held its last frame. The mouse had been opened, ribs spread. It's heart was traced by luminescence, and connected to an isolated image in a separate box. The image box was labeled, Deceased Mouse H8A1001, *heart*.

Beside that image box was another image box, labeled Standard Mouse Subject, *heart*.

A1001's heart was another size larger than the standard size, with a discernable shape difference.

Terrill whistled. "Rupture?"

"Swell, then rupture," Kiley said.

Her lab aides could not mask the concern from their faces.

"What is it?" Terrill said.

"We can't fight it if we don't get all the dets," Kiley said.

After all the trauma of battle, Karen admired how her longtime lab partners and friends were willing to confront more stress. She pushed at some locks of hair that had gotten singed. "I missed something... huge. The predictive analytics haven't matched reality over the past three years. It's not just the young, now we've got adult mice perishing over time. All those immunities to disease come at a price that's a real heartbreaker."

"Maybe the battle had something to do with it," Terrill said.

"And are you sure? Maybe we can run more samples..." Kiley said.

"It wasn't an atomizer beam or explosion for the adult mice. It was time without the booster serum. Probably from the over-production of pumping white blood cells, the heart swells, then bursts." She put her head in her hands.

"This is extinction threat from both ends now."

"Maybe it's only in mice."

"I'm checking into that with Genmur and his hackers. See what kind of stats he can pull from Earth's hospitals." Karen's eyelids drooped. "I pray that I'm wrong."

Her eyes closed.

Terrill sniffed and worked the tissues. The blood had all but ceased. "We tried to get the EFF to dole out the booster. What else can we do - show up back on Earth and get blasted into eternity? By the way, you're running on what, thirty-six hours in this place?"

She shrugged, took the chair from the neighboring workstation and melted into it. "There was... no way to know how these alien microbes would behave over time. Bad enough children are targeted for death by the Mars Plague when not held in check by Mrydev1. Now we're seeing

adults reap the immunity aspects for a time, then the heart swells and blood pressure spikes when the booster serum wears off.”

“And the EFF isn’t doling out the booster,” Terrill said.

“Right. We’re okay on MOS-1 because we have the booster serum.”

“Any word on the response on Earth?” Kiley said. “Maybe rodents have it worse than humans.”

“That would be a first, but welcome. We need Genmur and his IT hackers to tap into galaxynet and do some more data mining for us. Adults pay a price for the disease immunity offered by the serum in blood pressure spikes that arrest hearts and summon strokes.

An alarm kicked up, and red light circled the lab.

“Oh boy,” Terrill said.

“Probably just a drill,” Karen said.

The door slid open.

They turned to see Jenra, her eyes huge and intense.

“Battle stations! Ry and PS-17 are under attack!”