

The marines on the surface of Mars could only look up at the bright Martian sunrise in awe as the Separatist and Gaian fleets blew each other to pieces in orbit around the planet. Streaks of blue and red mixed with pops of yellow and green contrasted against the black sky becoming devoured by the rolling yellow sun. The light of stars past became once again lost by the new day as the war over Mars,, both in orbit and on its rusted and pocked surface, started its second full day of armed conflict. A few isolated firefights in the depths of the colony continued to rage while attention was driven skyward. Private Dudayev could not make out who was who between the colored lasers and bursts of explosions, likely from missile impacts and catastrophic detonation. A much closer explosion brought him back to parallel with the surface and he realized that his squad commander was gesturing for him to run to him. Quickly ensuring his helmet was secured and his rifle was snug against his arms, he sprinted across the open street towards the rest of his squad.

An air-shattering boom almost knocked him out of step during his hustle for cover. Dudayev stumbled the rest of the way before falling into the arms of his squad mates. Looking up, he saw the source of the sound heading skyward towards a cruiser up above. The mass driver round screamed into the heavens and buried itself into the body of the unprepared vessel and split the ship in half. The two halves of the Gaian cruiser Ugly began drifting apart, spewing debris and fire from the now lifeless husk.

“Get up!” Captain Wylie screamed as he pulled the private back to his feet. “We need to take that mass driver before it has a chance to do that again. They are taking a pounding up there and these guns aren’t helping at all.”

The planetary mass driver system was developed to take supplies into orbit without the need for rocket fuel or other propellants. Just generate enough electricity and the load would make its way up via

electromagnetism and the right-hand rule. The Separatists were able to weaponize the civilian cargo system into a devastating orbital defense weapon in case a war broke out.

Its effect was undeniable.

Abel squad began to maneuver through the cargo complex, attempting to evade ground troops they didn't need to fight, in route to the target. The fighting on the ground had been miserable and slow before the fold gate activated late last night, and it only got worse after the fact. Fighting over airfields, exchange yards, and mass drivers sprung up almost immediately from both sides. Dudayev had been on the move shortly before the gate activated, making him think that the Gaians knew their forces were coming through to make a push. Judging by the carnage, the Martians likely knew as well and were ready for them.

They stopped for a second while the captain and sergeant figured out what the next set of twists and turns through the dark and musty piping was going to be. Dudayev took every opportunity to look up at the predawn sky. The wreck of the Ugly was now clearly two parts, burning where they used to be connected. A pair of frigates, likely Martian, were speeding together in front of it, leaving their blue vapor trails behind them, firing their forward-mounted mass drivers at another pair of Gaian destroyers while point defense autocannons fired at incoming missiles. A sailor, on board the ship that brought them to Mars a couple months before escalations started, said that the Martian ships left behind light blue vapor trails because of the fuel they got from the ice poles to the north or south. The sailor also told them that their ship, Laffey, was named after one of the decorated ships during the Great Ocean Wars of Earth way back when. He hoped that the good ship and her crew were living up to their namesake tonight.

"If you want to be up there so bad," teased his friend, Private First Class Hudson "we can strap you to the next round that goes up."

“Not a chance. We are going to have this gun silenced before they have another chance to fire at one of our ol’ girls.”

“Yeah, but if we take the gun, we can aim you at one of the dusters ships and take one down from the inside,” Hudson explained, trying to get his mate to believe it was a good idea.

“Prove to me that you can wash your hands after you piss or perform basic math then I’ll consider letting you aim that thing,” chirped Dudayev.

Folding the tablet back into one of his many pockets, Sergeant Romero took one last drag of his cigarette and threw it to the ground. “Stay close boys. There’s a bit more running coming up, then the rendezvous with the rest of Baker company will be accomplished. If things remain as they are, we should be at the mission objective with about 15 minutes to spare before the next launch. Let’s move.”

The confirmation was articulated with the pounding of their boots against the pavement as they ran. The occasional explosion could be heard around the facility as the siege continued. The red-caked pipes and walkways were beginning to lighten up as the Martian sunrise started to peek over the industrial cityscape. The lights and flashes from orbital explosions and high energy laser munitions were beginning to blend with the saturated light from the sun. The two frigates, Two for Flinching and Inflexible, that had been barreling towards the Gaian destroyers, The Sullivans and Neil Armstrong, were now smoldering bows with massive twin nuclear fusion engines having been raked over by the superior fire power of the two larger vessels. Their true target became clear to Dudayev, as he traced their path across the sky as he ran, the dominating figure of what had to be the Gaian battlecruiser, North America. Before he could finish his thought, the full broadside from the North America all but deleted Inflexible and left Two for Flinching missing many more pieces of hull than before and significantly slower, allowing her to be intercepted by the destroyer Argonaut, which finished off the devastated vessel.

Dudayev found himself before what must have been an exchange yard for drone cargo trucks. “*This must be the rendezvous,*” he thought. Captain Wylie took out his signaling light and flashed it at the other dark corner on the far side of the yard, challenging its allegiance. He must have gotten the answer he wanted before tapping the private’s shoulders, indicating he should run for cover ahead to the first set of trailer beds. Dudayev immediately started running as fast as he had strength left to give and could hear the pounding of Hudson’s feet right behind him. He made it to his spot behind the first trailer and looked back to see Hudson, the sergeant, and a couple more of his squad make the dash for cover when the first rocket screamed in from shadows they had just challenged.

“Get down!” He yelled while making the drop motion with both his hands.

The rocket was well-aimed and impacted on the ground right ahead of where his squad was running, sending everyone flying. Dudayev began firing his rifle at the start of the smoke trail, along with the rest of his remaining squad on the other side of the divide. He glanced over at his commanding officer long enough to see him yelling into a radio but couldn’t make out what he was saying. He was most likely inquiring about the location of the Charlie or Easy squads, no point in wondering about Baker since the enemy got to rendezvous with them first. Reloading a new magazine into his rifle, Dudayev sighted in again just in time to see a second rocket coming right for his feet. Diving away just in time saved him from getting vaporized by the plasma warhead but still sent him flying into one of the stacked containers a couple parking spots down the way.

On his back, he saw the last bit of fighting he’d see until sundown. The Ugly was beginning to fall into Mars’ gravitational pull and further break apart. The larger ships like her were never meant to kiss atmosphere and were destined to live their entire life in space. The fireball she would leave behind wherever she landed was due to be a boon for local scavengers in a couple months if she didn’t wipe out the continent in the process. Having escaped disaster with her obliteration of the two Martian frigates,

North America now found herself in a slugging match with her equal number in Australia, which had been siezed from the Gaian navy at the beginning of the conflict. The two ships would likely beat each other up for hours if left to their own devices as auto cannons, missiles, lasers, and artillery slammed into the thick armor hulls built from high grade asteroid mined alloys. Energy deflectors and electronic countermeasures would delay the inevitable. Massive groups of SM-6 missiles could barely be seen streaking from each ship as his view began to darken and the fire fight around him faded. He could hear the chattering of rifle fire, occasional explosion from rocket launchers, and paddling of feet as red and yellow squads lured over by the sounds of conflict to reinforce his squads' position.

He could feel his wristwatch vibrate under his sleeves and he knew that it was time again. He tried to roll over and get someone's attention, but no one had time to notice during their more immediate fight for survival took precedence over the event soon to overcome them. He could only mouth the words he wanted to speak but couldn't muster the strength to shout. At the last possible second, he closed his eyes and covered his ears.

The thin Martian atmosphere compressed once again as the mass driver sent a massive slug of hardened tungsten hurtling towards the sky at multiple times the speed of sound. The pressure knocked over those who hadn't been aware of the impending crash and made the ears of those who didn't bring double-hearing protection ring. Dudayev could only watch as the round arced its way across the sky and score a glancing miss on the hull of North America. The imperfect impact of the tungsten shell destabilized the ship enough to give up the upper hand to the Martian navy, who pounced on the opportunity. The mighty hunter had quickly become the prey as a once timid pack of smaller attack ships began hounding the reeling vessel.

The naval corpsman assigned to the company of marines embroiled in conflict identified Dudayev lazily pointing up to the sky and came to assess his condition. The burns on his side were

serious but not life-threatening. Broken bones were likely but could be reset easily if they could manage to fall back to a better position. The corpsman decided to hit Dudayev with a powerful sedative in the meantime and save him from more immediate suffering.

“Hang in there soldier. Your fight isn’t over yet,” confirmed the sailor. “As long as those boys up there are fighting, you don’t have the right to die so you stick with me, got it?”

Dudayev struggled to nod as the cocktail of drugs proceeded to do their work in preserving his current condition, though he was determined to return the favor he owed to the sailors and marines, who continued to secure their escape off this cold and rusted hellhole.