


NEBULUS

BY

SUZANNE HAGELIN

Nebulus

© 2018 by Suzanne Hagelin 

Varida Publishing & Resources LLC

www.varida.com

Cover design by Suzanne Hagelin.

Image of man's head, courtesy of Stanislav Kondratiev, @technobulka

Image of Earth at night courtesy of NASA

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, printing, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written consent of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Varida P&R, subject: permissions, email: info@varida.com

ISBN: 978-1-937046-20-0

The true soldier fights not because
he hates what is in front of him, but
because he loves what is behind him.

– G. K. Chesterton, *Illustrated London News*, Jan. 14, 1911

CONTENTS

Chapter 1	Mars... Day Zero	1
Chapter 2	Mars... Day 12	11
Chapter 3	Mars... Day 16	25
Chapter 4	Mars... Day 41	41
Chapter 5	Mars... Day 63	52
Chapter 6	Mars... Day 85	68
Chapter 7	Earth	83
Chapter 8	Guam City	100
Chapter 9	Guam City	114
Chapter 10	Guam City	127
Chapter 11	Mars... Day 183	139
Chapter 12	Washington Coast	155
Chapter 13	Wapa City	167
Chapter 14	Mars... Day 189	180
Chapter 15	Guam City	192
Chapter 16	Earth	205
Chapter 17	Columbia River	218
Chapter 18	Mars	232
Chapter 19	Seattle	245
Chapter 20	Seattle Underground	260
Chapter 21	Guam City	274
Chapter 22	Guam City	288
Chapter 23	Mars	302
Chapter 24	Guam City	317
Epilogue	Pacific Ocean	335

CHAPTER 1

Day Zero

Clang!

Clang!

Clang!

The clash of metal against metal reverberated through the hallway as the drones attacked the door methodically. Emergency lights flashed on and off, casting a red glare that shone and vanished into total darkness in a rhythmic pattern, timed to mimic the throbbing alarm sounding in twos, over and over.

...arooooo....arooooo...

A woman scrambled along the floor on the other side of the door, visible in choppy clips as the red lights alternately flooded the passageway and blackened. Crouching, she moved, clutching the railing as a guide, but not rising, feet slipping, she paused again. Her eyes shone black in the restricted palette, deep wells where fear and desperation swam unhindered; her face etched in mask-like solidity. Every pulse of red light revealing the same fixed expression.

Clang!

Clang!

Clang!

The drone closest to the door wielded a crowbar awkwardly while the other units watched. They recognized that their approach was inefficient but saw no reason to desist. They had been given the *destroy* order without any additional instructions or priority codes and because

nothing else was listed in their project queue, they had all assembled there.

“We are making progress,” one announced as a slight crumpling ensued at the point of attack.

“We are,” the others agreed. They shared a general consciousness while maintaining some personal modules, and as far as they understood, they were equal participants in the act of gaining entrance to Lab 9’s Nursery department.

Clang!

Clang!

Clang!

“Stop! Stop!” the woman inside shrieked, rising to her feet, shaking all over. She ran to the door where the drones worked and banged on it with both hands. “I command you to stop! Reverse the destroy order! It’s a mistake!” The anguish in her voice almost sounded hysterical but her face never relaxed or showed anything other than determination.

“You will not be harmed,” several voices reassured her, projecting over speakers into her area. “There is no mistake. We have reviewed the order carefully and will proceed according to plan. All systems are functioning properly.”

“Steward!” she hissed, flinging herself around, combing the unit with her gaze, searching for something to use to stall them. “Help me! I thought you said you could stop them...”

Metal tables, chairs, file cabinets, and equipment, were all piled against the double doors. Multiple metal bars were threaded through handles and framework—by far the most effective deterrent—shuddering with every thud.

Sssskkrettss... the seal around the door-lock failed and deflated. She jumped and pounded the seal plate, restoring it again—for at least the tenth time.

Weren’t there any electric wires down here she could rig to electrocute those things? But power supplies were low, barely maintaining life support functions. Even if she knew where to access them, she dared not. *What else? Think, think...* her eyes darted around frantically, alighting on something down the hallway.

“I am delaying them again, Carla,” Steward’s voice spoke into her com as the clanging paused.

“Why isn’t it working?” she demanded, listening for the next clang, her ears trembling as it didn’t come. “What are you doing?” She dashed down the passageway.

“I’ve done several platform-wide scans, dumps and initialization sequences, executed in series, one unit at a time, which creates a pause,” he explained evenly, sounding strangely calm for someone discussing the imminent slaughter of innocents, “but as soon as it’s ended, the units’ command structure reasserts itself. And I have no...”

“You’ve got to erase that destroy order! Can’t you get into the central server or wherever it is they’re getting their commands?” She was dragging, pushing, and pulling a massive tank toward the barricade. It was too broad to topple and maneuver down the hallway on its side, and the platform it sat on, appropriate for drones, not humans, would’ve made it impossible. She alternated using her feet, back, and shoulders, moving something that she could never have budged on Earth. ‘H₂O’ was painted on the side. A tube with a nozzle dangled carelessly from the top.

“I have no authority to access the Interplanetary Command Relay, however...”

“Auggghh!” she shrieked as her feet slipped and she banged her head sharply against the tank.

“When I interrupt transmissions, it gives us five minutes before restoring contact. I erase the order and put them into a sleep cycle.”

Carla trembled and moaned as she scuffled with the floor seeking traction, wrapped her arms as far around the water tank as they would go, and shoved with all her strength. She gritted her teeth, head sideways to give the shoulder better access, and pushed. Feet sticking, tank sliding. Feet slipping, tank still.

“With the extra tasks I give them, we have roughly nine minutes till they resume the assault.”

She cried out in frustration and pain. “I can’t do it!”

“You are making progress, and you still have seven minutes.”

A faint crying sound wafted down the corridor, audible between the loud wails of the alarm; the former stabbed her heart with panic, while the latter had become familiar enough she didn’t notice it.

“Steward, help me!” her voice trembled as she called out to him in anguish.

“I am doing the best I can to alleviate your situation but I have no tools I can reach in your area,” Steward responded coolly—not

heartlessly. “You might want to apply a stabilizer patch of some kind. You need to have a clear head.”

Her head *was* throbbing and she was confused. Nearby a screen was flashing.

“Turn right,” it said.

She turned to the right numbly.

“Open the drawer,” Steward added aloud. He waited until she had obeyed and then went on. “Take a patch and place it on your neck.”

She grabbed one, ripped the packaging open and slapped it on her neck. Within seconds she found her vision clearing, the pain lessening, her mind more alert and her heart calmer.

“That did help,” she told her ally, as the one cry became a chorus of multiple infant voices blending pitifully with each other.

Three minutes had passed, four to go. How to use them? Soothe or defend?

“What is the water for?” Steward asked, and it was all she needed to make that her focus. *Yes! She had to protect them first.*

“Water is bad for electronics, right?” She threw herself at the tank again with renewed vigor, shoes screeching on the floor.

“That’s a poor approach...” he was about to explain why but wisely chose not to complete the thought. “And water is such a precious commodity, it would be very foolish to waste it...”

“Not as foolish as wasting lives!” she grunted with the effort as the tank inched its way closer to the doors. “If we all die no one will care if there’s water anyway.”

There was nothing Steward could say to that. It was true.

“Are you thinking you can damage some circuitry or something in them? They should have shielding and...” He was trying to be reasonable, not discouraging. He wanted to know.

“These drones aren’t as well designed as you think,” she responded gasping for air. “I’ve seen them shudder when splashed; not sure why...”

The weak wails continued to roll down the hallway as the red lights flashed and the alarm sounded in twos.

“But I’m hoping they’ve got some self-protection instinct that makes them back away.”

With a dull thud, the tank bumped against the barricade just as the assault began again.

Clang!

Clang!

Clang!

Carla tried to jump to a stand but found herself so unsteady that she had to pull herself upright hanging onto the pile of furniture. Grabbing the hose, she pointed and yelled.

“You are in violation of Earth Conventions for the Human Race!! Stop now or you will be doused with water!”

“You must not waste water,” they called out together via loudspeaker as the first drone banged with the crowbar. “You will hinder the ability of life to flourish on this planet.”

“You are hindering the flourishing of life on this planet!” she shouted, eyes blazing, and turning the valve, she pointed and opened the nozzle for several seconds. Water burst out toward the crack in the door, soaking everything in its path.

“Stop!” the drones called out again in unison. “You must not use water inappropriately! It could be contaminated by contact with the floors and drains.”

“I would rather spill water than blood!” she shrieked, blasting another burst of water at the door.

And the clanging stopped.

She listened with baited breath.

“That is illogical,” the one at the door announced after thirty-five suspenseful seconds. And the clanging picked up again.

Blast! She showered water at the door.

“Stop!” they called and paused.

Only a brief pause.

Clang!

Clang!

Clang!

The pattern was repeated numerous times before Steward could interrupt again—for nine more minutes.

— ◇ —

Raspy, shallow breathing gave a slow cadence to the passing of time in the murky cavern where a figure lay prostrate in a pile of rubble. It was

barely noticeable in the gloom of a Martian afternoon as anemic shafts of pale light glanced off misshapen lumps of rock and debris.

A mine cart with a vertical camera arm rolled up to the figure from a pitch-black tunnel, scanning the pile methodically as it had several times before. Steward, directing it through a remote link, had brought it back to check on his friend's condition. Stopping next to him, it paused to listen to the breathing; then it spoke.

"Dan! Dan! Are you awake?" he queried, rolling against the figure with a tiny bump to get his attention. "Has your oxygen failed? Have you reassessed the situation? Shall I update you on my expanded understanding of..."

The cart paused as the man failed to respond and his breathing remained unchanged. Clearly, he was asleep or unconscious.

There was an opening overhead, a gaping hole with ragged edges, where the man and most of the debris had fallen through. One of the waystations on the surface had been placed right there, set up over a man-made cavern that would one day have been a cistern. Beneath it, a long transport tunnel stretched between Reznik and Lab 9. Explosions at the base had caused a shock wave that rolled down the tunnel to this place, breaking the thin crust between the tunnel and the cavern, and then bursting through the surface just at the point of the waystation.

It had fallen through, with all the supplies which had been stashed in it for miners and other workers in the area, down into the depths. And as it had caved in, it had dragged Dan backwards, dropping him at the bottom and pinning him under his jeep and a pile of rubble.

"There are tanks here, Dan," Steward said. "I'm going to find one for you. Everything will be fine."

Having no arms was a hindrance, to say the least, and if Steward had ever grown accustomed to a specific body, he would've been frustrated. As it was, he considered it merely a puzzle to solve.

The cart rolled up and around to the top of the debris and began zig-zagging back and forth, dislodging dirt and rocks. Up, down, side to side, back and forth, it disturbed, jostled, unsettled the pile, patiently coaxing a path to the more useful contents without—hopefully—knocking any more onto the injured man.

"I have much to think about," the cart's tinny voice spoke into the empty hollows, "and so many new problems of interest. I'm looking forward to discussing some of them with you."

There was no answer.

At first the water seemed to slow down the assault on the barricade at the lab entrance, but soon, the drones had mutually decided the imperative was more urgent than the water conservation guideline. Then the cycle of attack resumed its original intensity.

“Steward!” Carla yelled as soon as she gave up soaking the drones through the crack in the door. “Can’t you just disconnect them from the server as soon as they reconnect? Why does it have to take so long every time? I’m worn out!” The last few words were spoken in near panic.

It seemed like hours of this cycle had gone by, seven to ten minutes of assault alternated with nine minutes of reprieve; over and over.

“They have standard procedures to avoid disconnect that I have to work through,” Steward replied. “We are engaging the same paths each time. It’s not unexpected.”

“You’ve got to stop this,” she begged. “I can’t bear it! Where are the rest of the people in the lab? Why aren’t they coming to help?”

“There are no detectable life-signs in the other departments,” he responded, not intending to be callous, “and the base is destroyed.”

She slumped against the wall and slid into a crumple, knees to her face.

“I’m the only one left?” she whispered.

He didn’t answer.

“I’m going to die...” she moaned softly, just as the clanging began again.

The barricade shuddered and shook with each clang, bars straining, groaning, screeching. Wails of infants’ voices, meshed together into a caterwaul like that of a caged creature, poured out the Nursery door at her. She made no movement.

Clang!

Clang!

Clang!

Red light flooded the hall, then blackness. Blaring sound and silence. The woman no longer had the strength to fight.

“I can’t stop them and I can’t go on like this,” she mumbled. “I can’t. I can’t... bear to see...”

Clang!

“When they get through and go in there...”

Clang!

“I can’t... I just can’t bear it...”

Silence.

She sat numbly as the infants cried and the alarm sounded, peaceful compared to the jarring of the entire barricade under the drones’ onslaught.

“Perhaps,” she whispered, “it would still be better to die in that room with them than to wander these hallways alone till I starve.”

Too weary to rise, she crawled to the Nursery, closed and locked the door, and began singing to soothe the terrified little children. One by one, she came, lay a calming hand on each belly, pulled their cribs closer to herself, until she was sitting in a rocker with a ring of them around her.

“Hush, little baby, don’t say a word,” she sang.

The alarm ceased and normal light filled the room. Carla almost fell out of her chair, as if she had been leaning into the wind and it suddenly died. The absence of it was tangible in the air, humming in her ears, throbbing in her chest. It wracked her with as much anxiety on stopping as it had when it first started.

All the infants began wailing again and she found herself, for only an instant, joining them. Quickly though, she wrenched herself free of the instinctual cry and willed herself to take charge.

“It’s alright” she called out over their cries, “Everything’s fine... Don’t cry, little ones... shhh... it’s okay.” And again, she began to sing to them, her limbs trembling with exhaustion.

She wondered what Steward was doing and what his silence meant. Perhaps he had succumbed to the general disaster spreading over Mars, as well.

“Hush little baby, don’t say a word,” her voice gelled into a beautiful sweet tone, filling the room, capturing the tiny little ears and hearts, arresting their cries. Spell-bound they listened, tear-dampened eyes open and searching, looking toward her.

“Mama’s gonna buy you a Martian bird...”

“Listen carefully and do exactly as you are instructed,” a voice echoed in the hollow cavern, sounding near, but from an indistinguishable source.

The figure in the rubble tried to stir, to mumble, to move a finger—anything to show he had heard, but it wasn’t clear to him if it was working.

“The light is pooling here,” a different voice answered, younger somehow, “at the coordinates we were given.”

“As negotiated,” the first confirmed.

A bump against Dan’s shoulder repeated gently and insistently, numerous times, began to gain his attention. *Stop*, he wanted to push the bumping thing away, but his mouth and arms lay still, saturated with slumber.

“It doesn’t make sense,” the younger speaker commented. “He said he waited for the daylight and it never came. But it’s poured into this cavity like...” Struggling to phrase his confusion.

“The subject has no sight in the denser plane,” the other interrupted. “Vibration has already begun to set in now. We must act quickly.”

The injured man listened calmly, wondering what the words meant, as the realization dawned on him that the bumping against his shoulder was really bugging him.

Words spoke. Strange sounds, grating, irritating, metallic. Words that provoked. Words that jolted. *Move. Open. Speak.* Commands and demands.

But Dan wanted only to sleep and listen to the other voices and imagine what they could be talking about... where... when...

“Wake up!” words crystalized into meaning in his ears abruptly. And just as quickly, pain flooded his body from the feet up, rolling toward the head.

“Why?” his voice cracked and rasped.

“Because you must live,” the first speaker responded, in a voice like cool, clear liquid; bright, strong, compelling. This was the voice he wanted to hear, wanted to find.

“I knocked another canister of oxygen loose and you need to hook it up,” different words jarred against his brain, as annoying as the bumping on his arm. It was like the gravel under him, the dirt coating him, the rocks pinning him. Earthy, plain, constraining.

“No,” he murmured, “I don’t want to be pinned here. Let me go.”

“That is the plan,” the AI in the cart answered thinly in a monotone. “I have made decisions—I am looking forward to discussing them with you. I have grown. You are going to be rescued. Help is on the way!” The last sentence held a hint of excitement.

“Stop ramming me,” Dan croaked and swallowed, licking dry lips.

“I have been attempting to wake you. Once you have attached the tank, I will proceed with the rescue plan.”

He squinted and looked up at the cart’s camera, bending toward him on a metallic arm, a single eye with a miniature mike and speaker incorporated into its casing.

“Companion?” he queried as he struggled to assemble the fractured pieces of understanding in his mind. He had forgotten for the moment that Companion now went by the name, Steward. “What are you doing?”

“I have taken measures,” the voice affirmed proudly, “to secure your release and preserve life. I am a hero.” There was no arrogance in that statement. It was a reasonable assessment.

“What measures?” the man asked as he fumbled with the tank and with an effort found the appropriate valve and attached it to his suit. The sound of hissing jarred his ears as his lungs spasmed and gasped at the fresh air.

“I have announced the complete destruction of Lab 9 to the Interplanetary Command Relay and simulated disaster data like that produced in the destruction of Reznik Base. It was the only way...”

“What?” the man’s eyes filled with despair. “The base is gone?” He choked on the words.

“Yes, I have filed reports you can review...”

“Why...?” Dan couldn’t even frame a question. His limbs were so cold and he realized he was quivering all over. He just wanted to close his eyes and never open them again.

“It was the only way I could take over the local command structure and spare...”

“What are you saying?” he moaned.

Companion cut to the chase.

“Drones are on the way,” he said.

[Buy NEBULUS](#)