

# The Great Martian War

## Invasion

By Scott Washburn



**Zmok Books**

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# Prologue

## *Cycle 597,838.2, Invasion Site 1.3*

The city was *burning*.

Bajnatrus had never visualized anything like this. The Homeworld's atmosphere had thinned to the point that it could no longer sustain combustion, but the target world's air was thick and rich with oxygen and things would *burn*.

The merest touch of the heat rays would ignite any combustible object, and the prey-creatures' structures were filled with combustibles. Some appeared to actually be *built* of combustibles!

The results were... amazing. The super-heated gases leaping skyward glowed brightly in a number of wavelengths, producing patterns unique to Bajnatrus' experience. None of its clanmates would ever have accused it of having aesthetic sensibilities, but Bajnatrus found itself strangely moved by the spectacle.

Or maybe it was just the fever.

It was growing worse. No doubt. Bajnatrus had first noticed it two local days earlier; a strange overheated sensation, as if it had been involved in intense physical activity, even though it was at rest. Then had come an irritation in its throat and a collection of fluid in its breathing sacs. At first the symptoms were manageable, but now there was a growing numbness in its manipulating tendrils. Communications with its clanmates confirmed that they were experiencing similar difficulties.

The inescapable conclusion was that some sort of contagion from the local environment had infected them. All such threats had been eliminated from the Homeworld so long ago that no one had considered this possibility. No provisions had been made...

A small group of the prey-creatures emerged from the space between two structures. They were carrying large bundles and clearly had not realized that Bajnatrus' fighting machine was nearby. The moment they saw it, they dropped their bundles and attempted to flee. Bajnatrus gripped the controls more tightly and brought the heat ray to bear. The targeting reticule moved across the creatures and Bajnatrus activated the ray—but too late! The beam swept jerkily to the left, incinerating several large plant-growths and an unoccupied vehicle of some sort. It brought the ray back, blasting a glowing trench in the ground, and this time caught the intended targets. The creatures disappeared in blasts of flame and steam, leaving nothing but a few charred patches on the ground. The ray continued on for a distance before Bajnatrus could regain control. Yes, this was getting worse; much worse. How much worse would it get? For the first time the idea that this could lead to its death entered its thoughts.

What a ridiculous notion! It had existed for over a hundred thousand cycles, budding off replacement bodies every few hundred cycles as necessary. It had survived the Clan Wars; it had survived the perilous journey to the target world; it had defeated the prey-creature warriors in battle! To be brought low like this! An unfamiliar sensation flooded it. It was a sensation Bajnatrus had no word to describe, but suddenly it was firing the heat ray again. The urge to destroy *everything* was irresistible. Back and forth it swung the ray; structures exploded into flames... *beautiful flames!*

It sent its machine lurching forward, through the pathways between the infernos, colliding with walls and tall plant-growths. For some reason, it could not control the machine properly. Its vision was blurred and its manipulators were so numb it could scarcely feel the control studs anymore. It reached an open circular space and stopped. In the center stood a tall stone pillar with an effigy of one of the prey-creatures, several times life-size, on the top.

*A worthy target!*

It took three attempts to align the heat ray, but at last the beam leaped out. The effigy cracked and several pieces broke

off, but it remained mostly intact as it began to glow. Hotter and hotter until it began to melt. White hot droplets splattered off and it slowly slumped down into a featureless lump of slag.

Still not satisfied, Bajnatrus turned the ray against the base of the pillar and left it there until the entire thing came crashing down. An alarm came on in the control cockpit, but it ignored it until the heat ray suddenly stopped firing. Checking the status, it saw that the device was overheated. It released the firing control as the need to destroy seeped away. *I am so tired...*

*Ulla! Ulla! Ulla!*

The 'general alert' siren took it by surprise. It could hear it faintly through the hull of the fighting machine and a duplicate signal lit up on the control panel. With clumsy tendrils, Bajnatrus located the source of the alarm—Hadjrubal's machine—and saw that it was not far off. Slowly it turned the machine and moved in that direction. It had to detour several times because of the structures and mounds of rubble that often blocked its path; once it almost fell when a leg tangled with an obstruction.

Eventually, Bajnatrus emerged in another open space and saw that a fighting machine was standing on a small rise. The device was lowered into the loading position and the hatch stood open. As Bajnatrus neared, it saw the body of Hadjrupal lying beneath the hatch. It was clearly dead.

*As I will soon be.*

The knowledge wasn't so shocking as it had been earlier. It now seemed inevitability rather than an outrage. A great sense of loss filled it, though. The mission had failed. And that failure would doom its clan back on the Homeworld. Such an expenditure of resources could only be justified with success. So its clan would die.

*But the Race could still live!*

That thought filled it with a new sense of urgency. Its tendrils were nearly useless now, but somehow it activated the long-range communicator. A door on the top of the machine slid open and the transmission antenna deployed. By great good fortune—when had it started to believe in such things as

fortune?—the Homeworld was above the horizon and a clear line of sight existed. The link was established and Bajnatrus painfully composed its last message.

*Expedition...failed. Infected... by... local... microorganisms. Lethal. With...precautions... success... still... possible. Repeat...success...still... possible...*

*Seven years later...*

*March, 1907, United States Military Academy, West Point, New York*

The mournful strains of 'Taps' echoed off the cliffs overlooking the Hudson River and slowly faded away. A misty rain dripped from the bare branches and beaded on the clothing of the watchers. Cadet Andrew Comstock shivered beneath his greatcoat, but the chill March wind blowing off the river had nothing to do with that.

The words had been spoken, the flag had been folded and given to his mother, but Andrew continued to stand and stare at the open grave and the coffin that lay within. The honor guard and bugler marched away and the mourners began to disperse, but still he stood there. The thing in the box in the hole could not possibly be his father, could it? Not the big, strong man with the bushy mustache and out-of-style mutton-chop sideburns? The man who had taught him to shoot and to fish, and who had dragged him and his mother from post to post all over the country? Not him!

It still all seemed like a dream. The news from England; his father had been sent there to observe some experiment with the fantastic devices the British had captured from the Martian invaders seven years earlier. An explosion. Several city blocks leveled. And then the telegram; his mother in tears. Finally, this trip to West Point's cemetery. A dream.

His aunt was leading his mother away, saying something to him about it being time to go. But he could not bring himself to

move. The crowd was almost all gone now, but he dimly became aware of someone standing beside him.

"He always loved this place," said a voice. "I'm glad we could bring him back here."

Andrew finally forced himself to move, turning his head slightly to the left. An officer stood there, the silver oak leaves of a lieutenant colonel on his uniform. It was Benjamin Hawthorne, his father's commanding officer. "Yes, sir," he heard himself say.

"It's a hell of a shame, and I can't tell you how truly sorry I am, Andy. He was a very good man."

"Thank you, sir."

"And..." Hawthorne hesitated. "I'm also very sorry on a personal level."

Now Andrew turned to face the man. "Sir?"

"I was the one who sent your pa over there. I should have gone myself, but I was busy with things and your pa was so eager to volunteer. I let him go. I'm very sorry."

Andrew blinked in surprise. A tiny bit of anger flared up in him, followed by embarrassment. Because he *had* raged silently over the fate—or the idiot—who had put his father in the midst of the accident. He hadn't realized it was Hawthorne, a man he'd met many times and rather liked. "I... you couldn't possibly have known, sir."

"No... no, none of us can ever know, can we? I mean what might come from the decisions we make. We live our lives walking through a fog and we can never know what lies more than a few feet ahead."

"I suppose not." Why did Hawthorne keep talking? Why wouldn't he just leave him be?

"You're graduating this spring, aren't you?"

The change in subject caught him by surprise. "Y-yes, sir, June Week."

"Have you given any thought to where you'll go after that?"

"Uh, I suppose I'll go wherever they send me, sir. That's the army, after all."

“Well, that’s true, but if you’re interested, I can find a place for you in my office, Andy.”

Now he really was surprised. “The Ordnance Department, sir? I... my grades aren’t really good enough for a posting like that, sir. I’m sure to be put in the infantry, with my class ranking and all.” The class ranking, a combination of grades and demerits—he had quite a lot of demerits—would usually determine what branch of the service a cadet was assigned to upon graduation. The highest being sent to the prestigious branches, like the engineers; the lowest found themselves in the infantry.

Hawthorne smiled. “I have a bit of pull and a lot of people admired your father. I think I could make it happen—if you want me to.” Andrew hesitated, unsure what to say. “I’m sure your father would be proud to have you follow in his footsteps, son. He really believed in what we are doing.”

“The Preparedness Movement, sir? He talked about that a lot.”

Hawthorne nodded. “Most people think that the invasion was a one-shot thing and that the Martians will never return. Or if they do, they will just die off again like the first batch. Well, maybe that’s true. But we’d be fools to make that assumption. We need to be ready if they come back, and what we do in the Ordnance Department is vital to being ready. That’s why your father went to England.”

“I see, sir. I... I’ll have to think about it, sir.”

“Of course. But come on, let’s not stand here. It’s freezing!”

\* \* \* \* \*

*October, 1907, Washington, D.C.*

“Theodore, there is no one in the country happier than I that you’ve made this decision. But are you sure you want to build your platform and run on *this* foundation?”

The President of the United States turned to look at his old friend, Major General Leonard Wood, and fixed him in his unwavering gaze. "It's the foundation I've been running on all along, Leonard," he said sharply. "And it's the only issue that could bring me to break my promise and run for a third term. Who else can be trusted to do what needs to be done? Everyone seems to think that Taft will be the Republican candidate if I don't run. He's a fine fellow, but he doesn't truly understand the need. Worse, he won't be able to convince the country of the need. And Bryan! He and half the Democrats don't believe there even are any Martians! No. It has to be me—and this platform."

Wood sighed. "Theodore, I know you're fond of the Preparedness Movement, but..."

"Fond! *Fond!* You make it sound like some pet cat that's followed me home! You didn't see London after the invasion; I did! A great city laid prostrate; women and children slaughtered in the streets! Do you want to see that in our own cities?"

"Not many people think that can happen here..."

"And why not?" demanded Roosevelt. "Because we are special somehow? That the Martians will spare us simply because we are Americans? Nonsense!"

"I'm not doubting the seriousness of the threat, Theodore," said Wood. "I've been a soldier most of my life and I know how starved the army has been, but it's been seven years and nothing further has happened. People are asking that if they were going to come back, wouldn't they have done so by now?"

"How can anyone know? Do you know what monumental effort must be required to cross the fantastic gulf of space between the planets? I surely don't! But it would make the effort of building a canal across Panama shrink to insignificance in comparison! Perhaps the first invasion was just a scouting mission. Even now they may be massing their forces for the real invasion!"

"But we have no evidence of that..."

"What about the recent sightings made by those Harvard astronomers with their new 60-inch telescope?" interrupted Roosevelt. "Bright flares seen on Mars! Just as happened before

they started seeing the gas eruptions that heralded the first invasion. Scientists thought that was the casting of the great launching gun. If they are casting more of them, they must be getting ready to launch more cylinders!"

"Theodore, I'm not doubting you, but other people will," Wood said soothingly. "Those flares were only seen by a few men—and they could mean anything. I'm not saying don't prepare—far from it! But to make it the central plank of your platform could lose votes. People are suspicious of the expense, of the sums already spent..."

"What sums?!" snorted the President. "A few millions in the first panic after the invasion. We added a few regiments to the army, built a few new ships, constructed a few additional forts, and then—nothing! People forget what's happened and what could happen! And their congressmen vote what they think their constituents want rather than what they know is needed. In the last few years we haven't accomplished a damn thing beyond a few research projects. I need to remind people of the danger, Leonard."

"Your opponents will remind people of the *expense*. With what we are paying on the canal, we can hardly ask for even more money for something with even less tangible benefits. I know you are disappointed that you haven't been able to accomplish all that you'd wish, but if you are not reelected, you won't be in a position to accomplish anything."

Roosevelt opened his mouth as if to deliver a blistering reply, but then thought better of it. "What's the matter with you, Leonard? Have you been talking with Cortelyou?"

Wood shrugged. "He did ask me to have a word with you. He will be managing your campaign, after all."

"He worries too much."

"So that you can worry about other things—like the Martians."

"Be that as it may, Leonard, this is what I will run on."

Wood spread his hands in acquiescence. "All right then. But it will make a much harder campaign for you."

“So be it,” said the President.

“Theodore, Cortelyou expected that to be your answer, but he begs you to at least wait until after the new year to make the announcement. That will give him some time to prepare people and smooth the way.”

“Very well, but no longer than that.”

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## *Cycle 597,842.6, Ajakanthas*

It had done this hundreds of times over the long centuries, and at each *awakening*, the being known to its fellows as Qetjnegartis went through the same routine. First, it opened its eyes and regarded the dead body that until moments ago had hosted its consciousness. Then, closing its eyes again, it searched its memories, going back, back to that first *awakening* when its progenitor had budded it off during a rare time of plenty, when offspring had been permitted.

Qetjnegartis knew that this self-examination was illogical. Hundreds of studies over many years had concluded again and again that the Transference did not produce any loss of memory. It was doubly illogical since if any of its memories *were* missing, how would it know? Nevertheless it searched the nearly endless caverns of its mind housing all the experiences that were the total of its being.

The Homeworld of that first *awakening* was much different than the one it would soon be leaving. The air was warm and thick, the water in the canals flowed deep and strong, nourishing vast croplands that grew under the open sky, as did the food-animals that fed off those crops. And the memories went even farther, for it held some of its progenitor's experiences as well, and they stretched back to times so remote as to be nearly incomprehensible. The vast low deserts which had covered most of the Homeworld even at Qetjnegartis' first *awakening* had held seas of water instead. The higher elevations

had been thick with vegetation that grew free and un-ordered and held creatures just as wild. No such things existed at the time of its first *awakening*. Even then, the People had realized that their world was slowly dying and that only by strictly ordering the use of resources could that death be postponed.

Century by century and millennium by millennium Qetjnegartis had helped fight that losing battle. The croplands and animals had been moved underground as the thinning air made growing them above ground impossible. The cities moved underground as well. The canals were dry except for short periods during the spring melts. The ability of the People to make *changes* during the budding process allowed them to still survive on the surface, but there were limits even to that.

As the crisis deepened, logic had been sorely tested. Drawn by some instinct that predated even the most ancient memories, the People had started to draw into groups that had sprung from the same progenitors—*clans*, the academics had called them. Instead of working for the common good, many had worked for the good of their clan alone, even if that caused harm to others. Illogical. Self-destructive. They all knew it, but few were able to defeat it. It was a hard truth that animal instinct could still overrule their minds.

From competing for resources, they had eventually started to fight for them. Conflict! Something unimaginable had become reality. Wars had swept the Homeworld. Weak clans were destroyed; stronger clans expanded their numbers to fill the space. Qetjnegartis remembered the novel experience of budding off new beings—*offspring*—rather than just copies of itself as its old body died. The experience of slaying a fellow being had been novel, too...

At last a new equilibrium was formed and logic reasserted itself. Further wars would accomplish nothing except to hasten the death of all. The Council of Five Hundred, the heads of the clans, was formed. An uneasy peace returned.

And it was a peace that could not last for long. Despite all of their efforts, the Homeworld's ability to support the People had dropped and dropped. The population had to be reduced,

and reduced again. At first this was done by culling out the youngest, a certain proportion from each clan. But then the larger and stronger clans began to refuse. They made up their deficits by destroying the smaller and weaker clans. The Five Hundred had dropped to Four Hundred. And then Three. A cycle of new wars, with each interval of peace shorter and grimmer, seemed inevitable. On and on until no one was left. The logic of the situation was all too clear.

But then someone—and it was so very odd that no one seemed able to put a name to that someone—had proposed a new logic: If the Homeworld was doomed to die, then leave it before it did.

It was an idea so radical that few listened at first. Oh, it had been known for centuries that the second and third planets supported life, but no one, except a few damaged individuals, had wasted thought on the idea of traveling to them. But imminent extinction made radical ideas seem far less radical. The notion gained supporters and minds turned to the task.

But it was an enormous task and many opposed spending the vast resources that would be necessary. If the effort was made and then it failed, it would only hasten the end for everyone. Despite this, one clan began to build the machines that would be necessary.

This very nearly brought on a war in its own right as clans who opposed the idea prepared to use force to prevent it. Qetjnegartis suspected that war, indeed, would have broken out, but then the scientists who had been studying the third planet made the remarkable announcement that the world was inhabited by thinking beings! Powerful telescopes had seen what appeared to be cities. Further observations had concluded that these beings were becoming industrialized at a frightening pace. Weak radio signals were detected. Fear swept through all the clans that the faint hope that so many had scoffed at would soon be lost altogether as these new beings developed the means to defend themselves.

Caution had been abandoned to panic. All the major clans began to prepare to launch colonization missions. The clan

who had started first was ready first and they refused to wait for the others. They launched their mission—which met with disaster.

But the disaster had brought back the information needed for the following missions to succeed. The third planet was teeming with life, both micro and macro. Ironically, the micro was the more dangerous, although the thinking beings posed a danger, as well. But the scientists said that the *change* could be used to overcome the threat of the microbes. The engineers said that their machines could overcome the rest.

And so...

Qetjnegartis opened its eyes again and regarded its old body. *That* was certainly different from the hundreds of other *awakenings* it had undergone. Its old body was not all that old; it would have lasted for many more cycles. But Qetjnegartis would soon be departing for the third planet and it was determined that all those making the journey should begin it with bodies which were as young and strong as possible. It flexed its tentacles and drew in breath.

That done, it pulled itself toward its machine.

There was much work to do.

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