

## Once More unto the Breach Ch. 2

I sat in the darkened room, watching the recordings of one of XCOM Europe's first confirmed contacts with extraterrestrial life. As the XCOM trooper on the screen reached out to disarm a seemingly catatonic police officer, I couldn't help but wince. I hit the pause button right in the moment where the seemingly unaware police officer dropped a live grenade at his feet.

I knew what happened next. The XCOM trooper would try to dive for cover, but the police officer would take the opportunity to unload his shotgun into the soldier, completely ignoring the grenade at his feet. The grenade would take out the officer, but not before the point blank blasts had shredded the trooper's torso.

That would be the beginning of a charlie foxtrot that would see the XCOM platoon sustain over seventy percent casualties. Only ten troopers would come back from a platoon of thirty-six, and that too only because a sergeant managed to rally the survivors and conduct a fighting retreat.

The only upside to this entire fiasco would be the handful of alien corpses the troops were able to haul back for analysis - and confirmed video evidence that these aliens could, in fact, control human minds with a terrifying amount of precision. In this case, the mind-controlled officer had lured the XCOM platoon into an ambush using a fake distress call before launching the suicide attack that distracted the platoon at the critical moment.

Honestly, it was lucky I had joined after this fiasco. The last thing I needed was to start my stint as Commander with an embarrassment like this on my record. While I no longer cared about getting promoted, having a good mission record would help immensely in the inevitable political jockeying that my position entailed.

A different trooper's bodycam had picked up the sight of the alien controller hiding behind the compromised officer. The only hint we had that there was mind control involved was the faint purple glow that had appeared in the officer's eyes, that pulsed in time to the glowing veins on the creature's overlarge skull.

The creature was the classic little grey man, with no mouth but large red eyes and the aforementioned skull. The skull had a delicate purple and red shading that had analysts convinced that it was some sort of superior breed. The ambush had contained almost thirty of the little buggers, but none of the others had that distinct coloring, although all of them showed an ability to mess with people's heads, spreading panic and hallucinations among their unfortunate victims. There had also been half a dozen armored green 7-foot-tall behemoths that had possessed no visible abilities beyond brute strength and devastating accuracy with their very powerful weapons.

The alien weapons were another source of tension. Concentrated plasma fired at supersonic speeds, their handheld weapons could penetrate the rear armor of a main battle tank. Thankfully, their range and precision seemed only slightly better than modern assault rifles, but that was cold comfort at best. Even mage shells were an uncertain defense. They could only stop a few projectiles before cracking, and even when they did, radiant heat from the plasma could cause third-degree burns.

Visha was sitting next to me, going over the recordings containing the various aliens already identified. The analysts had already been through them in detail, but some of the important bits were worth studying in person. I, for example, was focusing on what had happened in the lead-up to the ambush.

Watching the frozen image of the trooper, I couldn't help but shake my head. Illustrated right there on screen was one of the first problems facing XCOM Europe - the insane variety in training standards and competences. Being an international paramilitary organization, we had troops from at least a dozen different countries and ten times as many organizations. Everything from Albion's Special Boat Service to the Zurich City Police Department.

The results were obvious. In the above action, the officer in charge had come from a police background, and instead of scouting the terrain and securing his flanks, he'd focused on trying to save lives. He'd ordered a trooper to approach and disarm an armed unknown simply because the man had been in a police uniform and had been standing still.

The trooper in question - well, it was clear he didn't have the first clue as to how to go about safely disarming and detaining someone. Not surprising, as his record showed that he'd been a Germanian infantryman before coming to XCOM, with no experience in anything approaching a police action.

I started playing the video, and watched as further cracks developed in the platoon's coordination as the very first wave of enemy fire killed the lieutenant in charge. In the end, seven out of ten survivors, including the sergeant who took command, were OZEV soldiers. The various countries of OZEV had enough commonality in training standards to be able to work together on short notice, and that had paid off here. Amusing, that a policy I'd promulgated 75 years ago to face Communist Russy would now save lives when facing aliens from outer space.

Given a choice, I'd put together platoons purely from one country's elite forces. Naturally, I would prefer Germania, but some of the others also had some operatives worth the name. XCOM Europe wasn't so large that one major power couldn't supply all the combat troops.

Unfortunately, politics made that impossible. XCOM Europe's jurisdiction spread to every country in Europe, large and small, and these polities weren't about to let any organizations' forces into their territory if they couldn't get a say-so in that organization's staffing. If we wanted cooperation, then we had to evenly spread out our employees across the board. That way everyone got to keep an eye on XCOM and make sure we weren't about to compromise their precious sovereignty.

My next thought was to create XCOM platoons that came from one country's forces. Each standard platoon had thirty-six troops, to match the Skyranger's carrying capacity. Making sure each block of thirty-six came from the same country, or even the same organization, ought to be doable.

But even that had its pitfalls. It was almost certain that I would inevitably have to deploy these platoons to countries other than their home territories. And this is where Europe's diversity worked against me. There were dozens of territories with their own official language. Even their second language, if they had one, could be any one of four - Albish, Frankish, Germanian or Russy. If each mission didn't include at least a few natives, even something as rudimentary as street signs and witness statements would be beyond their ability.

A more long-term objection would be the inevitable cliques that would form if I started clubbing soldiers together exclusively by country. If these invaders had done even a modicum of scouting, then they would

inevitably target the myriad fault lines dividing human society. It was their best strategy for crippling any response, and I didn't need to do their work for them by segregating my soldiers along nationalist lines.

Besides, the last thing we needed was the sight of an all-Germanian combat team marching through the streets of Parisee. Over seventy years, and the Francois were still salty about my little tank ride. Talk about sore losers.

No, the best option was to follow the initial plan and train the various troops into one unified fighting force. Unfortunately, that took time that I suspected our enemies were not going to give us. There were, however, a few immediate changes I could make that ought to tighten up combat efficiency.

For starters, the policy of handing out officer slots based on seniority had to go. This was not a bureaucracy or a peacetime army. We were on the bleeding edge of a new era of combat. Competence and experience had to be the only criteria. That meant first pick would go to the decorated combat veterans. Even though there had been no major wars in decades, there had been enough small skirmishes and counter-insurgency operations to create a solid core of experienced officers. If the senior officers with the wrong kind of experience didn't like it, tough.

Second, every trooper had to meet certain basic training standards before they would be permitted out in the field. Here, time constraints would prevent the kind of holistic training most elite units went through, but they had to at least learn the same basic playbook. And of course, they would also have to meet minimum physical and skill requirements. This would be a bit easier - in spite of their less than stellar debut, all the troops had been selected for their excellent fitness and performance reviews.

And finally, there was the question of mages. While there were plenty of mages scattered among the support staff, there were almost none among the combat troops. The idea seemed to be, if XCOM needed combat mage support, we would call in the local mages of whichever country we happened to be in at the time.

I scoffed. I knew the real reason. Even with the accelerating advancement of technology, there existed few combat platforms as agile and versatile as the combat mage. Jet fighters might have ended their dominance of the open skies, but they were still unmatched in any terrain that provided sufficient cover. Combined with their limited numbers that no amount of eugenics attempts had alleviated, and no country would be willing to let them go, especially when faced with a possible alien invasion.

Well, that couldn't stand. Given the technical superiority of our enemy, XCOM needed dedicated combat mages to support our regular troops. Especially since, as the analysts noted, it might be possible for mages to better resist the alien's psychic influence. This had obviously not been tested, but since the use of their psychic abilities seemed to show up on magic detectors, the possibility had to be explored.

Fortunately, I still had friends in very high places, and a lot of favors saved up for a rainy day. I felt certain I could shake loose a company or two of Germania's Combat Mages. And once word got around that Germania was loaning combat mages to XCOM, the other major European powers would hopefully jump in if only to save face.

That was all I could do about staffing issues for now. The next item on my list was our combat gear. The Skyangers were nice, and the equipment were all at the best of OZEV standard (which, all modesty aside, I

believed was among the best in the world), but I felt we could do better. XCOM, after all, was envisioned as a small elite paramilitary organization. Our equipment ought to reflect this.

I had some ideas. There were several interesting technologies, particularly in the field of combat drones and robotics, that were currently in their testing phase in various militaries. I would have to put out some feelers. But before that, I would have to see what XCOM's R&D was capable of on its own.

I leaned over and gave Visha a quick peck on the cheek. "I'm going down to the labs. Want to come with?"

She smiled and shook her head. "You go. There's a few more files I want to see."

"Well, don't stay up too late."

"I can sleep when I'm dead," she snarked.

It wasn't funny at all, but we both laughed anyway. Forcing my mind to stop thinking about Visha's illness, I instead focused on what lay ahead. I had a couple of doctors to talk to.