

Martian Crusade Ch. 3

Imperial Military HQ, Berun, The Empire, August 1925

Major General Rudersdorf exchanged a glance with his old friend, ally, and comrade-in-arms Major General Zettour as the briefing drew to a close. Even though their department had gathered the bulk of the information that Colonel Lergen was even now presenting to the gathered members of Imperial Military Command, he had a hard time accepting the conclusions contained therein.

Aliens! Honest to God aliens straight out of a Jules Verne novel! Although he had heard Lergen muttering about someone named Lovecraft.... Shaking his head, Rudersdorf turned his attention back to the meeting as Lergen made his closing remarks. "In summary gentlemen, these creatures of unknown provenance have shown themselves skilled in magic, greatly advanced in technology, and implacably hostile to all they meet. The 203rd is doing its best, but it is clear these creatures are present in such numbers as to be beyond the abilities of any single mage battalion. If our allies are to control the Libyan hinterland, they will have to make a major military commitment - one in which we will most likely be required to contribute."

A soft murmur broke out as people quietly discussed the situation with their neighbors. Normally, the suggestion that any significant resource commitment be made to aid the Ildoans in holding the Libyan interior would be viewed with skepticism. While the port of Tripolis was valuable, the interior of the colony had hitherto been considered a hot deserted hellhole. The aid of the 203rd was more than enough to secure Tripolis, and the Empire would have normally left the Ildoans to deal with the interior. Unfortunately...

"The reports are confirmed then? These creatures have managed to dig up oil in the Libyan desert?" asked a lieutenant-general.

Oil! The proverbial black gold! It was the Achilles' heel of their glorious Empire that they needed to rely almost entirely on imports to fuel their industrial might and military machines. To make matters worse, in recent months their chief supplier the Unified States had shown signs of wavering in their neutrality. In such a situation, the discovery of oil in the territory of their ally would have been a godsend. A shame then, that this oil was being dug up and consumed by hideous monsters from beyond the stars.

"As certain as we can be without examining the area ourselves," replied Lergen. "None of the 203rd are engineers, but the images they recorded are extremely suggestive."

"It would certainly support the reports we're getting from elsewhere," broke in a Colonel from Military Intelligence. "These creatures have been sighted in almost every continent other than Europe, and each sighting corresponds to some sort of valuable resource - many of them previously undiscovered. For example, large portions of Central Africa are practically overrun with these things. The copper regions of Francois Congo and Albish Rhodesia are reportedly under constant assault. At the same time, these aliens have also been sighted in the northern parts of our own East African colony."

"Really? What's there?" someone asked.

The Intelligence Officer grimaced. "We don't know. Much of our colony is untouched by civilization. But if this pattern holds true, then there's something valuable down there, and these aliens are busy robbing us blind."

"Is that why these creatures are here then?" asked a naval officer. "To steal our natural resources?"

"It does bear an ironic similarity, does it not, to Europe's own colonization efforts?" mused Zettour. "Go in, displace the natives, exploit the land for your own needs... Given the disparity in technology, perhaps our world is their version of Africa."

"What disturbs me," said the Navy man, "Is how these creatures knew to find all of these things. We live here, and we didn't know! Just how long would they have been planning for this invasion?" He turned and addressed Zettour directly. "Your young Major Degurechaff might have a point when she suggested we put aside our differences and join hands with the other world powers in evicting these aliens. These things know way too much about us for my peace of mind!"

"Bah! That brat is just being alarmist! A few ugly monsters and she'[s running scared instead of focusing on the enemy at hand!" Rudersdorf refrained from glaring at the source of the voice. The former commander of the Norden theater was still smarting from the way Degurechaff had shredded his plans for a winter offensive - and even more when he realized his superiors had actually agreed with the diminutive Major and had only allowed the attack to proceed in order to use him as a distraction. The man continued, "Right now, those things are mostly running amuck in Central Asia and Africa. Well, I say let them! Most of that is Francois, Albish, or Russy territory! If they want our help, they can come crawling to us! In the meantime, we need to see to our own needs. We need to take care of the damn Francois!"

"Yes, quite," agreed the Marshall. "The Republican intransigence is becoming something of an embarrassment."

Rudersdorf didn't bother hiding his grimace. Defense Minister de Lugo's retreat to Africa had caught everyone by surprise. Almost a fifth of the Francois Republic's army and over half of their aerial mages had joined the expedition, and just last week the bastard had made a widely publicized speech declaring his willingness to fight to the bitter end rather than admit defeat as any sane person should. The whole incident had been deeply embarrassing for both Western Theater Command and Military Intelligence, and hard questions were being asked as to how such a massive evacuation could have been permitted. Then his grimace turned into a scowl as General Louis spoke, "Perhaps we can kill two birds with one stone."

Perhaps it was irrational of him, but ever since Louis had pushed through the invasion of Legadonia against his and Zettour's advice, Rudersdorf had been holding a grudge against the man. Yes, the war had gone remarkably well so far, but considering the Empire hadn't wanted an all-out war in the first place, Rudersdorf couldn't look on that decision as anything other than a disaster. Now he braced himself for whatever the man's latest suggestion might be.

General Louis stood up to address the meeting room as a whole. "The Francois resistance in Africa means we would have had to prepare an expeditionary force anyway to pursue our enemies. I suggest we increase the forces we were planning to commit, and base them out of Libya. That way they can be in position to both reinforce the Ildoans and take the fight to the Francois."

"That's absurd!" barked Rudersdorf. "You would ask the expeditionary force to split their attention between two objectives, and you would weaken our Continental forces at a time when both the Albish and the Russy are looking restive!"

Louis calmly replied, "The Albish are a naval power, they don't have the land forces to challenge us. And several of the suspected alien landing sites are in the middle of Russy territory. They will have their hands full with their own batch of alien intruders, they're not going to entertain any foreign adventures."

"Oh? Just like how none of our neighbors would dare to attack us while we took on the Legadonians?" came his acid response.

Louis flushed furiously at the reminder. But instead of snapping and weakening his position, he continued to be calm and measured in his response. "Now that the fighting on the continent is over, we can afford up to five panzer divisions without unduly stressing our defense plans. That should be sufficient both to reinforce the Ildoans and carry out offensive operations against the Francois."

Zettour broke in at this point. "Five panzer divisions would cut our strategic reserve to nothing. You are literally hoping absolutely nothing will go wrong in Europe to commit that many mobile forces to such a distant theater. Besides, supplying them will likely become an issue. No matter what you think of their ability on land, the Albish Royal Navy remains undefeated on water. Should they choose to formally enter the war, any forces in Africa will be in real danger of being cut off." The man affected a thinking pose before continuing, "No, if you want mobile forces in Africa, a few mage battalions might be a better option. Given the kind of weapons these aliens seem to prefer, mages are probably our best bet at dealing with them effectively. They can also be easily returned to the continent should the need arise."

Zettour, what are you doing? While Rudersdorf could accept Zettour's point that mage battalions would be far easier to support logistically than more conventional forces, mages were also the Empire's most irreplaceable resources. They already had the 203rd in Africa, stationing even more to that distant territory would greatly weaken magical coverage over their homeland.

Others could see the same thing. The general in charge of the mage corps spoke up, "My mages are overcommitted as it is! How will we maintain our defense of the Fatherland if we send even more to Africa?"

"We can cover the gaps using conventional aircraft," replied Zettour. "Please remember, with the exception of the 203rd, fighter aircraft still remain the best counter to enemy mages, and they can also be used for artillery spotting work."

"So, you think we can reduce our conventional force commitment if we increase the number of mages?" asked the Marshall.

"Yes, but only under certain conditions. The fact is, few of our mage battalions are used to being deployed in large independent formations, they are usually attached to infantry and artillery as support units. Should we assign them to Africa, they would need to be placed under the command of someone used to commanding mages in large numbers."

Rudersdorf barely bit back a groan. He should have known his cunning old friend would use this as an opportunity to further promote his *wunderkind*. He knew Zettour had a granddaughter the same age as Degurechaff, but the way the man doted on the Major, you would think she were his granddaughter in truth!

The suggestion immediately drew objections. To no one's surprise, Colonel Lergen led the charge in pointing out that not only was the girl yet to turn twelve, but she had only been a Lieutenant a year ago. Zettour countered by pointing out that any African force would be torn between two disparate objectives - reconquering Libya from the aliens and attacking the Francois in their African strongholds. Unless they were willing to create two entirely separate forces, which had its own issues, any mages assigned to the venture would need a centralized command so they could be deployed most effectively according to the evolving needs of the battlefield.

"What about South America, though?" broke in someone else. "Brasilia and Gran Colombia are both friends to the Empire, and they have been hit hard by these invaders as well!" And that opened a whole new can of worms.

The meeting lasted far too long, but in the end they reached a decision.

Major Degurechaff's notion of presenting a united front against the aliens was dismissed almost immediately. The current situation was far more damaging to the Empire's rivals, and until the Francois could be brought to heel and a proper peace treaty signed, the other European powers could deal with the aliens on their own.

Abandoning South America was a more contentious decision, but after two years of brutal war no one wanted to ship soldiers halfway around the world to a fight that was not theirs. They did however agree to start shipping their South American friends their older guns, tanks and artillery pieces as a gesture of goodwill.

Then came the issue of Africa. Everyone agreed something had to be done, but the real argument was where and how much. A strong minority believed that the Empire should secure their East African colony against alien depredation, but more sensible heads dismissed the suggestion. The colony was too remote to easily reinforce, and too underdeveloped to easily operate in. The Empire had no choice but to surrender the territory for now.

Libya on the other hand had to be held. Not only was it relatively close, but the temptation of alleviating their perennial oil shortage could not be ignored. General Louis got four divisions for his African campaign - two light panzer, one motorized infantry, and one light division of self-propelled

artillery. For its small size, it was one of the more powerful concentrations of mobile firepower put together over the course of the war. Given the alien invader's reliance on automation, energy weapons, and toxic gases, regular infantry and fixed artillery were deemed less than ideal and left out of the muster. The primary objective would be to secure the Libyan hinterland, before sweeping into Francois North Africa and putting paid to Pierre de Lugo's army-in-exile.

Of course, in exchange for supporting Louis, Zettour got his own little deal. Two mage battalions - 72 mages - would be sent to reinforce the 203rd, and his protegee Degurechaff would receive a brevet promotion to Lt. Colonel and be placed in charge, her rank to be confirmed later depending on her performance. Even more importantly, Degurechaff would maintain her independent command. Normally tactical control of air forces was in the hand of the local army commander, but now all aerial mages would report to a single independent authority. While Degurechaff would be expected to cooperate with the ground forces, it would be up to her how she went about fulfilling her objectives. Rudersdorf knew the idea of an independent Air Force had originated from Degurechaff, and he wondered just how much of his friend's thinking was being influenced by the girl.

Still, that was neither there nor here. The decision had been made, and the forces were being mustered. He just hoped Degurechaff was being paranoid when in her missives she described the aliens as an existential threat to all of humanity, rather than the raiders and looters they appeared to be.