

Once More unto the Breach

February 12, 2012, Wien, Germanian Union

I sat in the beautiful garden, admiring the distant hills. Next to me sat the love of my life. And she was dying. A progressive motor neuron disease. The same or similar to what had afflicted the physicist Stephen Hawking in my previous life. *Strange, the odd facts that stick in one's head, even after so long.* The disease had been diagnosed three months ago, and the doctors gave her at best another two years to live.

Some tried to console me by saying that Visha had had a good run. She had recently celebrated her 103rd birthday after all, and no one lives forever. To them I say, watch your closest one die, and you'll realize that seventy years together isn't enough. Seven hundred wouldn't be enough. To my shame, I found myself voicing the complaint that I'd always looked down on others for making. "It's not fair."

"Maybe not," said Visha, turning to me with a smile. "But you're going to say yes anyway."

Ah, she misunderstood. She thought I was talking about the unexpected job offer rather than her health. I decided to accept the new topic rather than continue wallowing. "Why should I? I gave them ten years as a soldier, twenty years as Chancellor, and another twenty as President. And even after I left they kept dragging me back every few months for every little thing. And now they want me to waste what little time we have left fighting yet another war? Enough is enough!"

As I finished my rant I turned to focus on Visha. Her shoulder-length hair was grey and wispy, her skin spotted and sagging, her face lined, and she was confined to a wheelchair. For a centennial she looked very good, not a day over seventy-five. The fact that I thought her beautiful was all the proof I needed that love is indeed blind. She now turned to me with fond exasperation and said, "You and I both know you can't stand to be idle. Besides, you can't pretend this is unimportant. As ridiculous as it may sound, their evidence is compelling. Aliens from outer space are attacking us for seemingly no rhyme or reason, and I at least can't think of anyone else they could have chosen to lead the counterattack."

"Oh, I don't know, how about someone who isn't turning 99 this year?" I asked sarcastically. "Seriously, what are the younger generations doing, if I'm the best they can come up with? Besides, fighting futile battles is a young man's game. I had my fill of that during the First Great War."

"You think this is futile?"

"If they really are extraterrestrials, then it means they have interstellar travel. Which, in turn, means they could wipe us out whenever they wanted by dropping a sufficiently heavy rock. If they haven't, it's because they want something from us. And if we manage to deny them, then they just might move to the 'rocks fall, everyone dies' option."

"And so you would meekly submit and accept whatever fate they have in store for us?" The sarcasm in her voice told me how little she believed that.

I sighed. "I'm not saying that. But... we have so little time left... and I'm not willing to give up on a cure! I can't let anything distract me..." I could feel my anger and fear rising. I still refused to accept Visha's fate. We lived in a world of magic! Over the last several decades the combination of science and magic had allowed this world to achieve miracles of technology and medicine far beyond my original. I was certain that a cure could be found. I -

"Tanya." The uncharacteristically sharp tone in Visha's voice pulled me from my thoughts. "You know as well as I that the best minds in medicine are already looking into the matter." Her smile was now sad. "They will either succeed or they won't. You have already done everything you can for me. Now, it is time to worry about you."

"About me? I'm not the one who's sick! I'm perfectly fine!" I was too. Whether it was because I was a stronger mage or had started younger, but if Visha looked in her seventies then I did not look beyond my sixties. I was as healthy as a sixty-year-old could expect to be, too. I could easily look forward to another ten or twenty years, and I refused to spend those years without Visha.

"So, spending sixteen hours a day studying medical texts and scouring the internet is fine, is it?" Visha sighed. "Don't think I haven't noticed. This retirement is a curse, it's giving you too much free time. At this rate you'll drive yourself mad long before this disease claims me. You need a distraction, something to occupy yourself." She took my hand in a grip that trembled just a little bit. "You need something to keep you going if the worst should happen."

"The worst? Visha, did you hear something - ?"

"Don't panic. There's been no news. But you know that two years is only a best-case prognosis. Depending on how rapidly it progresses, I could be gone in six months. No, don't argue, you know it's possible. And if that should happen... what will you do, I wonder?"

I had no words, I could only grip her hand tightly in despair. Seventy years together. Almost ninety if you count from when we first met. I'd had Visha in my life, one way or another, for almost two-thirds of my existence, even if you count my first life before Being X threw me into this world. Sometimes, throughout the chaos and confusion of my decades of political leadership, Visha had been the only thing that had kept me grounded and sane. I literally could not imagine a life without her, any more than I could have imagined meeting someone like her in the first place.

Some of my feelings must have shown on my face, because she smiled and squeezed back my hand. "This is why, Tanya. If I am to go, I need to know you're taken care of. And the best way to do that is to give you a purpose. An enemy to fight." Her smile grew mischievous. "Admit it, you were already coming up with tactics to deal with the enemies they described. I could see the wheels spinning in your head. I bet if it wasn't for this illness, you'd be jumping at the chance no matter how much you might pretend otherwise."

That was perhaps the one persistent misunderstanding in our relationship. Visha refused to accept that I was at heart a peace-loving person. She was convinced I pretended to be peace-loving because that was what a good person was supposed to be, whereas secretly I apparently thrived on conflict. Utterly absurd, but I did understand enough about romance to know that sometimes you have to let your partner keep their little illusions. If Visha wanted to believe I was secretly as much a battle maniac as her, who was I to argue? I still had to respond though. "This, coming from the woman who was still beating me on the rifle range six months back? I bet you want me to sign up just so you can live vicariously through me!" I teased.

"Maybe I do. Then won't you do this for me? Please? A last request?"

I couldn't help but laugh at how ridiculous Visha looked batting her eyelashes at me. Then I sobered up. "Fine I'll do it. But are you OK having to move away from here and into a military bunker?" I looked up and once more admired our surroundings. Wien's District 13 was one of the most exclusive and expensive residential locations in an already beautiful city. The villa and land had been a surprise present from the Germanian Worker's Party's leadership after my retirement from the Presidency. At the time, I'd been worried the gift would trigger accusations of corruption, but seeing Visha fall in love with the place at first sight had kept me from donating it to charity like I had for many other excessive gifts I'd received over the decades. Thankfully, between our savings, various book royalties (even though they kept misclassifying my autobiography as fiction), and the odd sponsorship, we had enough income to keep up the kind of lifestyle that a house like this dictated.

I confess I'd gotten used to luxury, and I felt a pang at leaving it behind for whatever military installation awaited us. Visha had no such hesitation. "I am. Besides, military bases always have top-notch medical care. And since you'll be the boss, there'll be no shortage of people to look after me while you're working."

"As if I'd leave you behind in your room," I scoffed, even as I stood up and took the arms of her wheelchair. "You might be stuck in this chair, but there's nothing wrong with your mind. How can I fight a war without my faithful adjutant?"

Her smile was radiant. And she called me the war maniac, hah! "How did that Albish poet it?" mused Visha, "'Once more unto the breach'?"

I scoffed as I wheeled her into the living room. "Henry V died at the wrong time and left political chaos behind. Let's aim a bit higher, yeah?" Looking up, I glared coolly at the three soldiers waiting inside. Two guards standing by the door and one Colonel who immediately came to attention as we entered. "Gentlemen. It seems I will be accepting the position after all. The facility has married quarters and a working infirmary, I trust?"

"We anticipated Miss Serebryakov's needs, Ma'am. You will find our medical facilities top-notch. Welcome aboard to XCOM Europe, Commander!"

Even as he was talking, I was already heading for the door, pushing Visha along. "Well then, let's not waste any more time. Pack up our things and bring it along after us, will you, Colonel?" I carefully hid my amusement at the way the Colonel twitched. Perhaps it was wrong to take out my lingering annoyance on the poor man, but if they wanted me as Commander, they could put up with all of me, crankiness and all. It had always been one of my regrets that I and Visha had wasted so many years dancing around each other worried what other people will think, and after we'd finally got together I'd made a private vow not to hide my feelings so much.

Leaving the Colonel behind to his newfound housekeeping duties, the guards escorted us out to the broad thoroughfare in front of my house - and the state-of-the-art supersonic VTOL parked there. The Skyranger was an example of what could be achieved when magic met materials engineering. A joint Germania/US project, it was a light transport with the speed of a modern fighter, range of an airliner, and vertical take-off/landing to boot. It also meant the governments funding the XCOM project weren't skimping on the funding and tech access.

As the bay doors closed and the jet took off a screaming roar, I was lost in thought. XCOM Europe was one of six regional HQs planned, and the second to be activated after XCOM North America. The others, all due to start operations in the next few months, would be in Asia, Africa, South America, and Australia.

It made sense, of course. A single centralized command would be useless against an enemy that can seemingly show up anywhere in the world. But it also meant I wouldn't just have to worry about the extra-terrestrials, but also about my fellow Commanders, competing as we all would be for a limited pool of resources. International cooperation is all well and good, but if this alien invasion got bad, you can bet all of them would be clawing to preserve their own fiefdoms, the rest of the world be damned.

And it would get that bad. I had a deep dark suspicion as to which force had arranged for the appearance of hostile aliens as one last attempt to force me to knuckle under to its whims. I had not prayed to Being X in over seventy years, not even when Visha was first diagnosed, and I was determined not to knuckle under now. If I had to genocide the first intelligent species that humanity had made contact with? Well, they shouldn't have allowed that fake god to manipulate them into causing a ruckus on my doorstep.