

Mission 1

Squaddie Matous Kadlec shifted nervously against his restraints and glanced at his wrist-gadget's watch function. According to the mission briefing, they should reach the landing zone in about 10 minutes. Kadlec hated landings. He still hadn't gotten used to the feeling of rapid deceleration from 760 km/h to next to zero, but it was necessary to ensure the element of surprise. By flying the Skyrainger in at top speed until the last possible moment a few hundred feet above the ground, the pilot could make use of the aircraft's Vertical Take Off and Landing capabilities to deliver the squad as rapidly as possible. None of this made Kadlec feel any better.

His neighbor, Sergeant Aatu Karppinen, must have seen the uneasiness on his face, because he patted Kadlec's knee and gave him a reassuring smile. "It never really gets any better, you know?" he said, voice raised over the din of the engines. "I've been on about 10 more missions than you and they still suck. You just get used to it."

Kadlec nodded and tried to return Karppinen's smile, but the worry lines didn't leave his face. Kadlec faced forward and locked eyes with Sergeant Miroslav Molnar across the small aisle. He, too, recognized the nervousness in Kadlec's eyes and tried to reassure him. *You'll be fine*, he mouthed, slowly so Kadlec could easily read his lips. Molnar exaggerated breathing in and out slowly, encouraging Kadlec to join in.

An alarm sounded through the speakers of the craft. "Approaching landing sight," called the pilot over the radio. Kadlec and the others braced themselves. The Skyrainger braked sharply and set down with a thump. The squad released their restraints and lined up in front of the loading ramp, weapons low but ready. Squaddie Kadlec and Sergeant Molnar took up positions behind the tank drone and let it roll down the ramp, listening for enemy fire or movement.

A low robotic buzz sounded in Kadlec's earpiece; the tank had visual. He glanced down at his wrist-gadget's mapping function. Two-level farmhouse due north, straightaway out of the ramp, two hostile blips on the roof. He peered at Molnar. Molnar nodded. They simultaneously stepped onto the

top of the ramp and broke off to either side, Kadlec left, Molnar right, dropping down to ground level. Molnar turned towards the blips and quickly raised his rifle. He peered down the holographic scope, aligned the projected image of the target with his reticle, and squeezed the trigger, sending off a fiery ball of plasma. The tank's audio receptors transmitted the wailing death cry of his target through the squad's radios. Kadlec smiled grimly, snapped his reticle towards the second projection, and squeezed again.

Another wail went up through Kadlec's earpiece, followed by praise from his squadmates. Kadlec's smile broke into a full grin. If the squad had seemed reluctant to accept him before, that would definitely earn him his spot.

The radio crackled in Kadlec's ear as Sergeant Molnar keyed his mic. Molnar's Slovak accent came through loud and clear. "Farmhouse. East-north-east. Backdoor facing west. Making break for it." Kadlec peered over the ramp as Molnar ran east to put himself against the wall and follow it towards the door. Four steps into his dash, a plasma bolt flew over Molnar's head, eliciting some Russian cursing that was drowned out by the sound of a crumbling brick wall from the errant shot. "From above! Roof or second floor! No visual!" Molnar somehow managed to crash through the door at full tilt without attracting more hostile fire.

Kadlec peered at his map function again. Sure enough, no enemy blips appeared on it. He shifted up and down to try to get a view into the house, but couldn't get an angle on any hostiles. He looked forward and saw the tank creep forward about a pace or two before it froze and buzzed again. Kadlec raised his rifle to sight in, but the target was inside the farmhouse. The tank must have spotted it through a window that Kadlec didn't have line of sight on.

A low, sultry but feminine voice came over the radio. "Standby. Taking the shot." That would be Captain Esmerelda Cruz, sniper extraordinaire. With time to sight in, she was undoubtedly the deadliest shot in the squad. Kadlec followed the plasma burst from the back of the Skyranger through the

window with his eyes and heard the tell-tale cry of another hostile eliminated. He shook his head in awe; she had skills to aspire to.

The sound of the rest of the squad shuffling towards the ramp inside the Skyranger snapped Kadlec back to reality. The tank turned to the east, and Kadlec saw it on his map: the exterior of the UFO. Command had designated this particular model as a “large scout” based on the various models they had seen. It was shaped like a block letter X, and it had managed to crash land so that the lines of the X were oriented exactly with the cardinal points of the compass. Based on previous encounters, it was assumed that the entrance was facing east, on the far side of the craft.

Suddenly the tank buzzed again. Another blip appeared on Kadlec’s map, three stories up, just north of the farmhouse. *A Floater*, Kadlec thought. Somehow, these aliens were capable of low altitude levitation; or at least, it was theorized that it was low altitude. None had ever been spotted floating any higher than about four stories or so, and no aliens ever strayed too far from their spacecraft. Well, unless they were raising hell in a population center.

“Running for it!” a new voice called over the radio. Colonel Nazmi Uyar dashed to the corner of the farmhouse. Kadlec saw him take three short gather breaths then pop the corner and fire at the Floater. Another death cry went up, and Colonel Uyar reported, “Hostile down!” Kadlec grinned again. The mission was going well so far. He trotted behind Colonel Uyar and stacked up against the wall of the farmhouse. Glancing over to the ramp, he saw Captain Cruz disembark and head around the south side of the farmhouse, with Sergeant Brigitte Buchard on her heels.

Sergeant Molnar keyed up his mic again. “Investigating house. Stairs located, holding position.”

Kadlec heard Colonel Uyar’s voice both through the radio and from right next to him.

“Standing by on north side of house. Squad, keep scouting.” The bustle of troops unloading from the Skyranger’s ramp made Kadlec wince. They needed to find some way to quiet down all the gear and equipment jostling around so that hostiles couldn’t hear and locate them. During Kadlec’s time in the

Czech Republic's 601st Special Forces Group, he'd been strictly drilled about enforcing noise discipline. Hopefully the aliens' hearing wasn't that great.

The rest of the squad moved south and west to scout. Colonel Uyar signaled forward movement to Kadlec, who tapped him on the shoulder to indicate that he was ready. Colonel Uyar popped out from the west side of the house and turned east. Raising his plasma rifle to the ready just below his eyes, he glided forward towards the southern end of the UFO.

"Squad, report," Colonel Uyar ordered.

"Captain Cruz, south side of farmhouse clear. Pushing further east, Sergeant Buchard moving north along eastern wall." Colonel Uyar keyed his radio twice in acknowledgment.

"Sergeant Molnar, interior farmhouse clear. Taking roof."

Captain Opiyo Atieno's voice came through the radio next. "Captain Atieno, ground floor of northern farmhouse clear."

"Sergeant Karppinen, following tank, north side of exterior of UFO clear, preparing to enter northern farmhouse."

"This is Cruz, third farmhouse spotted. Has excellent visual on UFO entrance. Suggest cautious approach when breaching, over."

"Uyar acknowledges. Have Kadlec in tow, will—"

The sound of a plasma blast caused everyone to freeze; nearly a dozen pairs of eyes whipped in the direction of the noise. A female voice swearing—off comms—followed almost immediately.

"Buchard, nearly ate that blast! South of third farmhouse!"

"Molnar, on top of farmhouse. No visual."

Colonel Uyar muttered a curse as Buchard sprinted up next to them, breathing heavily. Colonel Uyar had lead Kadlec nearly to the eastern corner of the southern end of the UFO. Popping the corner could potentially expose him to an ambush, but getting visual on the hostile was critical. "Cruz, standby to target hostile," Colonel Uyar said over the radio. "Establishing visual contact." Cruz keyed

the radio twice in acknowledgment. Colonel Uyar took his three gather breaths and popped past the corner of the UFO.

Kadlec glanced at his map as Colonel Uyar yelled, “Visual!” and a blip appeared. Just as he was peeking past the Colonel to see if he could see the alien, a ball of plasma zipped towards the reported alien position from Cruz’s. Another high pieced alien shriek pierced the air. “Damn she’s good,” Kadlec whispered to himself.

Colonel Uyar retreated back behind the corner. Normal breaching SOP would call for them to stack up just outside the door and lay an ambush for any aliens exiting the craft, but with the farmhouse right there and the aliens’ propensity for occupying them, that would be far too dangerous. “We’ll hold just south of the eastern protrusion,” Colonel Uyar grunted back towards Kadlec and Buchard. “See if we can clear out the area around the door before we move.”

The tank reported visual again. Kadlec, Buchard, and Colonel Uyar all glanced at their wrists. Sure enough, enemy sighted along the north wall of the farmhouse. Sergeant Karppinen’s voice came over the radio again. “Moving into position... taking the shot!” There was a brief pause. “Negative, no impact.” The tank started to move between Karppinen and the alien before it buzzed again. Another blip appeared on top of the roof that Kadlec thought he had cleared earlier.

“Enemy, back up! Farmhouse 1 roof!”

“Positive visual! Firing!... Miss!”

“Positive visual! Firing!... Miss!”

“Positive visual! Firing!... Hit! Sucker is back down!” Sergeant Hatfacoa Paura reported.

Kadlec let out a breath he didn’t realize he had been holding. Dammit, no credit for that kill anymore. They were good shots, too. Kadlec knew he shouldn’t be jealous of his mission statistics; success was far more important than individual performance anyway. Even though the squad would surely joke about it, the priority was getting everyone back in as few pieces as possible while making

sure that the enemy couldn't do the same. Still, a mixture of disappointment at his statistics and frustration at his failure to kill the enemy served to dampen his mood a bit.

Scrolling his map back to the enemy north of the third farmhouse, Kadlec saw the hostile blip flash and heard a plasma bolt firing. Almost instantly the friendly tank on his screen flashed with a red outline; the sound of plasma shearing and melting steel plate reverberated around the battlefield and the trio instinctively let out a collective gasp; the tank flashed and retaliatory cannon fire responded.

"We're moving. Now," Colonel Uyar ordered. Kadlec understood; the tank could only provide so much cover for Karppinen before he was exposed, and they were best deployed to assist. Unfortunately, moving to support him would require moving past the UFO door. SOP dictated that it was 'highly inadvisable' to move past doors or windows that hostiles could be hiding behind or pop out of at 'exceedingly inconvenient' times, but field conditions trumped SOP. Still, Kadlec couldn't shake his bad feeling about rushing past a whole UFO.

Kadlec stacked up behind Buchard and placed his hand on her shoulder to indicate 'ready.' She did likewise to Colonel Uyar. Instead of stepping off at a glide with his weapon at the ready, he took off around the corner of the UFO, shouting "VISUAL!" and pointing as he glimpsed the alien through two sets of windows on the south and north sides of the farmhouse. "Kadlec, outside, Buchard, in!" he ordered as he banged on the UFO door, causing it to slide open at the contact.

Mentally, Kadlec started to panic a bit. Rushing pell-mell into a UFO was one of the most dangerous things a soldier could do. As much as the aliens loved farmhouses, they also had a tendency to leave a few defenders in their craft. He shook his head to clear the worry from his mind and took up a position where he could see the Floater. Steadying his breathing, he raised his rifle, trying to line up the projection with the reticle. It wasn't going to be an easy shot, but he'd had good success so far this mission. Well, except for the KO that wasn't a kill. Gah. Didn't matter. Aim....

Once more Kadlec sent a ball of plasma flying forth in defense of Earth. This time, however, luck was not with him. The ball managed to fly through both windows and miss the Floater by the

narrowest of margins. It craned its neck slowly to glare at him. Kadlec suddenly had difficulty breathing. He crouched low, trying to break line of sight with the alien.

“Molnar, frag out!” Kadlec glanced back over his shoulder and spotted the grenade flying from the roof of the second farmhouse toward the third. He nervously tracked the projectile, desperately hoping it wouldn’t bounce off the side of the house and roll towards him. Thankfully, it landed where Molnar had probably been aiming it, just past the far corner of the house. Frowning, Kadlec mentally calculated the blast radius, concluding that unless the alien moved closer it probably wouldn’t be hit. Still, it was a great throw. If the farmhouse hadn’t been in the way, it probably would have been perfect.

The grenade exploded and the alien let up a cry, this one much different from the death screams. Despite the lack of a common language, Kadlec felt rage and anger in the cry. He tried to sight in on the alien, distracted by the new noise and what it could mean. Was it grieving its fallen comrades? Trying to communicate with them? Was there some common ground between the aliens and us? Then why have they invaded, and why have all our attempts to negotiate been rebuffed? Kadlec blinked twice, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and got a bead on the Floater through the window. He took a quick breath in, let it out, and at the bottom of his breath squeezed the trigger.

Colonel Uyar’s voice came through the radio. “Drone reconnaissance indicates no more hostiles in the area. Let’s mark the site for cleanup.” Kadlec relaxed, letting out a massive sigh. The built up tension of the mission faded, though it didn’t disappear completely. As hyped up as he had gotten on the adrenaline of the mission, now that it was officially marked as being over Kadlec knew that he would crash soon. He rolled his shoulders forward, loosing a bit more tension before jogging back to the Skyranger for the flight home.