

Chapter 1

*'The cost of the Aprion-Erebian War has been immense-
second only in damage and loss of life to the Great Conflict,
it has raged for centuries, claiming an untold number of lives;
and shows no sign of stopping.
-Excerpt from Erebian historical text*

394.3744 P.C. (10 months prior)

A lone figure marched silently through the Arcanum, moving swiftly between the poorly illuminated pathways that had been created by the towering data-shelves of the Arcanum librarium, constantly looking over his shoulder with almost paranoid frequency for anyone who may have been following him. He was growing nervous; the Arcanum was vast to say the least and every moment he spent in the dim librarium increased his chances of being found: and there were far worse things in the librarium than the enigmatic custodes of the *Prohebeo Scientia* who roamed the Arcanum's seemingly infinite corridors.

Briefly, he contemplated how he'd wound up in the fabled athenaeum, which he'd only recently discovered to actually exist. It had been fate, it would seem, that had directed him there; he had been approached and asked to do a great service to the Confederacy: something that the Proditor had stressed would soon bring a long deserved victory to the Erebian people and end the centuries-long conflict once and for all. Of course, he had jumped at this opportunity; too many had suffered and if by obtaining a datapad from the librarium he would somehow help in finally bringing peace to the surface of Paxus then there was no question of his decision: one man was nothing in the face of an entire nation.

Checking the datapad once again for the file number he stole a fleeting look at the aisle, glancing back and forth between the characters displayed on the flickering screen and then at those etched onto the stone shelves, cursing the Arcanum's creators for opting to scrawl the librarium's directory in their native language. "Godsdamn *Mortuus lingua*, can't understand a gekking word!" he grumbled angrily as he noted that the two didn't match and began stalking further down the passageway. As he approached the next aisle he noticed with some faint amount of surprise that the characters looked strikingly similar and he allowed himself a glimmer of hope. Checking the datapad slowly and cautiously, making sure that he was absolutely sure of each piece of text before moving on to the next he realized suddenly that he'd finally found what he had been sent to retrieve. Quickly, he moved to the terminal at the end of the aisle and began working; scanning through the directions that the datapad's screen displayed while plugging the commands rather awkwardly into the grime encrusted terminal's touchscreen.

About five minutes later, he finished typing in the last few instructions into the ancient computer and was rewarded with a quiet hum from somewhere beneath the stone floor as dormant systems came on-line for the first time in at least several hundred years; working to compile the requested data from the repository's massive network of storage servers.

A notice written in ancient text sprang up on the smudged display. He didn't understand what they meant but then he didn't need to; the Proditor had briefed him

about such things. Confidently, he reached out and tapped the right section of the screen, taking off a portion of thickly caked dust in the process and prompting the machine to replace the notice screen with an image that the man was familiar with; a loading screen. The datapad in his hand beeped suddenly as it began receiving files from the datashelf's computer, a small bar measuring the transaction's progress slowly but surely filling in as thousands of gigabytes of data were copied to the tiny device's internal drives.

Mere minutes after the download commenced there came a crash off in the distance, echoing off the high, concealed ceiling of the librarium. Freezing, he turned slowly, moving one hand towards the pistol on his belt while still cradling the datapad with the other, fully expecting to find himself face to face with one of the faceless sentinels of the *Prohebeo Scientia*. There was no one, which was hardly surprising considering the Arcanum's size; a single noise could be heard from anywhere in the librarium. Needless to say, he no longer felt safe crawling around the deserted catacombs of a long departed civilization's last true monument. It was then that he heard another, different noise; the soft scurrying of footsteps. He eyed the datapad pleadingly, praying to the gods that the noise was nothing.

As the flurry of footfalls came closer forms became somewhat distinguishable through the perpetual twilight of the librarium; monstrous, chilling forms. As the figures became clearer he discovered he'd stopped breathing from the sight: autoids. They were vaguely humanoid in shape but that was where the similarity ended; the forms were clearly mechanical, although he'd never seen anything like them before he'd heard of them as an initiate in the Schola Disciplina, well over three meters tall, the mechanized sentinels sported a variety of lethal appendages. Some, like the dual chainblades both machines sported on the left appendage were recognizable but others were not. Strangely enough there were no sign of conventional firearms, most likely due to the delicate cache of knowledge that the autoids had been tasked with protecting. Regardless, he didn't plan on finding out what would happen if the drones found him; he moved towards the end of the shelf as silently as possible, moving to the next aisle while stuffing the datapad in his pocket; praying to the gods that what he'd managed to get would suffice.

He didn't dare chance a look down the aisle he'd just vacated but judging by the sound of whining servos the autoids had just discovered his handiwork; he didn't have much time. With a tentative first step he was off, moving down the narrow corridor as fast as his legs would carry. He had failed to carry out his task. The Proditor would not be pleased.

196.3745 P.C. (4 months prior)

Klaxons blared and warning strobes flashed, filling the entire command deck of the Mobile Command Crawler *Ducis* with an ear-shattering noise and bathing it in a blanket of crimson. Adjutants ran from station to station, comm. chatter filled the air, mingling with the klaxons' noise in a cacophony of confusion and in the midst of the chaos one man stood silently observing. He was General Nicholas Etton: the Head of Task Force C-23.4, an expeditionary force in the Erebian Confederate Military. He had fallen into a trap, his men were dying and there was little he could do.

Etton turned as Warrant Officer Granek approached at a jog and produced a datapad. He handed the device to Etton and wiped his brow with his sleeve, breathing heavily. "Sir. Report from the remote sensor station; a second force has been detected, approaching from the south."

Etton stared at the text, temporarily at a loss for words.

Granek studied Etton with a mixture of uncertainty and apprehension. "Sir?"

Etton turning back to Granek and handed him the datapad. "Are you sure this information is accurate? You're sure the sensors aren't picking up any ghosts in the storm?"

Granek shook his head. "No sir. They ran the sweep multiple times. The sensors picked them up five minutes ago but it seems that the second force is being masked by the storm, we're lucky we got this much of an early warning."

Etton nodded, contemplating his suddenly limited options. "Circulate this throughout the task force. Tell them to keep up their scans and to notify me if they pick up anything else."

"Yes sir." Granek saluted and left the command deck running.

Etton felt an uneasy chill run up his spine as he watched the Warrant Officer leave. Although he felt inclined to a moment's indecision he knew that to hesitate would bring doom to the entire task force. There was no other choice: act or be destroyed. He stepped down to the main control console floor to one of the P.A. consoles and spoke as loud and as calmly as possible over the screeching of the klaxons. "Attention to all hands, this is General Etton. I have just received word that an enemy force has flanked us. Be advised that due to our current situation it may be necessary to evacuate the Ducis should the fighting reach us. At this time all non-essential personnel acquire the proper weather gear and weapons in the event of an evacuation." Etton put down the comm. and looked about the room at the numerous shocked faces of the officers he'd come to know in the past months.

It was then that Etton heard the familiar voice of Lieutenant Brize from somewhere behind him. "You heard the general. He said all non-essential personnel. What are you waiting for? There's a war on; get back to work!"

Etton turned and saw Brize walking towards him, her face set in a grim smile. "Sir, It's really bad out there, isn't it?" Brize's tone told the general that she already knew the answer.

"Most of our forces are deployed along the ridge and they're just barely holding off the enemy. The force that the scanners picked up is larger and headed right towards us through the south end of the valley. We have almost no presence to our rear and if the Aprion force breaks through what forces we do have deployed to our flank then the entire task force will break. It'll be a total rout."

Brize nodded and looked downwards. "What should we do, sir?"

Etton stared out the viewport at the flashes of the distant fighting between the main elements of Task Force C-23.4. "We need to attempt a full withdrawal."

Brize's face screwed up in a mixture of confusion and disbelief. "Disengage? But we don't have anywhere to disengage to. And in this storm..."

"I realize that our chances out in this storm are bad but if we stay here we will all die. Hopefully we'll be able to lose the enemy forces in the blizzard and find a temporary haven."

Brize looked unconvinced but said nothing. Etton moved towards a long-range comm. console and leaned over the officer manning it. "Open a wide-band transmission to all units, Priority Alpha."

The man tapped a few keys and turned to Etton. "You're broadcasting, sir."

"To all units, this is General Etton. I am ordering a full withdrawal from this area immediately to the following coordinates: 034-87-12. It is recommended that all units utilize staggered retreat formations. It is likely that the *Ducis* may be out of action; if the senior officers do not make it to the rendezvous your orders are to return to confederate territory and report Aprion activity in this area. That is all." Etton nodded at the comm. officer. "Repeat that message once more in case anyone missed it, and what's the status on the-

A distressed voice came over the comm. amid a wash of static, cutting off the general before he could finish. "This is Colonel Venseri, 3rd Tresid Infantry Battalion. We are taking heavy fire. I doubt the flank will hold much longer unless the gods send us a miracle. Be advised *Ducis*, you're gonna have company very soon unless we get some relief."

Etton turned to Brize, his jaw set in a grimace. "What was the 3rd Tresid's last position?"

"They're serving as the far southwest portion of our rearguard, sir."

"That's where the enemy force was headed." Etton leaned back over to the comm. officer. "Open a channel. I want to speak directly to Colonel Venseri."

The comm. officer keyed in another command and nodded at the general.

"Colonel, this is General Etton. Do you read me?"

Several seconds of static followed before the man's voice. "Yes, general, I read you. Are you sending-" Whatever the Colonel said after that was lost as the sound of a nearby explosion blasted over his voice.

Etton's face betrayed a hint of concern. "Colonel? Colonel Venseri, are you alright?"

"Yes, I'm here general. Tank got hit."

"What were you saying before?"

"Can you send us reinforcement, sir?"

Etton could barely hear the Colonel over the sounds of battle combined with the static, and he had to mentally keep himself from shouting through the comm. "Negative, Colonel. The entire force is engaged; you're on your own for now. Recommended that you disengage and fall back to the rendezvous point."

There was a large detonation over the comm. that actually shook the speakers on the computer console and for a moment Etton thought that colonel Venseri had been killed in the explosion. He stood there for a minute, and closed his eyes when the colonel's voice returned, although slightly distorted. "Negative on that, sir. We cannot disengage. We'd do more good holding our ground than we would by retreating."

Etton let out an audible sigh. "Are you sure, Colonel?"

A sound like a distant explosion came over the speaker and Vanseri's voice became more distorted. "Yessir. There's no way we're getting out of here alive. Might as well take as many of em' out as we can before we go. Slow em' down long enough for the *Ducis* to escape."

"You and your men have our thanks. May the gods watch over you."

The sounds of battle were now pouring through the comm. speakers and the Colonel's voice had become almost completely unrecognizable. "Thank you sir. We're-" A hiss of static burst through the speakers followed by an electronic shriek before suddenly going quiet.

Both Etton and Brize looked at the comm. officer who shook his head sullenly. "We've lost the transmission."

"Do we still have a reading on the 3rd Tresid's I.D.?"

"Negative, but that could be because of the storm."

"Very well. Open a channel to all decks on the *Ducis*." The man scrambled to fulfill Etton's task as the general watched him work feverishly until the man gave him the signal that it was done. Etton nodded his thanks to the man. "All hands aboard the *Ducis*, this is General Etton. Our flank has been overrun and we have very little time before the enemy is upon us. When that time comes there will be very little the *Ducis* will offer us in protection. I am hereby ordering the evacuation of the *Ducis* immediately. All hands are to report the H-Deck garage to board the RAEXT's that will be waiting.

He moved over to the center command console and typed in his service number, placed his finger on the scanner, and swiped his ID card. Brize looked at him with some hesitation but followed suite. Instantly an artificial female voice issued over the P.A. System, temporarily drowning out the warning klaxons. "SELF-DESTRUCT ENABLED. FIFTEEN MINUTES UNTIL SELF-DESTRUCT. PLEASE BE ADVISED, INITIAL BLAST RADIUS WILL BE APPROXIMATELY SIX-HUNDRED YARDS."

Etton seemed to deflate and hung his head. Turning to Brize, he said. "Get your HE-suit lieutenant. It's going to be cold out there."

There was a high-pitched whistling noise followed by a loud detonation and Colonel Karos realized that his feet were no longer touching the ground. He landed roughly five feet away in a snowdrift, dazed and confused, his vision blurry and his ears ringing. It took Karos several moments to realize that he was, in fact, still alive as someone helped him up from the snow. Although his vision was coming back he still couldn't tell who had helped him up but from the muffled noise the colonel could tell that the man was saying something to him. "What?!" He pointed to his ears to emphasize.

The man who had helped him up nodded and put his hand on his shoulder, guiding him somewhere. He was saying something that Karos still couldn't discern but he didn't resist the man.

Karos ran for about five minutes, each step sending a jolt of pain through his body until he thought he'd keel over before the man finally stopped. It was then that Karos realized that he'd reached the forest as the stranger set him down against an enormous Thornwood's craggy trunk. His vision had cleared up for the most part and Karos realized that his hearing had also returned, although a slight ringing noise was still audible over the sound of the man's inquiries.

The man came over to Karos and bent down next to him. "You all right, sir? You took a pretty nasty tumble back there."

Karos looked the man over; he couldn't recognize him and from the unit patch he wore on his left breast pocket he could see that the man didn't belong in his command. He glanced at the tag above the patch for the man's name and saw the black-grey lettering that read: Pvt. Symes. Symes noticed what Karos was doing and immediately

bolted upright, saluting smartly. "Sir! Private first class Elron Symes, 1st Tresdeon Infantry, 8th battalion, 1st division!"

Karos began to chuckle but in the end it turned into a cough as he rose to his feet. "Good to know, private. Thanks for the save back there; I owe you one."

Symes, who had still been holding his salute stiffened visibly. "There's no need to thank me, sir. I saw a superior officer go down and did what I could."

Karos nodded at the private, a smile creeping it's way across his face at the young man's intensity. "Well, thanks anyway son. I appreciate it. I'll be sure to send in a commendation when we get back. Now where in the hell are we? From the change in scenery I assume we're somewhere behind the lines."

Private Symes reluctantly dropped his salute and rubbed his shoulder absentmindedly. "I heard my C.O. order us to fall back and I left my position. I guess a mortar round or incendiary must've hit nearby because I wound up on the ground and when managed to get back up I was in a crowd of guys from the Cardon 4th and that's when I saw you go down, picked you up, and dragged you here."

Karos nodded, realizing that there were others nearby, some resting against tree trunks, others watching the exchange. "How many are there?"

"There's about thirteen of us that made it to the tree line sir: seven Cardon, four Tresdeon and two Ilirin."

Karos stepped forward and nearly toppled over as his foot gave way but Pvt. Symes caught him, putting the colonel's arm over his shoulder, producing a stim-shot from a breast pouch and handing it to Karos. The colonel grunted a curse as he jabbed the syringe into his leg, taking a few seconds before speaking again. "Doesn't matter who's with us now. As of this moment you are all under my command and we will proceed to the rendezvous coordinates ASAP. Forget your old units, forget your previous orders, all you need to know is that I'm in command and our only objective as of now is to meet up with the rest of our forces. Understood?"

A chorus of affirmations sounded from the troopers as they got to their feet, grabbed their packs, and started to move out. Karos began after them with a slight limp and although Symes offered to help the colonel multiple times the man flatly refused until the private cautiously suggested that Karos's injury was slowing them down and that it would be better for everyone if the colonel allow someone to help him. On the surface Karos grudgingly accepted but Symes could've sworn that he caught a look of relief on the man's face as the rest of the men voiced their support of the idea.

When the ragtag squad had moved through the forest for what seemed like an eternity Karos realized that he hadn't heard the slightest noise, a fact that unsettled him greatly. As he felt the man who had been supporting him, a captain by the name of Edvern, began to slow Karos realized that his men were beginning to tire. In fact, his own exhaustion suddenly revealed itself to him and the striking pain in his leg had grown so intense during the time they'd walked that his senses had almost completely been numbed to it. Karos grunted, tapping captain Edvern on the shoulder and motioned for him to stop before addressing the men. "All right, we'll rest here for now. Take five men."

Most of the troopers immediately dropped to the ground and began opening ration packs or draining their canteens, all except for private Symes who was staring back through the trees nervously. Karos struggled over to the private, coming to a stop beside

him, producing two ration bars, eating one and offering the other to Symes. Symes took the bar, thanking the colonel before tearing into it with the frenzied zeal. Karos watched the man eat with some small amount of amusement but said nothing.

They stood there for a minute, the few snowflakes that had penetrated the forest's canopy falling around them in an almost surreal fashion before Symes finally spoke; his voice hushed slightly. "I think we're being followed but I don't know why. I just feel like-

"Like someone's watching us." The Karos cut in, nodding, he had no proof that they were being followed but there was no need for any; he had long ago learned to trust his instincts above all other things and he had felt someone's eyes on him since they had started walking. It was simultaneously comforting and distressing that someone else had felt the same. "Someone's been tracking us from the beginning."

Private Symes looked at Karos, surprise evident on his features. "You saw who was following us?"

"No," Karos admitted, "but I've had a feeling someone's been following us since the clearing."

"What'll we do, sir? Post sentries?"

"No, we're too low on manpower for sentries and I doubt even they would do much good in this forest. We've got to keep moving."

Symes said nothing, although Karos knew what he was thinking; none of them could keep going much longer at this rate. Sensing their conversation was over, Karos turned back to the eleven other men who had all been getting what rest they could and moved over to the nearest trooper; who had evidently fallen asleep against a snow bank and kicked him awake. "Get up men; you can sleep when you're dead."

When everyone was fully awake and ready to leave Karos pulled the troopers closer, speaking very softly. "Alright, I have some bad news. We're being followed, possibly by an enemy force." There were a few groans and several curses at this but they quickly quieted when Karos glared at the men responsible. "Now, as I was saying. Due to the fact that we're being followed we will be unable to regroup with the rest of the force in case the enemy may give away its location." There were even more groans and Karos heard several men muttering things that would entail disciplinary action under normal conditions. Briefly, Karos began to fear that their current circumstances might be enough to embolden some of his men to get ideas in their heads. "Now, we will move through the forest to the northeast and try to reach an area the task force will probably-"

Karos was interrupted when a pale man named Renner spoke up. "How do you know someone's following us?"

Karos curled his fingers slightly at this, a habit that he'd had for quite some time when he felt unsure of what to do in stressful situations. Renner didn't know Karos enough to be able to interpret this as a sign of weakness but Karos cursed himself inwardly nonetheless. "That isn't important now. I'm your commanding officer!"

Another man, perhaps encouraged by Private Renner's stand verbally pounced on the colonel and threw the man completely off guard. "You aren't our C.O., I'm with the 3rd Tresdeon and I don't need to listen to you or follow you on your insane suicide march! Why the hell would we march north through this weather when we could head towards the rendezvous? That's gekkin' crazy!"

At this point, Karos's fists were balled up, white knuckled and he could feel his face begin to flush with heat. "Out here, I'm tantamount to the gods while you're an insect. You will follow my orders or I'll have you charged with dereliction of duty."

Renner spoke up, his tone challenging. "Well, you won't be able to do that if you're dead, now will you?"

Karos stared at the men, his calm rapidly eroding as his anger grew. "I would pick my words very carefully private. Threatening a superior officer carries a very severe punishment. Now I would suggest that you start walking and keep your mouths shut and I may let you off with a week's penal sentence."

Several of the men laughed at this while others, including private Symes, anxiously watched the exchange from the edge of the argument. A huge Tresdeon trooper whose tag read Ferdlan took a menacing step towards the colonel and held his rifle in a way that told everyone involved what was going to happen next. "You seem to forget that out here accidents happen. Who would file a report against us if, say, you somehow didn't make it back with us?"

The strike came quicker than anyone had expected, catching Karos on the right cheek just below the eye with the butt of Ferdlan's rifle. The entire squad was thrown into chaos as each person was suddenly forced to choose a side in the conflict. Most of the Tresdeon troopers, moved in on the staggering colonel while both Ilirin men and most of the Cardon troopers, being of the same unit as Karos, struck out at Karos's attackers.

As Karos struggled to his feet, private Ferdlan kicked him in the side and reached down to his belt, presumably to unholster his sidearm. As the colonel looked up at Ferdlan he saw with alarm that the private's eyes seemed to be lost in a bestial fury, his senses clouded by bloodlust. The entire ordeal seemed to occur in slow motion as he watched the private's hand reach for the gun and then suddenly jerk back at an odd angle as though Ferdlan had been a mere puppet to some unseen master. Karos watched as Ferdlan's lifeless body slumped over in the snow, revealing private Symes holding a pistol at the man's corpse, a shocked, sad expression on his face.

Before the colonel could begin to thank Symes he heard a shout and saw Private Renner slam one of the Cardon men, trooper Khern, a man he had known most of his time in the service, into the thick trunk of a Thornwood tree. Khern's hand searched for his holster but Renner had beaten him to it; bringing Khern's weapon to the private's chest; pulling the trigger twice.

In a moment Karos was onto his feet and bounding towards Renner, not even aware that he was screaming until he himself wondered where the frightful bellowing was coming from. By the time Renner managed to face this new threat colonel Karos was upon him, slamming hard against him into the trunk of the Thornwood tree. The impact knocked the wind out of Renner, opening a window that Karos used very effectively; Renner lost his pistol to a sideswipe of the man's hand and then received a punch to the gut, prompting him to keel over right into the colonel's knee. To his credit, Renner was back to the fight in an instant, landing a hard blow in the colonel's side, although Karos quickly subdued him with a following punch to the jaw, bringing his pistol to bear on the treasonous private as he curled into a fetal ball in the snow, blood leaking from his shattered nose.

Karos looked down at the battered Tresdeon trooper with revulsion, breathing heavily, finally realizing the toll the fight had taken on him. His leg was throbbing with a

searing hot pain and if it hadn't been before it was now certainly broken, his wrist hurt and judging from how much it hurt to breathe, he had possibly broken a rib or two.

His men hadn't fared much better. Of the original squad seven were dead and two were wounded, although neither so severely that they were incapable of walking. The surviving men brought the other's bodies to a snow bank and gathered their weapons ammo and supplies while others checked on the wounded. No one moved towards the motionless private curled up at the colonel's feet. Karos took a moment to collect his thoughts and clear the anger from his mind. The sentence he was about to give the man at his feet was not one to be chosen lightly.

Colonel Karos exhaled deeply, wincing at the pain it caused, and saw the apprehension on the surviving trooper's faces. Karos opened his mouth to speak and he heard the utter silence that had replaced the cacophony of fighting that had just minutes before cost the lives of seven men, two Cardon troopers, of which Karos himself had served with for nearly a decade; one of the Ilirin troopers; and three of the Tresdeon men who had attempted to aid Renner. Although his conscience screamed against it Karos knew what needed to be done.

The colonel lowered his pistol to Renner, still curled in a fetal ball and began to speak, "Private, 1st Class Renner. You have instigated an assault on a commanding officer and have attempted to usurp the chain of command in a combat zone, endangering not only yourself but also the lives of your fellow troopers. You are now a liability to this squad and will continue to be a threat to this unit's safety until you are considered either a casualty of war or are delivered to a military penal facility. As stated in the Confederate articles of war I, as the highest-ranking Confederate officer present, am authorized to pass judgment on your case in the absence of a full military tribunal. Due to our compromised position I have no choice but deem you as a threat to this squad's integrity and am required by the articles to remove such a threat immediately without hesitation."

As the colonel's finger tightened on the trigger Symes took a step forwards, incredulity obvious in his voice. "Colonel, look at him! There's no need!"

Karos stared at Symes for a long time before looking back at Renner, still weeping and bleeding into the snow. "This man is the reason for all those troopers' deaths. I cannot take the risk of him compromising the security of this squad again."

Perhaps snapping back to his senses, Renner began to scrabble to his knees, his blood smeared face staring pleadingly, first at Karos, then at the other men in the squad. When he saw the solemn, fated expressions of the other men he began to weep, turning towards Karos with a pleading wail that caused the colonel to nearly break down. "P..please. I didn't..I...didn't"

Karos swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat and pointed the pistol at the pitiful man before him, tears beginning to well up in his eyes as private Renner began frantically attempting to claw at Karos's legs. "May the gods have mercy on your soul, for I cannot." The pistol retort temporarily shattered the silence and left a still absence in its wake.

As tears streamed down his face, Karos looked around at the remaining men who were all staring back at him with empty eyes. Some, like those from Renner's battalion seemed shocked and appalled while others such as the last Ilirin trooper stared at Karos with an unreadable facial expression. He holstered his pistol and noticed that his hands

were shaking almost uncontrollably. In his eight and a half years in service to the Confederate military, he had never had to carry out a summary execution.

Karos bent over and laid the private's lifeless body across the snow, placing the corpse's hands one over the other as gently as possible before removing the man's tags, placing them in his left breast pocket. He got to his feet and somehow managed to keep his head raised against the shocked stares of the remaining men. Although it was hard, Karos managed to choke out his words next without so much as a stifle. "Collect the rest of the tags. We have to move. Whoever's following us is definitely going to know where we are now."

As the remaining five men moved to carry out his orders, stared sullenly at the eight corpses whose flesh had already begun to take on an icy blue hint as the unforgiving cold set in. He ran brought the man's tags in front of his face and ran his thumb over the engraved lettering, silently vowing to remember the man he had killed and silently prayed for the gods to watch over the souls of the deceased. *Lord Thantos, I ask you to watch over those who have passed as they join you now in the afterlife and to forgive those who sent them to you.*

As he put Renner's tags into one of his vest pockets he realized that private Symes was watching him; the man's earlier good nature had vanished, replaced with a cold stare that showed quite clearly that Karos had lost the man's respect. Nevertheless, Symes approached the colonel and began to help him as the rest of the squad began to move out, heading north. Not long after, several camouflaged men silently picked their way through the forest after them, barely pausing at the sight of the dead lined up at the base of a massive Thornwood before continuing on.

Etton snatched for the datapad he'd been reading as the RAEXT fast transport hit a patch of boulders, sending the small scout vehicle, as well as its occupants, flying. Etton heard Brize shout from somewhere at the driver, who was too busy shouting profanities and frantically attempting to get the vehicle back under control to notice.

They'd escaped the doomed *Ducis* just as the flank units had faltered, the men in those units selling themselves dearly in order to ensure the survival of their C.O. - a thought that made Etton sick to his stomach. From what he could tell, the task force was in a great deal of trouble and he had a feeling that conditions would get a lot worse before they got any better; most of his units had splintered during the disengagement and there were reports that more than one battalion had been completely routed. To make matters worse, the Republic forces had continued with their pursuit and many of the retreating Confederates, already battle weary, were slowly being run down as they attempted to escape.

Etton knew that if his task force was going to survive it would need a coordinated command structure and a chance to regroup, both of which would be very difficult with the loss of the *Ducis*. He leaned over to Brize, bracing himself as the RAEXT went over something big and was launched airborne for several seconds. "Lieutenant, when we get to the rendezvous I need you to help me get the units organized. We're going to have a real mess on our hands when we arrive: individual squads, battle groups, and loners. Unless we organize them into cohesive units we won't last against the Republic assault."

Brize nodded gravely, "Yes, sir!"

"That's good to hear. I'm not sure how many other command capable officers are left out here so I'm counting on you lieutenant."

Brize nodded again, determination blazing in here eyes. "I won't let you down sir."

Etton allowed a slight smile to edge its way across his face before hazarding a trip to the front cab of the transport. As he approached, he heard a loud string of curses that rivaled the expertise with which he had heard his father use many years ago and quickly ran to the front of the transport. "What's the problem?"

Etton had to brace himself against the doorway as a large explosion hit just to the left of the transport, prompting the driver to swerve hard right, narrowly missing a patch of trees. "Goddamn scads! They're lacing the entire area with artillery fire sir! We're lucky we haven't been hit yet."

To complement the man's statement the radio chatter that came in over the comm. carried the distressed voices of myriad individuals, all seemingly experiencing the exact same feelings of battle: fear, anger, confusion. Etton said nothing as the situation washed over him: the driver's curses, the voices from the comm., and the sounds from the other passengers. He put his hand down on the man's shoulder, "Don't worry son, the gods are watching over us." Exactly after the General had finished there was a deafening roar as high-velocity artillery round hit.