

## Chapter 10

*“Our Great Confederacy must not only focus on defending itself  
but also on maintaining justice and honor to it’s citizen and defenders.  
The Confederacy has and will always uphold these values unconditionally.”  
-Regis Arden upon his appointment as High Chancellor (3740 P.C.)*

Lier had spent the following week interviewing all manner of people who had been serving with the sixth Task Force during the battle and had discovered rather quickly that, true to the Councilors’ warnings, Etton was held in high regard by the vast majority of the troops. Even those who were under the command of General Typhus grudgingly admitted that Etton was an excellent officer.

Both Lier and Barret sat in a small room the size of a broom closet that they had been given for the purpose interviewing with a young bridge officer. The room was stifling, as though someone had deliberately shut off the air scrubbers and circulators in an effort drive the Judicator away.

The man being interviewed was a 1<sup>st</sup> Navigation lieutenant Nolan Tersel; he had served in Etton’s navigation officer aboard the MCC *Ducis*, which had been Etton’s command crawler before it’s destruction by the two Aprion ambush parties. The lieutenant, a pale, scrawny looking man who looked to be about fifty had been animatedly recounting the exact same story that Lier and Barret had heard for the sixth time that morning without so much as an inkling as to either men’s boredom. “As I attempted to move the *Ducis* out of the firing zone the emergency klaxons sounded and there was a huge rumble throughout the crawler. The general gave us the order to abandon the *Ducis*, which we did. I made it back to the rear lines shortly thereafter and proceeded with the rest of the task force after the engagement.”

Lier un-mashed his hands from his forehead and looked at the man for a second, making sure he was done speaking before snatching up the PDA, just in case Tersel changed his mind and began talking about some forgotten detail. “Well, thank you for your cooperation with this investigation. The Judicariate appreciates it.”

Tersel, apparently oblivious to Lier’s sarcasm just smiled and nodded. “Of course, the pleasure was all mine.”

*You’re damn right it was.* Lier nodded back and watched the man leave the room before letting out a deep yawn and announcing, not to anyone in particular. “You know, I don’t know how much longer I can hear the same story over and over again. At this rate I’ll be here till’ the war’s over. He looked over at Barret who, at first glance, seemed to be studying a report intently, after further investigation however, Lier discovered that Barret was asleep, his hands holding his head up to give the illusion that he had been reading. Lier slapped him awake.

“What the Hell!”

“Wake up Draylan. He’s gone.”

Barret got up and stretched his arms. “Who’d we got next?”

“Another bridge officer from the *Ducis*... a Belkea, Irin, 2<sup>nd</sup> navigation lieutenant...”

Barret’s face turned to one of mock horror. “No.”

Lier looked at the file again. “Yes.”

“Are you kidding me? We just talked the first navigation officer and now we have to talk to the second?”

Lier nodded. “This is ridiculous. We aren’t getting anywhere with this.” He got up and gathered the notepad he’d been writing on and picked up his PDA, heading towards the exit.

Barret moved after him into the hallway. “Um, quick question. Where are you going?”

“I’m going to find Etton. I need to talk to people who actually know what happened here. People who had to carry out Etton’s orders on the front.”

“Ames, don’t you think that Etton is a little busy right now? How about asking Brize?”

Lier stopped and looked at Barret. “After that little out spurt? She wouldn’t help us at all. We need to talk to Etton if we plan on getting anything done around here.”

“Ok chief. Your call.”

“Damn right it is. Just wait, I’ll get the clearance no problem.”

Lier and Barret made their way to the command deck and, after a short squabble with the two guards stationed outside the entrance and a weapons check, they were allowed access.

They entered through the sliding blast doors to find a bustling hive of activity; there were dozens of officers at their posts and the room was filled with a cacophony of noise. Etton stood over a woman who was sitting at a console to the left stabbing away rapidly at a keyboard. He looked somewhat worried and from his disheveled appearance; Lier guessed that the man hadn’t slept well in a while. *Hope he isn’t like that because of me.*

Lier took a few tentative steps towards the General but was immediately intercepted by Typhus. “Why Judicator! This is a restricted area you know. How did you even get by the guards?”

Lier tried his hardest to keep his annoyance from showing. “I told them that they needed to let me pass, that it was an emergency, and that any one of them who barred me entrance would be charged with hindering an official investigation.”

Typhus cocked his head slightly and watched Lier with a look of condescending amusement. “Well, Judicator. You may be unfamiliar with military regulations but an unauthorized guardsman, not to mention a civilian, can’t just barge into a vital command center like this without clearance.”

Lier affixed the man with a cold stare. “Well, that may be general. But I’m sure that I can come up with the clearance given time. Of course, I would have to report that you were less than cooperative with my investigation and wasted much of my time. I’m sure that neither of us would want that.”

Typhus simply nodded indifferently, “Of course Judicator. I was simply saying that we have certain rules and restrictions here and that it would be in your best interest to obey them.” Lier began to feel slightly uncomfortable seeing the grin on Typhus’s face that seemed to dare Lier to do otherwise.

It was at that moment that Etton strode up, his brow creased as though he’d already figured out what the two men were talking about. “Judicator Lier, Specialist Barret, to what do I owe this visit?”

“General. There’s something I need for my investigation.”

“Such as?”

“I need clearance to talk to some of the people who actually fought during your engagement with the Aprion task force.”

Etton’s face took on a hint of irritation. “We *all* fought, Judicator.”

“Yes, but I need to talk to someone who had front line experience... for a full scope of the incident.”

Etton looked at Lier with an appraising stare before looking at Typhus. “No.”

It took Lier a few seconds to comprehend the General’s answer. Whatever he’d been expecting Etton to say, it hadn’t been that. “No?”

“No, Judicator. You don’t have clearance. You entered a restricted area without general Typhus’s or my permission and then you proceeded to make demands. I’m sorry but that behavior won’t work on my command. You will have full access to the personnel of this station and only this station. Do we have an understanding?”

Lier found it hard to keep Etton’s stare but he forced himself to keep his head up. *Don’t show him that he’s won.* “Of course.” With that, Lier and Barret left the command deck.

Lier and Barret watched in silence as Irin Belkea left the interview room with unadulterated relief. Lier was scrawling a few final notes onto a sheet of paper and Barret sat in the corner biting his nails. They sat there for about five minutes until Lier spoke up. “What the hell am I doing here? Why did they give me this bullshit assignment?”

Barret looked up at Lier and a sly grin spread on his face. “Well, someone has to do it. Might as well be you right?”

Lier shot a venomous glare at Barret, causing him to cease his laughter. “I wouldn’t be cracking jokes here Draylan. You’re going to be stuck here right along with me unless we get this thing done.”

There was silence for another minute as the Judicator’s words sank in and Lier put his head on the table. Barret looked up at the ceiling as though about to scream at some sadistic god before his face began to shape a mischievous grin. “Lier, I think I’ve got a solution to our problem.”

Lier’s head popped up and Barret could swear he saw a faint glimmer of hope in the man’s eyes, which was promptly extinguished by Barret’s next few words. “We can get out through the ducts.”

Lier’s face was a fluctuating mixture of surprise, disbelief, and curiosity, all of which battled for control of his facial features as Lier’s mind struggled to decide whether or not Barret was serious. “The ducts? Are you insane?”

“No, listen to me Ames. If we go through the ducts we can get out without them ever knowing. The Confederate military generally has minimal security in most of their substructures so the chances of us being detected would be slim. Of course, we’d have to do it at night when there’s less of a chance of anyone knowing of our absence but that’s all the better because we’d have more cover on the outside.”

Disbelief won. “And assuming we reach the outside, what happens then? We wake up people and start asking them questions in the middle of the night?”

“Well, no. But we can try to find out what they’re so interested in out here. I mean, maybe if we find out then Etton will be more willing to negotiate with you. We won’t get anywhere doing this.”

Lier thought about it for a minute and although Barret's idea was utter insanity he had to admit that he had some valid points. "How do you know that the minute we break into the vent we won't trigger some sort of alarm?"

Barret shrugged. "To be honest, we don't. But for what it's worth that'd be really unlikely. These older MCC's are infamous for lack of sufficient internal security."

Lier sat there, thinking of the implications that Draylan's suggestions would have on his investigation, his career, the Judicariate, and even his personal safety. If they were caught then both Barret and himself could be sentenced to a military prison for life, or worse, summary execution, and he didn't find either of those possibilities to be very pleasant. *But then again, being stuck here for a year and a half doesn't seem too appealing either.* "Alright, what are we doing?"

"Well, first off, we're going to have to do this in one of our rooms. That way there's less of a chance of someone coming in here to get something and finding the duct cover all messed up."

"You know how much trouble we can get into for this right?"

"Of course, but what other choice do we have?"

Lier frowned. "Alright. Get ready, I'll meet you in your room in five."

"Alright, see you there."

Lier went to his room and quickly took stock of what he might need. He grabbed his grey overcoat; the wintry Clarion nights would prove to be deadly without it. The PDA was left behind due to its frail tendencies and Lier passed by many of his other tools; this task would be hard enough without having to worry about the myriad gadgets he would have normally brought. He took stock of what he had decided to bring and double checked that his PDA's thermal masking program was active, sending a misleading signal to the *Imperator's* internal sensors should anyone decide to check on him.

Within five minutes he was in Barret's room, stooping over a foot-in-a-half by foot-in-a-half vent seriously questioning the intelligence behind Barret's increasingly absurd plan. Barret removed the cover and set it aside, carefully setting the screws next to it. Barret brushed a little bit of rust that had come off from the cover onto his hands and sighed. "Alright, we're in business. We've got about six more hours before sunrise. Plenty of time to get in and get out before anyone knows we're gone."

"Well, what are you waiting for? You're going in first."

"Why do I have to go?"

"Because it's your plan, now go!"

Lier watched Barret enter the duct and then slowly entered after him. When he was about five meters into the duct a thought sprang into his mind. "You do know the way out of here right?"

He heard no reply except for the muffled clanging of metal.

Gerrald Typhus stood alone in the center of the command deck, hands clasped together behind his back in an attempt to produce a more imposing facade. To be honest, he found himself very uncomfortable with the present situation. When he had first found that he had been assigned to the protection of a possible LosTech cache he had jumped at the opportunity; with such a mark on his career he would be able to ascend swiftly into the highest ranks of the military, perhaps even make Lord Marshall. At the time it had

seemed all too easy: take a task force and secure the location of the site. It was only after that Typhus had discovered that another general – Nicholas Etton – the man who had led the task force that had originally discovered the site, would accompany him as well as the remnant of his original task force. This would lead to complications as well as less prestige for his reputation. Etton was a weakness, a failure, a hindrance to his well-laid plans that Typhus could not afford to deal with if the objective turned out to be as important as Command thought.

As though Etton hadn't been enough, the Judicator had arrived shortly after, complicating matters further. The involvement of the Judicariate had come as an unwelcome surprise and although the man had shown now indication of suspicion towards Typhus he was sure that the Judicator knew there was more going on under the surface.

Typhus knew that Etton was the Judicator's target and if he played his hand right he could turn two problems into one solution. He had bided his time, hoping that the Judicator would arrest Etton, leaving him in command of the task force. However, things had not turned out that way; after a week's time the Judicator still had not found Etton guilty of any charge and Typhus's hopes of an easy solution had withered.

As if that wasn't enough, Typhus also had to consider the very subordinates that were supposed to be serving under him. Although the Confederate military was supposed to perform as a single coordinated unit human nature often prevented that from happening, regardless of how much training and indoctrination the human mind underwent; loyalty was always a factor. Typhus had no doubt that those who had served under Etton were at best uncomfortable reporting to a new C.O. and at worst were downright suspicious of him. In fact, much of the *Imperator's* bridge crew had originally served on the *Ducis* - the Mobile Command Crawler that had been destroyed when Etton's task force had encountered Republic forces – seemed to be reluctant to divulge any information to him, instead consulting Etton when he was available and withholding it in the event that he wasn't. That had eventually led to Typhus's decision to bring some of his own bridge crew to man various stations of the *Imperator*.

Typhus turned as one of those men, lieutenant Herth, approached. He addressed Herth with slight annoyance. "What is it?"

"Sir, I received a diagnostics report from the internal sensors. They picked up an anomaly in their sweeps that I thought you might want to know about."

"Why would I care about a few rats running around the inside of an MCC? There's plenty of explanations for internal sensor anomalies; it's the ones on the outside that you want to worry about."

The man stiffened visibly and averted his eyes slightly, as though somewhat reluctant to continue speaking for fear of bringing Typhus's anger upon him. "The thing is sir, the sensors are picking up multiple large life signs that are moving through the ventilation systems."

"Large?"

"Yes sir, they seem to be moving towards the *Imperator's* exterior through the ducts."

"How many are there?"

Herth had become somewhat flustered and began to show signs of uncertainty and Typhus realized that he would need to ease up with his questioning soon or reassure the

crewman that he had done a good job. “You did good, lieutenant. Now, can you tell me where they’re headed?”

“I don’t know, let me check.”

Typhus followed the lieutenant back to his station and leaned over the console intently at the displayed data. “So they’re going to the external vents? Why?”

Herth tapped a key and the screen magnified to a higher resolution, revealing two signals that were moving towards the exterior hull of the *Imperator*.

Typhus stared at the image for a moment before speaking. “We don’t have any maintenance crews that are authorized in that area, do we?”

“No sir. In fact, those areas are normally restricted, even to maintenance crews and technicians.”

“Well then, who the hell is in there?”

“The sensors have been tracking them for quite some time now and although I couldn’t get an exact location I did manage to find the approximate area the signals originated from.”

“Show me.”

Herth tapped a few commands into the console and the screen was replaced with a larger image of the outline of the *Imperator* as well as the myriad multi-colored pathways representing the different integrated systems. He pointed towards a highlighted portion of the display. “That’s where they were first detected.”

A faint predatory smile found its way onto the general’s face and he lowered his voice to a lower, more conspiratorial tone. “Has anyone else been informed of this?”

The lieutenant’s face betrayed his confusion and slight discomfort as he answered. “Well, no. You’re the first to know. I’m the only officer on sensor duty right now.”

“Do not inform anyone else about this and after you’ve finished your station I want the data to be cleared. Understand?”

The lieutenant nodded somewhat reluctantly. “Yes sir.”

“Good. Now I want you to track them.” *I want to see if our Judicariate friend is really headed where I think he’s headed.*

Barret stumbled through the ventilation system for about half an hour before he finally found an external outlet after several occurrences of both Lier and himself getting stuck in the close quarters and dealing with the sometimes blistering hot surfaces of the vents themselves. The external vent opened to a larger compartment along the side of the *Imperator* that was perhaps ten to thirty feet high off the ground. It was at that point that he discovered a problem: while the internal duct lid had been removed with little difficulty the external vent would require much more effort. There were no real means of removing the vent and he could find no visible screws.

Barret scratched his forehead and looked back at Lier. “I don’t know how we’re going to get through this. I can’t see how we could get it off.”

Lier ran a hand through his hair. “Well, we better think of something cause I sure as hell didn’t crawl through that oven for nothing. How about taking a grenade or something to it or shooting it out?”

Barret’s eyes opened wide with shock at Lier’s suggestion. “Do you know what a grenade would do in an enclosed space like this?”

Lier thought about it for a few seconds before replying. “Ok, that wouldn’t be very smart but do you have any better ideas?”

Barret moved to the side of the compartment and peered at the metal surface closely, running his hand lightly over its surface as though testing for some invisible object that might be concealed there. Lier watched Barret curiously for a moment before walking over; trying to see what Barret could be looking for. “Draylan, what the hell are you doing?”

Barret kept staring at the wall, brushing Lier’s question off with a wave. “Sometimes these ventilation systems have controls. You know, for the maintenance crews.”

Lier opened his mouth but whatever he was about to say was drowned out by the sudden shriek of metal scratching against metal as the external vent began to slowly open, bringing with it a rush of cool air and snow.

Lier nodded at Barret, impressed. “Very nice.”

Barret wore a smug grin on his face as he untied a length of cord that he’d been carrying around his shoulder. “I told you I’m amazing,” he tossed Lier an end of rope, “Now go tie this to something and hope that nobody heard us.”

Lier caught the rope and looked at it as though it were a coiled serpent ready to strike. “You want to climb down this? Are you crazy? This rope is like string.”

“It’s nalex fiber, very strong, very durable. You could saw away at that rope all day and it’d barely make a scratch.”

Lier looked at the rope for a minute before shrugging and tying it to the edge of a nearby compressor. “Ok, it’s done.”

Barret took the rope, tugged experimentally a few times and then disappeared over the edge of the vent, rappelling down the side of the crawler. Lier watched Barret’s progress with slight concern; it had been a long time since he had ever climbed and he didn’t exactly feel like relearning how to now. Barret had just reached the bottom, shaking the rope lightly to let Lier know he had gotten down. *Well, here goes nothing.*

Lier took the rope, and then slowly eased himself over the precipice, praying that he wouldn’t fall to his death. He started out slowly but after the second kick his foot slipped on an icy patch of metal and hit his side on the *Imperator’s* hull as the rope brought him back, almost causing him to lose his grip. Lier bounced against the metal hull for a couple more times before managing to right himself and begin descending again. He was roughly twenty feet from Barret.

Barret looked up at the jingling rope worriedly; the storm outside had intensified rapidly and he couldn’t see more than a couple feet in any direction. Then he heard a curse followed by the sound of something banging against metal prompting him to shout out in alarm. “Ames! Are you alright?”

He only heard more cursing and several more crashing noises until Lier finally appeared through the snowy haze. He held his breath as Lier cautiously made his way down the remaining stretch of rope and finally got off of it, looking slightly shaky.

Lier looked at Barret for a second, his facial features partially masked by the snow and his white snowcap. “I’m never doing that again.”

Barret couldn't help but laugh, prompting yet another angry stare from Lier. "Ames, you did good," from the Judicator's expression Barret could tell that he was still shaken and angry. "No really, listen. You did better than I did the first time."

Some of the anger on Lier's partially hidden face lessened slightly. "Really?"

Barret laughed and patted Lier on the back. "No, not really but you still did ok."

The anger on Lier's face returned and he began walking away but Barret simply ignored it and followed. "Ok, so what's the plan?"

Lier ran under a mammoth Thornwood tree and produced a crudely drawn map from his overcoat pocket showing it to Barret. "Ok, from what I could glean from my visits to the command deck I saw that the cave entrance to the supposed cache is to the north, away from the main encampment."

Barret looked at the map with slight amusement. "You draw that yourself?"

Lier glowered at Barret. "Shut up, that's not what's important. Now, the area around the cave is forested and the storm will help us by reducing visibility. We shouldn't have much trouble getting in undetected."

"What happens if we need to get outta here fast? A person can get lost pretty quickly in a storm like this."

Lier looked up at Barret triumphantly. "We can mark the trees we pass with a boulder or a piece of ice." Lier looked around for a few seconds before picking up a jagged chunk of ice that had formed under the treads of the *Imperator*, brandishing it at Barret. "Like this."

Barret looked at the map and then at the forest before nodding, tone suddenly serious. "Not a bad plan. But, if we do reach the entrance and we do find something big how are you planning on dealing with security? There's bound to be guards around and they'll probably have thermal-detection equipment."

A wide grin spread across Lier's face. "Well, we'll just have to deal with that when we get to it, won't we?"

Barret looked at Lier with a worried expression. "That sounded a lot like something I would have said... you're starting to worry me Ames."

Lier said nothing as he began to jog deeper into the forest with Barret not far behind and it wasn't long at all before the only evidence that the two had ever been there was a swaying black rope and rapidly disappearing footprints.