

Chapter 2

*No one should ever take the responsibilities of leadership lightly;
anyone who does usually winds up dead quite quickly.
- General Trenton Fueller (3425 P.C.-3516 P.C.)*

Colonel Karos, with the help of troopers Symes and Verbrant, one of the Cardon troopers who had survived the earlier skirmish, had allowed the remnants of the squad to move remarkably quickly through the forest. Everyone was growing tired, but with the events that had claimed the lives of seven men still fresh in their minds no one questioned how long they were going to keep going or what would happen once they'd reached their destination. In truth, Karos had no idea where they were or where they were headed due to the storm's interference with his standard nav. equipment but for the sake of preserving what little morale remained with his men he said nothing.

They continued onwards through the forest for well over four miles before his men finally faltered, slowly stopping behind him, breathing heavily. The Ilirin man, Captain Jerick looked over at the colonel with a near-defeated expression, his face flushed. "Sir, we need a break."

Karos watched Jerick closely before looking around at the exhausted men surrounding him; everyone was tired and several troopers looked as though more than their bodies were on the brink of giving out.

"All right, take five men," Karos conceded. "But stay on your toes; we'll need to be ready to move out at a moment's notice." Karos nodded at Symes and Verbrant who promptly freed themselves of the colonel and sat down next to the other men, Karos noted with some unhappiness that they all kept a distance from him. *They don't trust you. You killed one of them in cold blood. Murderer.* Karos breathed deeply, letting the frigid air into his lungs which cleared his head rather effectively before leaning against the bole of a nearby tree; as much as his legs screamed at him to sit he knew that it would be far less pleasant to try to get back up onto his feet with his injury once he was seated.

Karos fully intended to simply close his eyes but the next thing he knew he was looking up into Syme's face, temporarily unaware of where he was until he realized that he'd fallen asleep while against the tree and had fallen over. Despite his somewhat stunned and embarrassed state Karos noticed, with some degree of contentment, that the private wore a concerned expression.

"Sir! Sir! Are you ok?"

Karos rubbed his forehead, "Yeah, I'm fine... just had a slip there. Leg's still givin' me some problems."

Symes and Jerick both exchanged questioning glances. "Sir... you've been out for at least ten minutes. We thought you'd had a stroke or something. Are you all right?"

Karos was flabbergasted. *Ten minutes? How is this possible? I'm supposed to be their C.O. and I go and take a nap? What kind of leadership is that?* "I was out for ten minutes?"

Symes nodded, "Yeah, you were really out of it sir. Do you feel sick? You could be suffering from internal damage. Maybe we should lie low for a while; we don't know what sort of damage could happen if we keep moving."

Karos shook his head in a futile attempt to clear his thoughts as waves of self-doubt began to creep in. The thought of failure and weakness was so foreign to him that now that he had come face to face with it he was honestly shaken, so shaken that his mind immediately chose what his basic instinct was when faced with an unknown factor: continue onwards. "We stop here we die. Let's get moving. We've already wasted too much time."

Several of the men exchanged worried glances but almost immediately after the squad had gathered up their gear and had resumed walking they had reverted back to their trance-like state of exhaustion, focusing on taking one step after another. Then, out of nowhere the silence of the forest was broken by the telltale whistling noise of artillery shells, coming from the treetops above; causing several men to duck involuntarily in a futile attempt to find cover should a round land nearby.

Symes and Verbrant dove to the ground, pushing Karos down with them as the shells screamed overhead. Everyone lay there motionless, waiting for the noise to cease but after about five minutes of a constant rain of shells and not an impact in sight, Karos ordered everyone up and by some miracle managed to coax the men to continue their seemingly endless march.

Karos hoped for the bombardment to let up very soon but from his past experiences knew he better; he'd been in engagements where artillery barrages had lasted for hours, even days, as one side attempted to soften up a target or deal a critical blow to a splintered force. As much as he wanted the constant scream of artillery rounds to end he knew that chances of that happening would be slim.

It was then that the colonel heard something quite different from the sound of artillery; the sound of an engine and treads slicing through snow, a vehicle. Karos's squad had ventured too close to the edge of the forest and as they looked out into the relatively flat rocky plain Karos saw something that looked like a halftrack dart through the trees, leaving a cloud of swirling powder in its wake. The sound of the engine receded off into the distance and suddenly all was quiet. The squad just stood there, questioning if what they had seen was real or just a hallucination before they realized that the sound of artillery had also faded. Symes took a small step back towards the forest, towards safety. "Sir, I don't think we should go out there. That transport could've been a hostile and we don't know how long until that artillery starts going again. If we're caught out in the open we'll be torn apart."

Karos was about to speak but the returning sound of engines cut off whatever he was about to say. The men scrambled back into the forest as the first transport sped past, followed closely by a second almost immediately after. Then, as if things couldn't have gotten any worse, the artillery began again, this time impacting all around them. Karos dove to the ground, madly attempting to bury himself in the snow as some irrational part of his mind decided that the tiny shards of metal flying through the air in myriad directions wouldn't be able to penetrate a foot of crystallized water.

Private Symes was hunkered down into a small ditch six feet away and somehow, over the cacophony of the artillery bombardment, heard a dreadful scream of twisting metal and fuels combusting. Silently, he lay there in the ditch curled up in a ball, when the image of private Renner's corpse flashed into his mind. He'd watched Renner curl up into the same position, just lie there and die. The concept of death was suddenly all too real and for the first time in his twenty-seven years of existence he was afraid. He lay

there, all the numerous ways his existence could be snuffed out running through his mind. *A shell could land right here on this very spot and I'd never know it. I'd be gone and who would remember me? Nobody would, I'd just be another name, gone.*

Symes felt panic setting in as he began to find it difficult to breathe. His ears were ringing from the sounds of the barrage and he could feel the artillery pummeling the ground mercilessly. Splinters of shattered Thornwood trees filled the air, pricking his skin in a thousand different places. The pain snapped his shell-shocked brain back into action and he realized that he was suddenly peeking up over the lip of the ditch through a hellish fog at a lone RAEXT class half-track about twenty feet away that looked as though it had suffered a glancing blow to its side armor.

Karos, having heard the explosion, screamed as loud as his throat would allow, hoping someone would be close enough to hear him. "STAY DOWN, REPEAT, HOLD YOUR POSITIONS AND STAY BEHIND COVER!"

Symes peeked back out at the wrecked half-track and saw the insignia painted on its plates, partly obscured by a three-foot high inferno that had managed to persist throughout the crash, probably due to a ruptured fuel line. The private knew instantly that if there was anyone still alive in the transport they wouldn't be much longer if the fire reached the fuel tank. The choice was not a difficult one for Symes; he vaulted over the top of the ditch and was halfway across the gap before he heard the incoherent screams from the other men as they realized what Symes was doing. Symes shut everything else from his mind, focusing entirely on reaching the wreckage. *Might as well, I'll probably die anyway.*

Miraculously, Symes made it to the crippled transport unscathed and climbed atop the upturned chassis, searching for a side door. It took him what seemed like an eternity to find the door, partially covered in snow and dented inward slightly, presumably from an explosion due to the multiple punctures in the metal frame. Symes grasped the door tightly, feeling the little warmth in his fingers disappear the minute they made contact with the freezing steel. With a heave Symes had opened the door, almost falling off the half-track when the door fell off its hinges, releasing a blast of oily black smoke from the transport's interior. Symes began coughing and attempted to simultaneously cover his face and drop down into the RAEXT's rear compartment, no small feat considering the entire transport was thrown on a forty-five degree angle.

Symes felt around the transport slowly, attempting to peer through the stinging smoke. It was then that he heard a feeble voice and stumbled through the blackness towards it, finally stopping as he stepped on something soft that emitted a weak curse. Symes reached downwards, grabbing the man and moved him through the compartment back towards the doorway where he found himself staring up at the worried faces of troopers Verbrant, Nealte, and Jerick. They grabbed the unconscious man as well as himself out of the half-track.

Symes saw the man he'd rescued carried by Verbrant and Nealte under the artificial outcrop formed by the transport's wreckage while trooper Jerick turned to Symes and immediately threw himself on top of the Tresdeon private as another artillery shell landed nearby, showering the two of them with fragments of wood and superheated water droplets. Jerick immediately rolled off of Symes, looking at the man as though he were an alien. "What the hell is with you man?! Do you want to die or something?"

Symes ignored Jerick completely, instead moving back towards the entrance hatch. "There's still people in there. We've got to get them out before this whole thing goes up." Most of the smoke had dissipated and Symes could definitely see several forms lying in the rear compartment, and some were moving. "I've got movement. I'm going back down."

Trooper Jerick, still surprised by his comrades suicidal run to the transport simply nodded and followed Symes down through the hatch.

With the absence of the smoke the full extent of the damage was revealed- several looked to have been killed by shrapnel rounds that had torn through the transport's chassis, many lying slumped lifelessly in their crash-seats. Two men had either been out of their seats when the transport had been hit or had been thrown with such violence that their harnesses had broken. Symes moved towards one man to check for vitals while Jerick tentatively moved to another. The man's head dropped slightly as he felt the man's lifeless body but shot up at Jerick's startled exclamation. "Hey, we've got a live one here!"

Symes ran over to the kneeling man, "How is he?"

Jerick shook his head slightly, disbelief evident on his face. "He looks ok. Don't know how the hell it's possible but the guy seems to be pretty much intact; actually, he seems in better shape than you do," he said wittily, noting Syme's roughened condition from his dash to the transport. Jerick reached down towards the man's HE-suit and started unzipping it, revealing a dark blue command uniform. "Ooh, looky here! We got ourselves a poshy bridge boy! I should check if he's got any carc-sticks on him; I could use a light after all the shit we've been through. I'm sure he won't mind."

Symes ignored Jerick's snide comment, instead focusing on the insignia on the man's shoulder, an emblazoned dagger with dual serpents entwined around the length of the blade; the Confederate officer's crest. "Check again idiot. He's an officer, look at the badge."

Jerick's eyes finally rested upon the crest and he immediately ceased his rummaging through the man's pockets, an abashed expression evident. For the first time the two troopers looked closely at the face of the man and they both took an involuntary breath; before them lay General Etton's comatose body.

"Good Gods." Jerick uttered. "It's the General! Holy Hell!"

Symes felt a strange sensation run through him. *This is bad, he shouldn't be here! How the hell could this have happened? What are we gonna do?*

It was then that they heard trooper Nealte's gruff voice, "Hey, anyone alive down there? It's awfully quiet out here, or it could just be that I'm deaf from all this galking artillery waiting for you two morons! Hurry the hell up out there, or have you forgotten that this transport is on fire and could very well explode any minute?"

Symes nodded, "He's right, get him out of here, there doesn't seem to be any internal damage but just in case be as gentle as possible. I'll check for any other survivors."

Jerick grabbed Etton's ankles and began dragging him towards the hatch, prompting a weak groan from the general. Symes went from crash-seat to crash-seat, finding only three battered survivors who had been miraculously spared from the shrapnel that had claimed so many of the other passengers. Two of the survivors, one of whom looked to have a mild concussion and the other who seemed to have an injured

arm, were stunned but otherwise responsive when Symes directed them to the hatch. The other survivor, a blonde woman who was unconscious and slumped over onto the corpse of a young bridge officer proved to be totally unresponsive despite Symes's attempts to wake her. Eventually, with the increased frequency and urgency of Nealte's 'encouragements' Symes released the woman from her harness and carried her to the hatch, handing her over to the waiting arms of troopers Nealte and Verbrant.

The first thing that Symes noticed once outside of the transport was that the artillery had lessened considerably. In fact, the shell impacts were barely noticeable and the frequency of the dull thumps that signified artillery rounds impacting earth sounded far more distant. Unfortunately, there was little time for them to celebrate their sudden turn of fortune as another fact became apparent; the crackling-hiss of the half-track's fuel line.

Verbrant and Nealte immediately picked Etton up and began carrying him away from the wreckage; presumably back towards where they had originally taken cover. The other two men had enough sense to follow them while Jerick moved to help Symes carry the woman. Both men moved through the shin-deep snow as fast as possible while carrying the woman, fully expecting the half-track behind them to explode any second sending thousands of razor sharp splinters everywhere. When they were about five meters away Symes heard a loud pop followed by a loud and drawn-out snap-hiss as the fuel lines fully ruptured and ignited. Someone began to scream, Symes wasn't sure who, and then he saw the colonel's face emerge from up behind the ditch, screaming at the both of them, his arms waving wildly. In an instant Jerick and Symes were upon the lip of the ditch, pausing only to hand Karos the woman, before hurling themselves head first into the ditch as the fuel tanks finally ignited in a brilliant display of orange, yellow, and red.

Shrapnel tore through the area, throwing up a flurry of snow, debarking entire trees, leveling others; the entirety of the explosion lasted twelve seconds but seemed to last forever. Once again, the area was quiet save the occasional cackling from ignited trees and wreckage. The squad began to slowly peek out from their respective cover, seeing an eerie, flame-lit fog littered with craters, debris, and pieces of bodies.

As Symes began to crawl out of the ditch a hand stopped him, grabbing his leg. Surprised, he turned around, ready to deliver a kick to the hand's owner but relaxed slightly when he saw Colonel Karos's face. When he had dove into the ditch he had practically landed on the colonel's injured leg, an understandable mistake given the circumstances but nevertheless a regrettable one. Symes realized somewhat absentmindedly that he had disobeyed a direct order and a small bit of fear began to develop in his mind. "Sir?" Symes prepared himself to run, remembering the fate of Private Renner. *I'm not going to die like that, not a chance.*

Karos, however, did not seem the least bit angry. In fact, his face was completely calm and, with the exception of the grimace he had from the obvious pain in his leg his features were relatively neutral. "Private, you know what you did?"

Symes nodded slowly, "I disobeyed a direct order and endangered the lives of my fellow troopers, sir." He silently cursed himself. *Way to go idiot, now you're definitely getting shot.*

Jerick, who was a few feet away suddenly yelled out, pointing at Symes from with a half insulted, half amused look on his face. "Hey, don't listen to him Colonel. Nobody made me go out there 'cept me! You think that *he* could make me do anything?"

The colonel turned to Jerick and shot him a dark stare, which immediately silenced the man. "Captain, shut the hell up."

"Yes sir." Jerick turned away from the exchange, abruptly discovering that there was something interesting towards the other direction of the ditch.

Karos turned back towards Symes, slowly shaking his head in irritation. "Those are all true points, Private, but you saved four of our men, including the General." Karos noticed the stunned expression on Symes's face and then noticed where his eyes had traveled, the colonel's breast pocket, where he'd put Private Renner's tags. "Private... Symes listen to me, I'm not some monster who enjoys killing but I will when it's necessary. What you did out there was dangerous and yes, you disobeyed my order but you did so to save your fellow comrades and I would never punish anyone for doing that. You may think of me as you like but you needed to know that."

Symes nodded, a staid look cemented on his face. "I understand Colonel. But I served with Renner for a long time and he was a good man. He didn't deserve to die that way. I don't agree with what you did and I doubt that I ever will and I hope that you'll understand that."

"Of course son, I'd think something was wrong with you if you didn't."

Symes was somewhat thrown off by the colonel's words but managed to play it off without revealing his surprise. "Is that all, sir?"

A wry grin appeared on the colonel's face as though he'd fully expected Syme's to say just that, "Well actually, Private, now that you mention it there is something I could have you do." He shouted over to Jerick who had been cleaning his rifle on the opposite side of the ditch. "Captain Jerick, you and Private Symes over here are going to do me a little favor."

Karos clambered over to the rest of the squad with all the grace of an arthritic man, grunting and cursing when pressure was put on his bad leg yet staunchly refusing Verbrant's offer to help him up. "All right men, we need to see if we can't get these two up and moving. If we can, great, but if we can't then we're going to have to carry them."

Trooper Verbrant knelt over General Etton's unconscious form, gently shaking him while nearby Nealte and the two men who had escaped from the transport's wreckage, a Second Lieutenant Clenel and a Warrant Officer Granek, were attempting to wake Lieutenant Brize. Karos, now standing over the General's prone body shouted a warning to his men, his tone conciliatory. "Be careful now, they could have some injuries that we don't know about and I doubt that shaking them awake would be the best way to be woken up after nearly being killed. I know I didn't find it very pleasant."

Brize remained unresponsive but, to the relief of the entire squad, Etton began to come to, a groan escaping as he began to stir.

Verbrant leaned in close, hovering over the general seeming unsure of what to do with himself. "Sir! Sir, are you all right? Can you hear us?"

Etton groaned again and he opened his eyes. From the general's expression Karos could tell that he didn't know what was going on, which was understandable given the circumstances. "Trooper, why don't you give the general some room? I'm sure that he wouldn't want to wake up to your face after an ordeal like that."

“I’m not too sure anyone would want to wake up to Verbrant’s face, ever,” chimed in Nealte, who had come over to see what had happened.

Verbrant moved away from Etton, giving Nealte a mixed look of humor and annoyance. “Ha ha, why don’t you shut the hell up Nealte? Ya know there’s a nice tree over there with a branch that looks like it’ll fit right up-”

“Quiet!” Karos shouted, “Now that you’ve both so eloquently introduced yourselves I think we’ve had quite enough of that.” He hobbled over to Etton’s side. “Welcome back to the land of the living, sir, though I’m not sure that you’re better off here.”

Etton propped himself up on his hands and then rubbed his forehead, finding a tiny trickle of crimson on his hand. He looked at the blood for a moment as though trying to determine whether or not it actually belonged to him but after several seconds, apparently deciding that the point was moot, he looked back at Karos, his tone quizzical. “What happened to us, Colonel?”

“Well, sir, we were attempting to disengage from the Republic force and were forced to move into the forest. After a while we heard your transport while we were caught in the middle of an artillery bombardment. Your RAEXT must have taken a hit because it crashed in the middle of my squad and a lucky thing too, sir. The gods must’ve been protecting you. If my men hadn’t gotten to you chances are you probably wouldn’t be here.”

Etton shook his head slightly as though trying to clear it of cobwebs; “Did anyone else make it?”

Clenel and Granek appeared at the general’s side almost immediately. Granek kneeled down next to Etton, a look of relief written all over his features. “We’re here sir... and so is Brize.”

Etton’s face lit up at the mention of the lieutenant. “Thank the gods that she made it. Who else is here?”

There was a long silence before lieutenant Clenel finally spoke, “We’re it sir, just you, me, Granek here, and the lieutenant.”

Etton nodded slowly, a pained expression creeping across his face. “I see... well we survived, thanks to the help of the colonel and his men.” He turned to Karos, “You have our thanks, colonel.”

Karos shook his head slightly, “Actually, sir. I didn’t have any part of it, bad leg,” he pointed to his injured leg. “You can thank my men for saving you; all I did was sit in a ditch and try to shout orders over the sound of shell impacts. They did all the work.”

Etton managed to get to his feet slightly more quickly than Karos had, stretching his limbs before turning to face the two troopers next to him. “Troopers, you have the thanks of the entire task force. Thank you.”

Verbrant and Nealte both smiled but before they could say anything Granek interrupted; “What about the other two?”

Etton looked at the warrant officer strangely, “What do you mean where are the other two?”

The two troopers turned around and for the first time realized that Jerick and Symes were nowhere to be found. Nealte scratched the side of his head, confused. “What the hell? Where’d they go? They were just here a minute ago.”

Etton looked to Karos with a questioning look, "Colonel, what are these men talking about?"

Karos shook his head, a small frown on his face and he quickly shot Granek a dirty look. "Of course, sir. Troopers Symes and Jerick were there at the time of your rescue. Actually, private Symes was the first one to the transport and was also the one who rescued you. As for where they are now, I have no idea. They might have deserted while we were preoccupied with getting you back to cover. That's the only explanation I can come up with at the moment."

Etton looked Karos straight in the eye, his expression dubious. "Deserted? Why?"

Karos shook his head and shrugged. "I'm not entirely sure sir; all I can say is that the men have been through hell and back following me and as much as I hate to say it my men's morale is wavering. We've already had one violent incident with regard to sedition within the ranks that cost many of my men their lives."

Etton nodded slowly, his expression thoughtful. "I see Colonel. Well then I suggest that we start moving again. I need to get to the rendezvous if this task force is going to survive." Etton took a cautious few steps forward, as though testing his legs for injury. "Do you know of our current location?"

Karos glanced over the edge of the ditch out into the forest, once again feeling as though someone was watching them. "I have our general location but I think that we should leave, immediately. We were being followed when we found your transport and I think that we're still being followed. For your own safety I think we should leave immediately."

Etton, now a bit steadier on his feet, moved next to Karos. "Very well, then let's get moving," he turned to Granek and Clenel, "Warrant Officer, Lieutenant, carry Lieutenant Brize. We're leaving." He turned to Karos, "Well, Colonel, let's move out."

Karos motioned to Nealte and Verbrant who both pulled themselves out of the ditch, lying sprawled, half concealed by the foot or so of snow. For a moment everything was still until a hand appeared with ring and index finger extended, the go-ahead signal. Karos, Etton, and the two bridge officers carrying Brize all followed, running after the two troopers as they made their way between the trees and brush with little regard for the injured and overburdened men who were struggling to keep up. Finally they stopped, taking cover behind a few jutting boulders.

Karos bent over, breathing heavily. "For the gods' sake! I said to get us out of here, not leave us back in the forest lost somewhere!"

Verbrant held up his hands, "Don't look at me, sir, I was just following Nealte."

Nealte shot up, wearing a riled expression. "Hey, you said we needed to get out of there fast!"

Clenel spoke up, aggravation slightly evident in his voice, "Did you have to take us through the gekking thornbushes?"

Nealte looked at the colonel closer, and then at himself before realizing that the there were numerous cuts and scratches crisscrossing practically every member of squad. Nealte, his face revealing that this was news to him, began to scratch the back of his head in a slightly embarrassed fashion. "My bad, I guess I was just in such a hurry to get us outta there..."

"Shut it." Said Etton, "we don't need to be fighting each other out here; there's plenty of apples for that. The general's words cut short any further bickering but that

didn't stop Clenel from shooting the trooper a dark look, which prompted an obscene gesture in return. For a moment it looked as though Nealte was about to say something else when the sounds of gunfire echoed not too far behind them.

Verbrant looked at Karos with alarm, "Trouble?"

Karos shook his head and started moving towards the noise, wearing a wry grin. "Granek, Clenel, you stay here and guard the General. Verbrant and Nealte, you follow me." The two troopers took off after Karos at a jog, for the first time noticing that he was no longer limping.

As they ran back through the thorn bushes, Verbrant thought about inquiring as to how the colonel's leg had miraculously healed and why he'd been forced to carry him countless miles through the forest until he thought better of it; *the colonel's just a hardass sometimes, better to just leave it like it is*. Verbrant didn't have any time to consider the matter further; as they moved through a thicket of trees and dormant shrubs he found that they'd reached the action; eight men wearing grey-white camo armor crouched behind various cover, all exchanging fire with an unseen foe farther back in the trees. Karos, Verbrant, and Nealte took cover behind a smattering of juvenile thornwoods.

Verbrant looked at the colonel, "Hostiles?"

Karos nodded, "Definitely hostiles, probably the sneaky wrikers who've been tracking us."

Nealte peeked through one of the thornwood's needle-laced branches. "Well, they're shooting at something. Who the hell are they fighting?"

Karos got up, took a frag-grenade from his belt and pulled the pin, tossing it over behind a rock where two of the republic troopers were hiding. "Will you two stop chatting and start fighting? It doesn't matter who they're shooting at right now, just take em' out." A large explosion emphasized his last sentence as the grenade exploded, taking out both of the Aprion troopers as well as a sizeable part of the log they had been using as cover.

Verbrant and Nealte joined in, opening fire on the other six troopers who were slowly beginning to realize that they were being attacked from two sides. The rest of the Aprion troops lasted approximately fifteen seconds under the combined efforts of Karos and his men as well as the unseen force in the forest. After the firefight was over, a still silence moved over the battlefield.

Verbrant looked to Karos, his expression asking what they should do next.

Karos was about to respond when two men emerged from underneath a pile of snow, their bodies having been almost completely submerged in the crystallized substance. They moved cautiously, at all times careful not to stray too far from potential cover. When they had walked about twenty feet from where they had been concealed one spoke; "Colonel?"

A wide grin spread across Karos's face and he moved out from behind the trees. "Good to see you, men. Good work with the camouflage."

Nealte and Verbrant emerged behind Karos, shock obvious on their faces as they looked back and forth from their C.O. to the two troopers. Nealte took a cautious step towards Symes and Jerick. "The colonel said you two ran away!"

Jerick scoffed, "Please, you think *I* would run away? Now that's just insulting."

While Nealte was busy arguing with Jerick, Verbrant made his way over to some of the Aprion soldiers with Karos and Symes in tow. Verbrant knelt next to the bodies of

two of the troopers, setting his rifle down next to him before placing his hands on both men's arteries. Only when he registered a pulse from one of them did he shout out to the others, "This one's still alive!" Verbrant immediately pointed his rifle at the man and backed away. "Sir, this man's still alive!"

Karos looked the downed soldier over; he saw an exit wound through the shoulder and what looked to be a few glancing blows from shrapnel. *Nothing too life threatening so long as none of the major blood vessels were damaged.*

Symes looked down at the republic soldier with slight concern, no doubt dreading what would undoubtedly come next.

But whatever Symes had predicted to be the colonel's judgment he was pleasantly surprised when Karos put his hand on Verbrant's weapon, lowering it slowly. "Ok, bandage him up, we're taking him with us. And see if anyone else survived the attack."

Nealte and Jerick gave Karos a strange look but followed the man's orders, bandaging the injured trooper. "Sir," Nealte inquired, "does this mean that we'll have to carry him?"

Karos looked at the man as though he'd just said something incredibly stupid, "No, Private, you can just wake him up and tell him that he has to walk the whole way. Of course you'll have to carry him!"

Verbrant approached the colonel, "Sir, there were no other survivors."

Karos nodded, "All right men, let's head back to the good general. We've got a lot of walkin' to do if we're going to make it back to the rendezvous."

After the short walk back to where they'd dropped off Etton and his men Karos introduced Symes and Jerick. Etton thanked the two of them, promising commendations to them both for the Erebian Star, the Confederate military's highest honor. They both thanked the general for the honor but said they hadn't done anything that anyone else wouldn't have done in similar circumstances. The entire reunion was cut short however, when Karos reminded everyone that they needed to return Etton to the head of the task force as quickly as possible.

As they started to move Symes approached the colonel, his face set in an emotionless manner. "Sir, I just wanted to thank you for what you did back there."

Karos looked at Symes with a puzzled expression as he approached. "It was your actions back there that saved the general, not mine. You should get the credit."

Symes shook his head, "No, I mean for keeping that republic trooper alive, for not executing him."

Karos's face suddenly became devoid of emotion. "I kept him alive for intelligence purposes, Private. I'm sure that he'll be useful if we want to get out of this mess alive."

The expression on Symes' face showed that he didn't believe a word of it, something that Karos undoubtedly saw and seemed slightly discomfited by. "Of course, sir." Karos, perhaps deciding to leave it at that, turned away from Symes slightly. "Is that all, private?"

"Yes sir."

"Then get ready, we're moving out."

Symes and the rest of the troopers quickly got what little they had unpacked in supplies stowed away and prepared themselves for the long trek to the rendezvous point, stopping only to offer a short prayer to the gods in hopes for protection from not only

their enemies, but the very wilderness itself. With that, the men of colonel Karos's squad were once again on the move.