

Chapter 3

*In regards to my personal opinion towards the way the war is progressing-
I sometimes catch myself wondering which side the gods are actually on.
- Lord Marshall Jacob Mannus (Excerpt from personal log)*

After walking for what seemed to be a never-ending march Karos's squad began seeing telltale signs of human activity evident as they progressed further through the wilderness: discarded ration packs, broken foliage, spent rounds. Bodies, Erebian and Aprion alike, were all found scattered throughout the forest the further they traveled. At first, when the squad had come upon the corpses they were wary, keeping their distance as though the freezing bodies would suddenly reanimate themselves but as they continued onward such sightings became more and more frequent to the point where even the greenest of the men, namely Lieutenant Clenel, proceeded by often with little more than a passing glance.

Eventually, the uniformity of the forest began to lull the men into a trance, to the point where even colonel Karos felt as though they were lost. He kept his concern quiet from the rest of his men, reaching into his pocket and producing a small but ornate compass.

Jerick, noticing the object in the colonel's hand, addressed the Karos. "If you don't mind my asking, sir, what is that?"

Karos held the compass up slightly higher than before, "It's a compass trooper."
"What?"

Nealte, further down the line, overheard the exchange. "It's a compass. An old navigational tool that uses magnetism to determine direction," he offered, in the most matter-of-fact tone he could muster. "They're obsolete but they don't require power so they're still useful in certain circumstances, such as ours."

Jerick looked at Nealte for a minute before returning his gaze to the compass, "Well, I don't know how you're supposed to use something like that to find out where you are, the pointer thing looks like it's wasted or something."

Karos looked down at the compass, whose needle was swinging slightly back and forth in a lazy motion as he took each step. "Well, it doesn't work all the time, certain anomalies and such can affect it." The colonel suddenly held up his free hand in a tight fist, signaling the others to stop. "And it also helps if you're on a steady surface." As he spoke the needle slowed slightly, pointing roughly in Jerick's direction.

Jerick nodded slightly, "So... what does that mean?"

Karos pocketed the compass and resumed walking, "It means we're going in the right direction, trooper."

"Well, that's good to hear. I can't wait 'till we get back and I can get outta this friggin snow."

Karos couldn't help but grin, "Understandable, trooper. I think we've all had enough snow for a long time."

Nealte ran up to the colonel's side, "That thing must be an antique. I don't think they even make em' anymore. Where'd you learn to use a compass anyway?"

Karos nodded, "It's a family heirloom. My father used to use it on hunting trips with me; he was a little... old fashioned. That's how I learned how to use it. Of course I hated learning it at the time, but it really helps in situations like these."

Nealte was about to speak when Karos's hand shot up into the air, formed into a fist. Everyone instantly dropped to a crouch, scanning the surrounding area nervously. Despite being absolutely silent, there was no audible noise and after several minutes many of the men began to fidget and mutter, despite the colonel's harsh curses at any who talked

Etton crawled over to Karos, Granek and Clenel in tow. "Colonel, what did you see?"

"I didn't see anything, General, I heard movement over there," Karos whispered, pointing off to the right, at a dense thicket of dormant foliage.

Etton looked at where the colonel was pointing, squinting in an effort to somehow see more clearly through the branches. "I don't see anything, Colonel. Are you absolutely sure you heard something?"

Karos looked over at the general with an irritated expression, "Sir, I heard movement over there, I'm sure of it."

Granek interrupted, "Yes, but it could've been just an animal or something. How do we know it's a threat?"

Karos looked back at Granek, his face incredulous, "How do we know it's not a threat? Are you willing to take a stroll over there to find out?"

Etton shook his head, "Now, Colonel, there's no need for bickering, I believe you if you said you heard something but I don't think we can afford to sit here for a few hours to try to wait out whatever it is out there."

"So who's gonna see if something's out there?" Granek chimed.

Karos exhaled deeply. His men were tied up watching their flank and he didn't trust the bridge officers with the prisoner. *I guess that just leaves me... damn.* Karos let out another deep breath, not believing what he was getting himself into. "I'll do it, just keep the others on the lookout and make sure you have that appie secured, I don't want to get shot 'cause he got loose," the colonel said, staring at the bound Aprion trooper who was under watch by Clenel. "I don't know how much stock I'd want to put into you bridge boys.

Granek bristled slightly at the insult but calmed when Etton gave an approving nod, prompting the lieutenant to begin crawling back towards the other men huddled around the few trees they'd been near when the colonel's warning had sounded. relaying Karos's plans.

Karos, still cursing himself inwardly for volunteering himself slowly rose to a crouch, scanning the bushes warily for any sign of movement. When there was none, he began to make his way forwards, still moving slowly in order to produce the least possible noise. He entered the thicket and quickly resigned to the fact that there would be no possible way to traverse the brush without making a large deal of noise. As if things couldn't get any worse, pain began to seep back into his limbs; the stims he'd taken seemed to be wearing off faster than he'd anticipated, most likely due to the extreme stress his tormented body had undergone. Cursing silently through gritted teeth, the colonel moved through the bushes, sidearm at the ready for a potential target to reveal itself.

Karos was happily surprised when he reached the other side of the bushes without being shot, though he was still suspicious as to what had caused the noise he'd heard. He scanned the immediate vicinity once more, proceeding to scrutinize the rest of the area nearby after he'd found nothing in the immediate vicinity. *I know there's someone out here, unless I'm just paranoid... but then again, just 'cause someone's paranoid doesn't mean someone isn't out to get them.*

Karos's investigation was cut short; whatever covert advantage the colonel had had was shattered by a cautionary wave from someone on his squad's side. Karos shook his head slowly, irritated. He glanced around for a moment, scanning the surrounding area once more before waving back.

There was a rustling of branches as Symes and Nealte, followed by the rest of the squad, joined Karos moments later.

Etton, still crouched, approached Karos, "Did you find any sign of hostile forces?"

Karos shook his head, biting the words back even as he spoke them, "No, sir, I didn't find a thing. But I was sure that-" Karos was suddenly cut off as a pair of men, rifles drawn, materialized a few feet away, the expressions on their faces very unfriendly. Karos raised his hands into the air and cursed openly as several more armed men appeared all around the squad. His men followed suite, confusion and surprise evident on their faces as the unknown soldiers swept through their ranks with mechanical efficiency, saying nothing yet moving with uncanny coordination.

It wasn't until the soldiers came across the captured Aprion soldier and Brize's unconscious form that they revealed some trace of surprise, one of them stepped out in front of Karos's hastily rounded up squad. "What is this?" The man said, pointing to two of his fellows who were holding the Aprion trooper.

Karos was about to speak when he heard Etton's voice. "Easy son, we're friendlies."

Karos winced slightly as he felt more than one weapon point in Etton's direction. The man cocked his head slightly, as though feeling a mix of uncertainty and humorous surprise. "And who might you be? I see you're wearing what looks to be an officer's uniform, albeit a dirty one. Let me guess, you ambushed or found a transport, took the crew's uniforms, and are trying to infiltrate the Confederate taskforce."

Symes, not believing a word he was hearing, burst out loud; "Are you gekking insane?"

Trooper Jerick followed the Private's lead; "Seriously, you must be trashed or something 'cause that's the most idiotic thing I've ever heard, and a couple of my old squad mates smoked a whole lot more than carc-sticks so that's sayin' something."

Both men were silenced when multiple rifles were leveled at them. Etton attempting to get off his knees ceased his efforts when the weapons were once again directed towards him. He raised his hands a little higher in a conceding sign. "Ok son, everything's crazy out here, I know. But I need you to listen to me for one minute, after it's up you can do whatever you want with us."

The soldier walked closer to Etton, both his tone and gait suggesting a slight superiority complex. "And why would I have to listen to you?"

Etton shrugged slightly, "well, honestly you don't have to but do I look like someone the Aprion would send on an infiltration op?"

The man stared at Etton for a moment, his mind working through the General's words intensely before he made a decision. "Alright, what've you got to say?"

Etton smiled, his face showed relief as he resumed speaking. "I am General Nicholas Etton; my transport was hit en route to the rendezvous point where we were rescued by Colonel Karos and his squad." Etton stated, motioning slightly towards the men of Karos's squad. "I can assure you that we are not Republic infiltrators. Why would we be carrying around an Aprion soldier?"

The man interjected suddenly. "Well that's all fine and good but how do I know this isn't all just a ruse? You wrap up one of your guys to make it seem like you captured an enemy for questioning? And besides, who would be stupid enough to actually carry an enemy soldier around through a war zone? That's suicide."

Karos shook his head at the remark and kept his head down after he noticed trooper Nealte's dirty stare.

Etton shook his head. "No, that man was a member of a Spec Ops team that had been tracking the Colonel and his men. We took him with us because it is quite likely that he knows quite a bit about the enemy's movements. We were on the way to the rendezvous point when you ambushed us."

Granek, finally losing his patience and apparently from the way he'd begun shaking, some of his sanity, abruptly stood up, oblivious to the rifles that sprang towards him. "This is insane! You people don't realize that this man is General Etton?" Granek exclaimed, pointing one hand towards Etton while keeping the other on his head. "You all are threatening the general of the entire gekking task force and you don't even realize it?"

The leader began moving towards Granek when another man motioned to him. They began whispering to one another in hushed tones, apparently arguing over something, Granek's comments seemingly forgotten. Meanwhile, Etton edged over to Granek's side, "It's not such an insane idea that they don't recognize me. Most of our units were assigned last minute. That leaves over twelve thousand men to come to full familiarity with their superiors in less than two weeks. Remember Granek, not everyone gets to stay in the relative safety of an MCC like we do so it's no surprise that some of our men don't know us personally."

Etton was beginning to say something else when he noticed Colonel Karos, facing the two officers mouthing something. Etton shrugged to let him know he didn't understand and raised his hands off his head slightly for a second. Karos gave a strained look at the two of them before trying again, this time enunciating each word slowly: *We need to leave NOW. Not safe here.* Etton nodded at the colonel, letting him know he understood.

It was then that the man approached Etton once again, helmeted head cocked to the side in a somewhat inquisitive and bemused fashion. "I know what you're thinking and no, before you do something stupid, it won't work. You'll all be dead if you try anything. You'll be happy to know that we've gone against orders and broken radio silence to tell HQ what's happened. They said the last contact with the General's transport a few hours ago so we're going to bring you in. However, we're going to need to do a search first, if one of you is hiding something then you'll be in a hell of a lot more trouble than you are now."

Etton nodded at the man, "That's wonderful news sir--"

“Captain.” The man interrupted.

“Captain, right. I’m sorry Captain but we need to get out of here ASAP. I have reason to believe we’re being followed and it’s only a matter of time before they find us.”

“Well that’s a problem we’ll have to hope we can avoid but command was adamant that we check you for bugs. The appies find our rendezvous point and we’re well and truly gekked.”

Etton shook his head and exhaled deeply, irritation beginning to show on his features. “Listen to me; we need to get out of here now! Let me talk to your superiors and I’ll prove to you I’m Etton.”

The man shook his head. “I can’t let you do that.”

Etton was finished playing games; he had already brushed off Karos’s advice once and didn’t feel like seeing how much worse things could get. “Fine,” anger was evident on Etton’s face and his tone. “Tell whoever it is on the other end that this is General Nicholas Etton, MIDC: G239.4532. Code word: Plurimi. That should be all the confirmation you need, *Captain.*”

The man looked at Etton for a moment before nodding at one of the soldiers standing behind him, turning back towards Etton after seeing the soldier begin uttering something into his headset. “Fine, we’ll tell-”

There was a startling crash and the captain suddenly jerked backwards, an invisible force tearing through his chest, sending a splash of hot liquid into the snow. Immediately, Granek dove at Etton, knocking him to the ground. The sound of gunfire erupted from all around them as the startled Confederate troops slowly overcame their surprise. Nevertheless, it was looking grim; roughly a third of the confederate soldiers had been knocked out of the fight and Etton was stunned to see Granek’s emotionless features next to him, realizing too late that the Warrant Officer had taken a round through the throat. Rolling out from under Granek’s body, Etton motioned towards the others to move towards a dense patch of trees, scooping up the deceased captain’s sidearm as he ran.

Etton dove through the trees and slammed up against the nearest trunk he could find, flinching slightly as Jerick and Karos ran through, carrying Brize. Peering through the trees Etton saw Clenel dragging Nealte’s body behind a boulder while a one of the Confederate troopers covered them. Two more of the troopers, realizing that their best chance of survival was to find cover, ran towards the trees and were cut down before they got six feet. Etton looked turned around, resting his head against the trunk for a moment while he caught his breath, taking stock of the situation. Aside from Karos, Symes, and Jerick were three of the confederate troopers, assault rifles held at the ready as they took positions by nearby trees, scanning for movement through the branches. Etton noted with some uncertainty, that one of them was the man who the late captain had been talking to shortly before the ambush.

Etton’s mind raced, the man was likely the captain’s second in command and, as such, would be their best chance of getting through their current situation alive. He scanned the forest, searching for any movement before firing dashing across to the confederate troopers, all of whom, Etton noted with some gratefulness, began laying down suppressing fire, presumably to cover him as he moved between cover. Etton shouted at the man, attempting to be heard over the roar of the two soldier’s autorifles. “Thanks, do you have a way out of here?”

The man pointed to his ears, indicating he couldn't hear him. He turned briefly, tapping the two troopers on the shoulders and made a cutting gesture across his throat when they turned around, then looked back at the General. "I'm sorry?"

"We need to get out of here, now," Etton said, impatience easily detectable in his voice.

The man bristled slightly, as though slightly annoyed at being told the obvious. "Well sir, I'm sorry but half my squad is bogged down and I'm not leaving them." Almost as an afterthought, he added, "and some of your men are with them."

It was Etton's turn to be offended, "You think I would order you to leave our men behind? I'm just asking you if you have a way out of here, so do you or don't you?"

The man nodded, perceptibly indignant. "Yes, sir. We have a RAEXT, it's been informed of our location and is en route. ETA, two minutes."

"Good," Etton's eyes traveled from the confederate officer to the boulder that he'd seen Clenel and Nealte near, relief filling him when he saw muzzle flashes appear by it. *Well at least someone's alive over there.*

Behind him, the officer put one hand to his headset as though listening to something intently before yelling across to Etton, "ETA, confirmed, one minute thirty seconds."

Trooper Nealte shook his head, clearing the cobwebs from his mind as he attempted to stave off unconsciousness, pain from the wounds in his shoulder and thigh nearly knocking him out as he shifted his weight. He leaned around the side of the boulder he'd been dragged behind and took aim with his good hand, struggling to place the rifle Clenel had managed to nab from one of the dead Confederates during his mad dash to safety. Nealte had to admit, although he'd found his brief time with the man somewhat strange, he'd underestimated Clenel's endurance, utterly shattering his ingrained paradigm that all bridge crewmen were weaklings and cowards. *Hell, anyone who could drag my ass fifteen feet and still avoid getting shot's got stones in my book.*

Clenel was currently firing a pistol he'd relieved from the dead Confederate trooper at some unseen foe, though from the way he was firing Nealte guessed that he was shooting more to try to keep their enemy's heads down rather than actually trying to hit anything. Either way, Nealte was relieved he didn't have to deal with someone suffering from the effects of a shellshock; he'd seen it happen before and it was the last thing he needed during a firefight. Nealte grunted as he lifted the autorifle, struggling to keep the weapon's sight level while simultaneously fighting to keep his movements from aggravating his injury. Eventually, Nealte gave up trying to find a target and decided to follow Clenel's lead by firing indiscriminately in the general direction of their attackers, throwing a few curses in their direction for good measure.

It was about this time that Nealte decided that he was going to die, an odd revelation for someone who'd dealt death to dozens of others throughout his years in the Erebian army yet never thought once about how or when death would come for him. In a strange way he realized that he wouldn't really mind if he were to die, but a part of him did wish that he could make a difference before he went; his idea of glory didn't exactly coincide with dying propped up against a rock shooting at bushes. He looked over at Clenel, trying to get the man's attention when a thunderous crashing sounded, moving

towards them. A wave of relief swept over the trooper as his mind matched the familiar noise to that of a RAEXT transport. *Well I'll be damned; I may get out of this yet.*

The deafening roar of the halftrack's engine came to a fever pitch as it barreled through a patch of shrubs, sliding to a halt meters away as its brakes struggled to bring the vehicle to a stop on the snowy surface. Almost instantly, the transport's main turret opened fire, belching thousands of rounds per minute into the surrounding forest where the Confederate's attackers had come from.

Almost immediately, several of the Confederate troopers broke cover and made a mad dash for the RAEXT, trusting the halftrack's gunner to keep their enemies tied up long enough to reach safety. Clenel grabbed the injured Nealte and began to drag the trooper to the transport, well aware that the two of them were a tempting target for any Republic sharpshooters that may be lurking in the trees.

By some miracle, the two made it to the transport's rear ramp hatch unscathed, two Confederate troopers lifting the injured Nealte from Clenel's exhausted arms after Clenel eyed them with suspicion for a moment. The two men shook their heads, although irritated at the man's distrust of them before moving to the rear of the compartment, attempting to lay the Private down at the floor of the halftrack with the other wounded when he objected. "I'm not dead yet, just get me into one of those harnesses, I'll be fine." The two men shrugged and pushed him into the seat rather unceremoniously, prompting a grunt and a curse from Nealte. One of the men leaned in to harness the trooper in when Nealte raised his good hand up, making an urgent stopping gesture. "No! I'm good. I'll do it myself."

The soldier just shrugged again, "fine," before turning back towards the hatch. As Nealte's eyes followed the soldier he noticed, with relief, that Karos and the other men from his squad had made it to the transport unharmed although he couldn't find the other bridge officer that had been with them or the prisoner that they'd captured as he scanned the assembled faces that were busy strapping themselves into their harnesses.

From somewhere farther down the halftrack came a hurried shout followed by a sharp burst from somewhere outside that could be felt through the armored plating of the RAEXT that made Nealte slightly more apprehensive than he already was. *We've been sitting here too long.* As though reading the trooper's mind, the idling engine swiftly roared to life; swinging into a sharp turn that threatened to throw a Confederate soldier who had been punching the command to close the rear hatch out the back. The man's arms flailed wildly as he frantically searched for purchase. For a moment Nealte was certain that the man would fall out the back until Colonel Karos, who had been sitting in a nearby seat grabbed a hold of the man and held him back long enough for the hatch to swing up and close.

Nearte watched with interest as the shaken soldier looked at his savior for a moment with a somewhat hesitant expression before nodding his thanks and taking a seat next to the Colonel. It also seemed that the Confederate officer had seen Karos's actions because he got up and despite the rumbling and general unpredictability of one's footing that was commonly associated with riding in a RAEXT transport while going at its maximum speed the man approached the Colonel, grabbing onto one of the hand-rails that ran along the compartment's interior. "I'm Lieutenant Benton," the man said, shakily extending his free arm out towards Karos. "I wanted to thank you for saving my man back there... I'm sorry that we didn't listen to you sooner."

Karos looked at the man for a moment, and then glanced at his extended hand before finally returning his gaze to Benton's face. "I'm not the one you should be apologizing to," he said, looking over at Etton, who despite the tumultuous conditions in the transport was kneeling next to a wounded trooper with a medkit.

The man returned Karos's gaze, his face set in stone, and nodded gravely, working his way over to the General. As he stumbled over to the kneeling General, Etton got to his feet, somehow managing to circumvent the powerful forces that had everyone else bouncing around the transport's interior, handing the medkit over to another trooper who had been treating the injured man. Etton looked at the Lieutenant, his face expressionless yet almost expectant.

Benton saluted suddenly with his free arm, nearly falling to the floor when a sudden jolt ran through the transport as it rolled over something outside. After quickly regaining his composure, the Lieutenant brought himself to look at the General once again, furrowing his brow as he spoke and shifting his weight slightly, as though suddenly uncomfortable. "Permission to speak freely, sir?"

Etton returned the salute, this staid expression replaced by an almost pensive frown. "Of course."

The man nodded, exhaling deeply as though a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. "Sir, I just wanted to apologize to you. It was my fault for not checking your IDC beforehand. If I'd followed protocol then we might have cleared the whole--"

Etton cut the man off, raising hand in an almost conciliatory gesture. "Listen to me, Lieutenant, it wasn't your fault any more than it was your Captain's fault for not ordering you to check our identification and ultimately you could blame me for getting us in this mess in the first place. When it all comes down to it you were following orders, usually that's the best way but sometimes it doesn't work out," Etton paused, a flicker of anguish temporarily visible on his face as Granek's blank stare flashed into his mind. "Good people died today and there's nothing more we can do about it except try to keep ourselves alive so that they'll be remembered."

Benton nodded sullenly, looking at the General's feet. "Yes sir, thank you sir."

Etton wiped the blood on his hands off onto his uniform, scanning the compartment for a moment before taking the open seat next to Nealte, resting his head against the cold metal frame of the halftrack's compartment as he stared up into the lighting panels, staring straight at the ceiling for a few seconds before closing his eyes. For a moment, the trooper thought that Etton had fallen asleep, but the General stirred seconds later, pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and index finger as he spoke. "You going to be ok, trooper?"

Nealte nodded, examining his wounds. "I'll be fine, nothing the medics can't patch up... you ok?"

There was a brief silence before Etton replied, sniffing. "I've been better."

Nealte let out an embittered chuckle, staring down at the wounded man at his feet. "Haven't we all."