

## Chapter 4

*When the lost are found, may the Gods protect their children from the sins of their fathers.  
- Translated text from archaeological transcript*

Karos awoke with a start, feeling someone's hand on his shoulder. Instinctively, he snatched his pistol and had it under Symes's jaw before the man knew what was happening. It took a second for the Colonel to realize where he was and when he saw the Private's shocked expression he quickly holstered the weapon, noting the stunned stares from the nearby troopers. "Sorry, Symes," he muttered sheepishly.

Symes withdrew his hand slowly and shook his head, trying to mask his unease. "It's alright, Colonel.... Just thought you'd want to know that we're coming up to the rally point."

Karos rubbed his eyes and stifled a yawn. "We've made it?"

"Soon."

Karos nodded, for the first time in what seemed like forever a smile crept across his face. "Well that's the best news I've heard all day.

Symes was about to reply when someone came in from the driver's compartment; it was one of the RAEXT crew. Karos watched the man as he ran to Etton, whispering something to the General before disappearing back into the driver's compartment.

Etton got to his feet and cleared his throat, his features betraying worry and concern. "We're approaching the rendezvous point as we speak. Now once we arrive I'd like Colonel Karos's men to stay with him. I realize you may be anxious to find your individual units but for the sake of coherency I think that it'd be best if you stayed together for the time being. Understood?"

Trooper Jerick scoffed. "Anxious? Nothing'd make me happier than knowing I'd never have to see those idiots again." Jerick said, nudging Verbrant in the ribs with his elbow.

Symes gave him a slightly stunned look. "You hated them so much that you'd want them dead?"

Jerick shook his head quickly. "No, man. I'd never wish that on anybody... we just never got along, me being better than them and all."

Nealte scoffed. "No surprise there."

Jerick's bobbed his head quickly, almost excitedly. "See! This guy knows what he's talking about! You guys should try to be more like Nealte here. Maybe you'd have more-"

"Cut the chatter," interrupted Karos. "Check your weapons. Just because we've made it back doesn't mean we're home safe. Need I remind you that there's an Aprion army out there looking for us? We'll be lucky if they take a few hours to find us."

He stole a quick glance towards the pair of troopers who had taken over for Etton. They'd done what they could; the blonde haired Lieutenant, Brize, had been stabilized as well as another of the troopers from Benton's squad. Unfortunately, they'd lost one of Benton's men shortly after escaping the firefight and many of the trooper's compatriots were visually shaken from witnessing the passing of one of their own.

The rest of the trip was spent checking their weapons; a relatively simple task that each of them would normally have been able to complete effortlessly if not for the unsteady environment created by the compartment's constant bouncing as the RAEXT

sped through the forest. Karos was sitting down on the bench between two of the armored troopers who were absorbedly cleaning their weapons; feeling slightly pleased that they so focused on their tasks, knowing all too well that their intense focus was probably more an effort to take their minds off what they'd witnessed as opposed to any real desire to prep for arrival at what was most likely the safest place within several kilometers.

After about three minutes there was a noticeable drop in the noise level from the transport's engine as it decelerated. Many of the soldiers looked up with relief, finally feeling some vestige of safety after all that they had endured in the Clarion wastes. Karos moved to the rear hatch, meeting Lieutenant Benton who was issuing orders to his own men. Karos said nothing as he watched Benton work with an appraising gaze; he had to give it to the man, whether Benton had always been leadership material or he'd simply picked it up recently the man knew his stuff.

There was a brief electronic screech that issued over the RAEXT's comm. system before the rear hatch fell to the ground, allowing a gust of cold air to assault its human cargo. With a copious number of curses Benton's men filed out into a dark clearing followed shortly by Karos and his men.

Karos looked around for a moment, taking stock of his new surroundings. They were roughly a hundred meters from the tree line. There were several dozen vehicles idling at the base of a small hill on which several white camo pattern tents had been erected. He could see small groups of sentries making rounds along the forest perimeter and the occasional RAEXT darting between the trees. The site was bustling with activity and he felt a wave of relief wash over him as he saw how many of his fellow Confederates had survived the assault.

Sensing someone behind him, Karos turned around and saw Lieutenant Benton and a slightly shorter man approaching. Benton trudged towards Karos, both hands resting on his rifle and a tired smile on his face. "Colonel, this is Corporal Uller. He's going to take you and the General to the command tent," Benton said, pointing a noticeably larger tent sitting near the middle of the hill.

Etton turned to Benton, worry etched on his face. "I'm not leaving Lieutenant Brize, if anything were to happen..."

Benton raised his hands slightly, "Sir, she'll be all right. They're transferring the injured personnel to the medical tents as soon as they arrive, the Lieutenant will be in good hands but you're needed elsewhere." Etton looked at Benton with weary acceptance for a moment before glancing at the RAEXT in the background as its engine once again roared to life, a plume of grey smoke issuing from the vents followed by a spray of slush as the transport sped off towards another part of the encampment.

Karos bit the inside of his cheek, looking over his shoulder at his men. "You heard the man."

The man, Uller, shook his head, wearing a look of poorly feigned apology. "Sensitive intel. I'm sorry but your men will have to wait here."

A thoughtful expression spread across the Colonel's face and he crossed his arms slowly. "Like hell Lieutenant, we're in the middle of a warzone. Sensitive intel or not these men have been through hell and back with me and I'm not going to leave them here if they want to come. It's their decision."

Uller looked taken aback. "But Colonel, I can't allow that! Command won't tolerate a breach in security with such--"

Etton interrupted suddenly. "Corporal, it's alright. These men saved my life and have been treated to unappreciative suspicion in return. These are the last people I would suspect for treason. They have my trust." He said, pausing to take a quick glance in their direction, "and yours as well."

Uller was about to say something but swallowed instead. "Of course General, please follow me." Uller began plodding back towards the hill, Etton, Clenel, Karos, and forming a ragged line behind him.

As he passed by Karos noticed Benton's hesitant stare and stopped, giving the man a slightly questioning stare. "Something you want to say, Lieutenant?"

"Well, Colonel. This is where we part ways. I know that we had a rocky start but I hope that you can forgive me for what happened back in the forest."

Karos put a hand on Benton's shoulder and looked him straight in the eye, maintaining a sedate expression. "No," Etton said, maintaining eye contact as the Lieutenant appeared crestfallen. "I don't forgive you for what happened," he continued, "because I never blamed you. You should listen to the General. Things like this will happen, you'll need to learn how to cope or you'll never make it. I saw you take command after the ambush. You've got a future as an officer, you've got leadership skills but you have to remember that you're dealing with the lives of others and sometimes people die. That's just war and the sooner you understand that the easier it'll be. Understand?"

Benton's eyes lit up slightly and a thoughtful expression spread across his face. "Yes, sir."

"Good. Now got take care of your men. Get them ready for anything; I doubt we've seen the last of the enemy." With that Karos turned and jogged after the others, allowing a small smile for the first time in a long while.

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Etton followed Corporal Uller into the command tent, a wave of noise washing over him as he passed through the threshold. Once inside Etton found himself in a very cramped and chaotic space. Computer consoles rested upon about a dozen different tables that had been crammed into the tent. He was relieved to see several of his bridge personnel operating the various consoles.

Uller snapped to attention and called out, "Attention! C.O. on the field!"

There was a sudden calm as everyone in the tent stopped what they were doing and stood up, holding a salute towards a slightly taken aback yet pleased Etton. The General returned the salute; "At ease," Etton said, first to Uller then the others. "We're in a bad way here and I'd appreciate it if you all did your best to keep working. Our first priority is to re-establish communications with Confederate Command. Can someone fill me in on what's happened during my absence?"

A dark-skinned man who was still wearing a white and grey camouflaged H.E. suit despite the balmy thirty-degree temperature inside the tent appeared at Etton's side with a datapad. Etton immediately recognized the man as Sub-Commander Taveras Desdev, the man who had been in command of the *Ducis* and would have been his direct superior if not for the Council having named Etton de jure leader of the task force.

Desdev was a good officer and Etton was glad to see that he'd survived. Desdev handed the datapad over without a word; casting quick glances Etton's way as though unsure of the General's possible reactions. Etton scanned through the reports; most of the information was intel from scattered scouting parties as well as other relatively insignificant information but one of the reports caught the General's eye. A task force-wide census underway, several of Etton's subordinates had begun compiling a list of survivors who had made it to the rendezvous by name, rank, and unit. Etton scanned the list searching through the list of names, wincing inwardly at how many were red, signifying the missing or presumed dead. Etton finished the list but began scrolling through it again, this time practically emitting an air of alarmed apprehension. *This can't be, they have to be here.*

Desdev took a step towards Etton, the somber look on his face and the dimness in his eyes told Etton what he already knew. "We still have a lot of men out in the field." Desdev stated matter-of-factly.

A nearby adjutant chimed in, "That list doesn't mean anything. They couldn't even pick up your scanner in this mess." However, the man's face fell when Etton turned away, leaning against a nearby table, jostling the computers resting on it much to the annoyance of their operators.

Karos took a step forward, looking from one man to the other with slight curiosity. "What's going on? What's the matter, sir?"

The General looked up suddenly, his voice ringing through the tent so that everyone could hear. "I want increased scans; I want to know if someone's sneaking up on us this time. Increase scouting parties in the northwest and southeast portions of the forest. That's where they attacked from and that's where they'll be coming from. Those are the most likely directions from which any stragglers will be coming." Etton moved towards Desdev, who watched the General with a mixture of humility and concern. Etton met Desdev's gaze and held it for a moment. "I want this order to go to all scouting parties ASAP: Do not engage any contacts whatsoever until they have been confirmed as friendly or hostile, we don't need friendly fire." Etton scanned the room, shaking his head when he saw several of the assembled men and women staring at him intently, as though expecting something more. "Get to it people!"

The clatter of various murmurs, humming machinery, and two-dozen people tapping keys once again filled the tent almost immediately.

Desdev gave Etton a curt nod before motioning for him to follow outside the tent. Etton moved after the commander quickly, leaving the suddenly crowded and very warm fabrication for the harsh winds of the clearing. When they'd gotten far enough from the structures Desdev stopped and turned towards Etton, his face sullen. "We've got a problem."

Etton exhaled deeply, he'd sensed that the commander had been holding something back. "How bad is it?"

"Bad" Desdev replied, looking away slightly. "There's a massive front building."

Etton squinted of into the distance. Taking note that the wind had begun to increase and the snow was descending more rapidly, and at an increased angle. He looked back at Desdev, "How long can we stay here?"

"Not long. We don't know for sure it's moving towards us fast."

Etton exhaled audibly, pinching the bridge of his nose. “And there’s no way of holding our position? We couldn’t fortify the encampment?”

Desdev shook his head slowly, “No, the data we’ve received from our remote stations is incomplete but all the readings say we’ll have winds of two-hundred-twenty to two-hundred-sixty kilometers an hour. Even our prefab structures would be damaged from those conditions”

“Damn” Etton cursed silently. “We’ll have to move to the forest. It may be able to shield us from the worst of the storm.”

Desdev nodded. “There’s something else, before we left the Ducis there was a sensor reading that we discarded. It was some sort of subterranean formation off to the edge of the valley. It was overlooked due to the arrival of the Aprion force but it could provide some cover from the storm. If we start moving now we may be able to reach it before the brunt of the storm hits us.”

Etton scanned the forest’s edge for any sign of movement but saw nothing. “You’re right. Let’s get on it; we’ll need to pack up quickly if we want any chance. We’ll just have to hope that some of the other stragglers find us. Issue the order, this camp needs to be down by the hour.”

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The remnants of the task force were set to move a quarter of an hour behind schedule and Etton could already tell the storm was growing ever closer. The wind had picked up significantly and several of the abandoned prefab structures which had been built for the express purpose of standing up to the harshest conditions were beginning to fracture and most if not all of the tents that had been set up were now somewhere farther down the valley, the thick canvas material unable to stand against the gale force winds.

The majority of the task force had already embarked and the last of the transports were preparing to leave. Etton had sent Dresdev and the majority of the surviving senior staff ahead with the others. An adjutant appeared at Etton’s side, leaving the general slightly perturbed that he hadn’t sensed the man approach. Etton turned to the man slowly in a deliberate fashion. “What’s our status?”

The adjutant shivered slightly as a gust of frigid wind tore past. “We’ve managed to get most of our equipment out and ran a final scan of our immediate area before we broke down our sensor net. There were no other readings.”

Etton once again scanned the forests edge, which was now obscured by the dense flurries of snow.

The man looked around nervously as he waited for the general to move. Only when a sudden crackle came over his comm. Signaling that the last RAEXT was prepped for departure did he interrupt. “Sir...”

Etton suddenly became aware of his surroundings and turned abruptly. “Lets go. We’re done here.”

“About time,” the man muttered under his breath, apparently unaware that Etton heard him. However, the general let the comment go, they’d all been through hell the past few hours.

Etton moved into the waiting RAEXT’s rear hatch and strapped himself into a crash seat. As the hatch began to close, shutting out the screeching howl of the wind he

allowed himself a moment of reflection, recalling just before the attack and how in this gods damned wasteland he'd lost so much. *Will I ever be able to forgive myself?*

The transport's engine growled to life as the halftrack began moving and he realized that he already knew the answer.

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Etton felt the RAEXT decelerate as it slowly ground to a halt. Seconds later the rear hatch lowered, letting a coolness seep slowly into the compartment. Unstrapping himself from his seat's harness, he stepped out into the darkness beyond the RAEXT's exterior foglights. He found himself in a large cave. The sound of idling RAEXT's echoed off the walls and faint islands of illumination from the myriad floodlights revealed how large the cavern actually was. Looking up he could vaguely make out the smooth surface of the near invisible ceiling.

The dark forms of several troopers approached him at a run, their features half hidden by the shadows produced from the RAEXT's foglights.

The lead figure snapped a quick salute, waiting to speak only after Etton returned the gesture. "Sir, Commander Desdev requests you meet him over at the command center, he says it's top priority."

Etton nodded, "Indeed, show me the way."

The troopers led Etton through several checkpoints and stations that had apparently been set up throughout the cave. He walked past what had apparently been designated as a vehicle pool judging from the numerous vehicles lined up in neat rows. Some of whom showed signs of recent use; as Etton passed he could hear the pinging of a hot engine cooling down. Moving past the makeshift 'garage' Etton moved through a small city of personal tents, makeshift living quarters that every Erebian soldier was issued in case of this very event. As they began passing the smaller tents Etton noted they slowly gave way to larger, more elaborate structures, most were still tents but he could see several more durable prefab structures that had been set up. Apparently someone had managed to salvage at least some from the rendezvous site.

As his guide ushered him into one of the largest prefab structures Etton made a mental note to find whoever was responsible for that insight and thank him personally. Being intended as slightly more durable and more importantly, were climate controlled. Relishing in the warmth that suddenly washed over him, Etton briefly forgot the reason he was there in the first place; Desdev.

The sub-commander was leaning in towards a holopanel intently; face only a few inches from the orange-red projection. Sensing newcomers, Desdev looked up at Etton, an expression of relief filling his otherwise weary features. "General! I'm glad to see you made it. Last I heard things were getting very nasty out there."

"They are, before we left half the camp was somewhere down the valley, the storm's bad out there, but on the flipside we'll be very difficult to find." Etton said, his tone hopeful.

Desdev nodded, moving towards Etton. "The latest census is in. Roughly a quarter of the task force is accounted for." Desdev spoke slowly, as though he was unsure whether or not he wanted to continue. "No word from the Monoran units, either of them."

Under the holopanel's glow Etton seemed to physically pale at the news. For a few moments he stared off into the hologram, seemingly lost in thought. His features cemented in a look of utter dismay.

The two stood there in silence for well over a minute before an adjutant entered the structure, wheezing from exertion. Both men looked up at the new arrival with similarly puzzled expressions on their faces. The adjutant snapped off a quick salute and immediately began talking, spitting out more syllables than either of the two officers would have imagined possible under normal circumstances.

Eventually, Desdev raised his hand in a halting gesture to which the adjutant abruptly stopped speaking. "Slow down Private, we can't understand you. What is it?"

The man took a few moments to gulp some air before resuming at a much slower pace. "Sirs, one of our recon teams has found something deeper into the cave!"

Etton looked up from the holograph, his eyes lighting up. "What did you find exactly?"

The man shook his head, taking another deep breath. "You have to see for yourself. I'll take you to them."

With that the adjutant left the structure, with both officers in tow back towards the vehicle pool where a RAEXT was idling. Etton and Desdev followed the adjutant into the halftrack's rear compartment and within seconds they were roaring deeper into the depths of the cavern. The adjutant began filling the two of them in on the details. As they got closer to their destination both men could feel their uneasiness grow.

Finally, the transport came to a sudden stop, almost as though the driver had just noticed some obstacle and had broke hard to keep from hitting it. Puzzled, Etton and Desdev leapt out into the ankle deep snow before the rear hatch had even fully lowered and began making their way to the front of the RAEXT. In front of the transport they found several troopers standing with flares set up along what seemed to be a massive wall of dark ice. While Etton approached the group and started talking to them Desdev made his way over to the icy partition, noting with some curiosity the rocklike material that was buried what seemed like several inches into the icy surface.

With a tentative hand, Desdev reached out towards the ice, his hand slowly making contact with the smooth surface. Upon closer inspection, he noticed that the material had a series of intricate designs which ran along its surface which the RAEXT's foglights illuminated.

After some time, Etton arrived at his side, staring at the design for a moment before finally speaking. "Are you alright Commander?"

Desdev, who found himself at a loss for words, simply continued staring at the glyphs with amazement, his hand still tracing the strange symbols.

Etton managed to tear his eyes off the strange markings and eyed the Desdev for a few moments, disturbed by what he saw. He grabbed Desdev's shoulder slightly and gave him a gentle nudge from which the commander snapped back to reality.

Desdev's face contained a look of alarm; his features seemed physically worn, as though he had been almost completely mentally drained from the experience. For a moment he attempted to form words, but faltered, an almost painful look of anxiousness in his eyes.

Etton began ushering the man back towards the waiting transport along with the remaining scout team. As he walked, he opened a channel with his comm. The voice that

came over it belonged to Clenel, who had taken over for the two senior leaders while they were gone. "Sirs?"

"We're going to need an engineering detachment and some heavy equipment up here ASAP." Etton stated, trying to keep the uncertainty out of his voice as much as possible.

"Understood, I've already sent the engineering squad and I'll send what equipment we still have from the Ducis up there as soon as possible." Clenel's voice chimed in over a cackle of static.

Etton reached to his shoulder strap and keyed his comm. "Thank you Lieutenant." He said, before cutting the connection. He looked over at Desdev, who was leaning against the side of the RAEXT, rubbing his temples slowly. "Taveras, are you alright?"

Desdev looked up at Etton with a glassy eyed look, "I think so... I'm feeling a bit, out of it." Etton noticed that several of the troopers were shifting around, signifying their unease with the effect the markings had taken on their commander. Several of the troopers cast quick, almost fearful glances over at the ice walls, their curiosity getting the better of them.

Then, abruptly, Commander Desdev let out an ear piercing scream and doubled over into the snow, clutching his hands to his head. Several nearby troopers rushed to help Etton pick the thrashing Commander up and get him into the RAEXT where they wrestled Desdev down for several minutes until he slipped into unconsciousness. As the Commander grew still the compartment became quite silent and an uncomfortable hush fell over the men.

The disturbing event was the last thing the men needed to think about after the day's events, Etton decided. They needed a distraction, "Troopers!" He shouted grabbing a small shovel from a nearby storage rack, "I want this snow cleared by the time that heavy equipment is up here. Do I make myself clear?"

There was a chorus of yes sir's as the General's orders as the men filed out of the halftrack wielding their shovels with the determination of men who were uncertain of a great many things, knowing the only thing they could do to keep their minds off what was going on was to focus on something they could change. Etton gently moved Desdev to the side of the compartment and, after giving an appraising look, exited the transport with a shovel in hand and off in the distance, echoing off the cavern walls, Etton could hear the low growls of approaching vehicles. Sighing, he planted the shovel in the snow and got to work.

The engineering teams arrived roughly ten minutes later. The slippery conditions and intermittently placed snowdrifts wreaking havoc with even the RAEXT's heavy-duty treads. The heavy drill got right to work, making its way much quicker due to the scout team's quick clearing of the surrounding drifts.

As the giant machine; a two-story automated lifter which had been specially fitted with three massive, rotating drill bits, trundled over to the wall the rest of the assorted men took cover, moving far beyond the range of any possible debris. Finally, after a nerve-wrackingly slow approach the driller reached the wall it's drills making contact with it's surface as a fountain of debris began flying outwards in all directions. Huge chunks of solid ice began raining down around the machines where Etton as well as most of the other troopers had occupied just minutes before. The drilling continued unabated for about thirty seconds before it was cut off by a deafening shriek followed by a belch of

sparks and smoke. Etton glanced around the edge of the RAEXT he'd taken cover behind, his head out and to his utter amazement he saw the driller shaking violently, black oily smoke pouring out from the exhaust.

One of the nearby engineers who had taken cover with him started shouting into his comm. Apparently talking to the drill operator, as a mixture of white noise and cursing rang out from the tiny device. Etton watched the machine as it attempted to resume drilling, a fountain of white hot sparks erupting from the machine accompanying the terrible screech of metal coming into contact with something far more solid than ice.

The engineer was screaming into the comm. at this point, his face flushed in frustration and anger. "Godsdammit! Pull it back! Pull the damn thing back! You're gonna wreck the damn thing!"

The machine stopped drilling, its triple drill bits slowly coming to a stop as it took a few tentative steps away from the now bare wall, almost as though reluctantly conceding defeat to a superior foe.

Etton got up from behind the halftrack and made his way towards the wall, making his way through the maze of ice chunks that had been scattered about by the driller. As he approached, he vaguely realized that his mouth was agape; the sight that lay before him left him utterly baffled. A massive portion of the ice had been cleared away by the driller, the brutal efficiency of the sizeable machine's handiwork evident on the outer edges of the ice where some still remained. Yet, somehow, the machine had failed to even dent the metal surface of the wall. Even the intricate designs which completely covered the barrier's surface remained intact; completely pristine and untouched despite the driller's best efforts.

Etton felt lightheaded, although he wasn't quite certain if it was because of this seemingly impossible occurrence or the effect that the designs were having on his mind. Likewise, several others started verbalizing their astonishment. None more so than a pair of nearby engineers who were alternating between gawking at the wall's surface and exchanging curse strung exclamations to one another.

Etton looked down along the length of the partition, noticing with some degree of concern that several of the men were staring at the obsidian surface with hauntingly intent expressions, bringing to mind Desdev's earlier erratic behavior.

Etton tore his gaze off the glyphs, somewhat annoyed that he had fallen under their spell for the second time and reached for his comm. "Attention, this is General Etton; I am ordering an immediate withdrawal from the area. This area is hazardous and is hereby restricted. All personnel are to return to the main encampment with all due haste." Putting aside his comm. he took a moment to watch and see if the men would follow his order, thankful when they all began moving towards their transports. As Etton turned back towards the RAEXT he caught himself turning to look, one last time, at the haunting glyphs so perfectly etched onto the wall's onyx surface.

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The ride back to the main encampment was unsettling to say the least; Etton watched as a pair of medics attempted to discover what had caused the sudden illness, disregarding Etton's explanation of the effects the glyphs seemed to have on him and the other troopers who had encountered them. He watched in silence as they worked,

examining the Commander's prone form for anything that could have possibly caused the man to suddenly break down.

When they made it back to the prefab structure Etton was finally welcomed with some good news. Clenel approached Etton with a wide grin, "Sir! I have good news!"

Etton straightened upright for a minute, relishing the feeling. "Lieutenant?"

"There was a lull in the storm and we managed to make brief contact with a forward outpost. We didn't maintain a connection long enough to receive a response but the message was confirmed sent."

*For once, some good news.* Etton thought as he let out a sigh of relief. "That's excellent news Lieutenant, it looks as though we'll have something of interest to report to command after all." He said, succeeding in masking his weariness from his subordinate.

"Sir?" Clenel asked, head cocked to the side slightly, his tone inquiring.

Etton shook his head slowly, "It doesn't matter right now. All we need to focus on at the moment is reestablishing contact with command."

Clenel nodded, casting a sideways glance to the flickering holopanel. "The storm should begin dying down over the next few hours, we should be able to get a signal through then."

"Very good Lieutenant," Etton said, looking at the assembled officers who were pouring over their consoles, "now I'm going to need-"

A trooper entered the room unexpectedly, bringing with him an aura of anxiety and apprehension. "Sir! General!"

Etton turned to face the new arrival. "Private?"

The man made a hasty salute and pointed back through the doorway. "Sir, you're needed at the infirmary. Right away."

Etton's face revealed a hint of concern. He knew what the reason was for his being sent for. Although he hoped that Desdev's condition had improved and that it was simply the Commander wanting to speak to him deep down he knew this most likely wasn't the case. Mentally, he prepared himself for the worst.

As Etton arrived at the two conjoined prefabs that made up the makeshift infirmary. Ushered inside by the sole trooper who stood guard at the entrance Etton was greeted one of the few field doctors who had made it through the ordeal. The man showed him to the enclosed observation suite Desdev occupied.

Etton entered the suite, quickly taking stock of Desdev's condition. Laying sprawled across the cot, he was stripped down to his undergarments, all of which were drenched in sweat. Etton cringed inwardly at the man. *He looks like hell.*

The medic who had brought him to the room entered after the General, closing the door quietly behind him.

Etton stared at the medic for a moment, "Is he going to be alright?"

The man nodded, his face showing visible bewilderment. "We haven't been able to find out what the problem is but we did pick up some unusual brain activity."

Etton's brow furrowed slightly, "What do you mean unusual?"

The man shrugged, looking over at Desdev's comatose body. "It's not anything that we haven't seen before, just a variation of some abnormal brainwaves. Then again, we're not entirely sure if it's even the reason for the Commander's ailment. It could be something completely unrelated," he said, folding his arms together in a gesture of deep

thought. “We’re looking into alternative causes at the moment but it could take a while. Assuming, of course, that there’s anything to find.”

Etton’s brow furrowed, “Those glyphs, you’re still not considering my explanation?”

The doctor let out a sigh, “Sir, with all due respect. It’s extremely unlikely that some symbols could have had this much of an impact on the Commander’s health.”

“I saw him right before it happened. He was staring at them for only the gods know how long before I shook him out of it.” Etton exclaimed, voice rising noticeably.

The man shook his head. “That may be true, but there were dozens of personnel exposed to the symbols and to my knowledge there haven’t been any other cases. No one else has reported anything at all like the symptoms that Commander Desdev has exhibited.” He paused for a moment, bringing his hand to his chin in a thoughtful pose. “Now, there have been several cases of nausea and headaches and for that reason we haven’t completely discounted your theory, General. But you have to look at it from a scientific perspective. There have been no prior cases such as this. Ever.”

The General opened his mouth as though about to speak but ultimately decided against it. He stared at the man for a moment before walking over to Desdev’s side. “Well you’re the expert. I just need to know how long until we have the Commander back on his feet.” Etton said, staring down at Desdev, his tone low.

“Of course sir, we’ll make sure that he’s back in command in no time.” The man said; his voice with the tinge of a man who had absolute conviction in his assertion.

He was going to continue but his comm. suddenly burst to life, a stoic voice issuing through the device; “You need you down here ASAP. We’ve got a situation.”

The man grabbed the comm. out of his pocket and muttered into it for a moment before stuffing back into his white labcoat pocket. “I’m sorry, but we’ve got some new arrivals. The Commander needs rest anyway.” The doctor had moved towards the door and his hand already rested on the doorknob. Clearly something had come up.

Etton turned back towards the man, his tone stern and his voice even. “You go ahead; I’m going to keep an eye on him for a little bit.”

The medic stared at Etton for a few seconds; the turning wheels in his head were practically visible to the General as he decided on what to do until his thoughts were shattered once more by the comm. The voice that rang through the device was much more restless than it had been moments earlier, and the sense of urgency that came through ultimately made the decision for him. He looked at Etton, hand still cemented to the doorknob. “That’s fine; just make sure that you keep the room locked at all times. The Commander may still have some trauma from before and we don’t know how he’ll react when he wakes up. If he starts to regain consciousness leave the room immediately and inform one of us. We need to know as soon as it happens.”

Etton nodded, his expression sincere. “Of course.”

The medic wrenched the door open, shot Etton a concerned look, and then disappeared out into the hallway, closing the door behind him.

Etton moved over to the Commander’s side slowly, as though hesitant to approach the man for fear of disturbing him. It was at almost that exact moment, however, that Desdev began to stir, causing Etton to jump back in alarm.

Desdev’s eyes opened suddenly, revealing two bloodshot orbs which quickly began scanning the room. The man’s dark skin became even more drenched, as though

the mere effort of waking was taxing him to the point of exhaustion. When he saw Etton's startled form he opened his mouth in astonishment, his lips moving as though trying to form words. With great effort the man shakily raised a hand towards Etton, still mouthing the General's name over and over until finally, after what seemed a titanic effort, the Commander spoke; his voice dry and raspy. "Etton? Is that you?"

Etton grasped the quivering hand firmly. "Commander. Are you alright?" The Commander attempted to sit up but Etton gently pushed him back down. "Sir, hold on, I'll go get the medics. They can help you!"

As he turned towards the door he found that Desdev was nowhere near as frail as he appeared to be; his hand was locked in a vice-like grip with the Commander and a hoarse 'no' croaked from the man's seemingly parched throat.

Etton leaned in closer to the Commander, "What was that, sir? I couldn't-"

Before he could finish Desdev swiftly sprang upwards, grasping Etton's uniform with both hands and pulling the General closer towards him to the point where he was inches from Desdev's face. Etton attempted to pull back but the man's grip was surprisingly strong and he was unable to break free. "Commander!"

Desdev pulled Etton closer to him and the General could actually feel the man's breath on the side of his face. The Commander began uttering words at an almost inaudible volume and he had to strain to hear what the man was saying. "Etton... please... forgive me, I've seen things... terrible things... I've changed... it's all so complicated now... but I know-" Desdev suddenly contorted in visible agony, his hands gripping the General's uniform even tighter than before, releasing an inhuman shriek that chilled Etton to the marrow.

Before he knew what was happening, Desdev was out of the bed and upon Etton, releasing an ear shattering howl. Etton tried to stop him but the man was powerful and the adrenaline that was no doubt surging through his veins further strengthened his bestial fury. After taking several punches Etton was able to get his feet under Desdev and, with as much power as he could muster, kicked his Commander off of him, sending Desdev across the room, into the monitoring equipment that had been set up near the bed.

It was only after Etton had managed to get to his feet that he noticed his holster was empty. He turned towards the recovering Desdev, dread filling him as the man rose to his feet, weapon in hand.

Desdev's hands shook as he brought the weapon to bear on its owner, his face contorted in agony as though suffering some inhuman amount of pain. He took a menacing step towards Etton, moving slowly as though he was torn on what action to take. With gritted teeth the Commander began to speak, however, the voice that came from Desdev's lips had changed. Where his voice had once held a certain warmth it was now cold and hollow, as though the man who had been Commander Taveras Desdev had disappeared, replaced by someone vastly different. "I'm so sorry..." With shaking hands the Commander placed the weapon under his chin, gave Etton one last, pleading stare, and fired.

Etton watched in horror as Desdev's body crumpled to the ground. He ran to the Commander's side, kicking the weapon from the man's hand as he bent over Desdev's body. "Gek! Sir!" It was only when he saw the man's lifeless eyes that he accepted the man was gone. Disbelief washing over him, Etton took several steps backwards and sat on the cot, staring at his bloodstained hands in a state of shock. He'd seen men die

before; in combat he'd seen his comrades torn in two by high-caliber rounds, he'd seen a close friend blown open from shrapnel. He'd seen things that would have driven a lesser man to madness but the look on Desdev's face, that look of simultaneous horror, pain, and malevolence right before he fired had shaken him more than anything he'd witnessed throughout his long career in the Confederate military.

The medics tore into the room seconds later, cursing profusely at the sight of Desdev's body. They rushed over to him, almost completely ignoring Etton as they tried in vain to find some evidence of life in the Commander's body. When none was found, the man who had left Etton earlier got to his feet, hands covering his face.

He exhaled deeply, and looked down at Etton and for a moment their eyes met before breaking off. The medic looked back at Desdev's corpse and inevitably found the discarded weapon lying like a black omen against the glaring white tiles. His features darkened as he looked back at Etton. "Sir, what happened here?"

Etton knew what the man meant. Even though the man hadn't said it outright he knew what he'd meant. *He's wondering if I shot him. He wants to know if I killed Desdev.* Etton looked at his questioner, staring right at his face until the man looked away, no longer able to bear seeing the look in Etton's eyes. With that, Etton moved over to Desdev's body, pushing the other medics out of the way before picking up Desdev's lifeless form and moving him to the bed. Etton left without another word, pausing only to glance at his pistol which had ended up across the room before slowly closing the door, leaving the rest of the medical personnel in stunned silence.

By the time Etton finally arrived back in the command prefab news of the Commander's death had reached most of the senior officers. They greeted his arrival with a cautious silence and Etton could feel a dozen pairs of eyes follow him to the command holopanel. Staring at the distorted image he did his best to ignore their uncomfortable stares until it grew to be too much and he needed to say something to make them understand. "As you have all heard, Commander Desdev is dead. He was a great man and a close friend..." Etton paused for a moment, making every effort to veil his emotions in front of his subordinates before continuing. "He will be remembered for the leadership he displayed and his exemplary service to the Confederacy. May the benevolence of Clementia grant him mercy as Lord Thantos guides his soul to the afterlife."

There was a long silence after Etton spoke, and he let a brief silence fill the room for a moment as though deciding on what more to say. "There will be no further investigations into this site. We will depart for Confederate controlled territory as soon as we are able. I want us ready to embark the minute the storm clears and not a second later."

He met the men's stares; seeing uncertainty in some, suspicion in others. He didn't care. He looked into each man's eyes as he spoke, his tone cold. "That's an order."

### **201.3745 P.C.**

The chamber was dimly lit and cast in shadow when Etton was ushered inside. The assembled Lord Marshalls had ordered his testimony to the events at Clarion almost immediately after his beleaguered taskforce had set foot on Erebian soil. Etton had slept very little since and was not in any condition to present his statement. Nevertheless, he found himself before several of the Confederate Military's highest ranking military

officials having to explain what was being widely publicized in the national news as one of the worst defeats suffered by Confederate forces in several years. That coupled with the pending investigation of Commander Desdev's death had put Etton's career and even his freedom on a very precarious slope.

He made his way to the middle of the room, opting to stand before the assembled Lord Marshalls. The moment he had indicated his preference to the assembled Marshalls they commenced with the proceedings: "You are Nicholas Etton, is that correct?"

Etton nodded, keeping his tone even. "That is correct."

"Please state your rank and military identification serial number for the record." It was Jacob Mannus, one of the younger Marshalls and the man who had been tasked with the debriefing.

"Rank: General. IDSN: G239.4532"

Mannus nodded. "Now General, let me be the first to express my deepest regret for the events which took place under your command and for the loss of Commander Desdev, he was a good officer." There was a brief pause as he looked over the case file that had been gleaned from numerous sources in the taskforce since their return to Confederate territory. "May I also offer my sincerest condolences for the loss of your-

He was interrupted by Marshall Kecel, "I believe I speak for all of us when I say we are sorry for the man's personal loss but I must insist that we begin at once."

Etton clasped his hands behind his back, not buying either of the Marshalls sympathies for one second. "I appreciate your kind words. The losses we've sustained were... immense, everyone has suffered."

Mannus nodded emphatically. "You mentioned in your report that there was a cavern in which several artifacts were discovered."

Etton's brow furrowed, remembering the cavern wall and the cryptic glyphs that had been scrawled upon it. "Yes, we discovered a large fortification made of an unknown material. Our initial attempts to breach the"

One of the other Marshalls spoke up, holding a copy of the report up to the light. "It says here that there were markings on this structure."

Etton shifted slightly. "There were markings that had been etched into the surface, most likely some sort of language although I am not familiar with it."

Mannus gave him an intrigued stare. "I understand you were unable to breach the barrier?"

"It was attempted but at that point the Commander had been incapacitated. My priorities were to ensure that the location was secure; exploration was not a primary objective."

Mannus nodded slowly. "You did well all things considered."

Etton stared at his feet. "Of course, sir."

Kecel folded his fingers and put them on the desk before speaking. "General Etton, we believe you have discovered something of great importance. Something that could very well affect the outcome of the war."

Etton looked up at the man, his features dubious. "Sir?"

"General, you may have discovered something of greater importance than any military victory. A lostech cache larger than anything we've previously encountered." Mannus said, his tone low and conspiratorial.

"But sir!" Etton exclaimed.

Mannus cut him off. "General, this matter is of the utmost importance. Discretion is needed and in the past you have proven to be both a capable and trustworthy officer and that is why we need you to lead a task force back to secure the site."

Etton couldn't help but be surprised, having expected the proceedings to go very differently. "With all due respect sirs, I don't believe I'm worthy for such a responsibility. Surely there's someone more suited for this role...."

Mannus shook his head. "You misunderstand me, General. We were not asking you to take up this command. The matter has already been decided."

Etton swallowed the bile that had formed in the back of his throat. "I see. Well then it seems the matter is decided. Though I must voice my sincerest doubts."

"Your concern is noted, General. You and your taskforce will head out as soon as we can replenish your losses. However, that should take several months, plenty of time for you to prepare."

"You should be honored, General; the future of the Confederacy has been placed in your very capable hands." Kecel added, a shrewd grin on his face that made Etton sick.

Etton choked down a cough. "I am very grateful for this honor. I will do my duty for the Confederacy."

Mannus nodded, "I'm sure you will. Now if there's nothing more I believe this meeting can be adjourned. General, we thank you for your time."

As the Lord Marshalls began filing out of the chamber through the side corridors until Etton was left alone in the chamber. Fighting back tears of frustration he collapsed back onto the lone chair that had been placed in the middle of the chamber.