

Chapter 5

*“And with great vigor we renew the battle against our enemy.
None will stop us in our quest for peace, and all who swear allegiance
To the Erebian banner know that peace cannot exist until our enemy lies defeated”
- High Councilor Harlan Venae (3365 P.C.-3431 P.C.)*

254.3745 P.C. (Present Day)

Judicator Ames Lier made his way up the worn marble steps of the inner Council Chambers towards the Great Hall. It hadn't been the first time in his life that he had ventured through the ancient colonnades of the Erebian High Council Chambers; nevertheless, the building's magnificence endured.

Every few pillars was a monolithic effigy of one of the four Erebian gods; the golden muscled form of Mactonus; the guardian deity of battle. The hooded onyx figure of Thantos; Lord of the afterlife. Clementia; goddess of mercy and compassion, characterized by her soft alabaster features and flowing robes stood upright, face turned towards the heavens. At the far end of the building was Veritos; Lord of knowledge, truth, and the Arcanum; a lost text represented by a pure white marble tome that he held proudly in one hand. Reverence and awe were most likely the architect's intent, an ambition that had certainly been sated as the statues stared at the tiny form of Lier as he approached the stone deities' feet.

Upon reaching the polished golden doors, Lier entered one of the colonnade's main antechambers, flashing his identification; a small Judicial badge on the left of his overcoat, over his heart, at the guard who promptly granted him access to the Council Chambers. Lier hurried his pace; he had heard that the Councilors do not like to be kept waiting.

Lier found it extremely difficult to not stare at the intricate carvings that adorned the enormous domed room, despite his best efforts he realize that his mouth was open as he stared at the beautiful artwork that encompassed him. He'd heard that the entire room is a means of catching its visitor's off-guard, a way of giving the council members an edge; it certainly felt as though the room's massive volume was having a debilitating effect on him.

The first thing that the Judicator noticed was that the lights had been dimmed. The illumination, which could easily rival a large stadium, had been reduced to little more than a dim glow, casting much of the vast chamber in shadows. The Councilors were arranged in a raised semi-circle while the remaining hemisphere contained numerous empty seats for the myriad senators who usually inhabited the Council chambers. In the middle of the circle was a brightly lit solitary dais. Lier, unsure of what to do with himself, stood at the edge of the light until a voice told him to take a step up to the brightly lit platform.

Looking up towards the councilors, Lier saw that many of them had made it to the meeting, which only reinforced how important it was. Councilor Perin Steele, one of the younger members of the council, easily distinguishable by his jet-black hair and sharp-facial features was flipping through a large stack of papers, a frown on his face. Lier also

noticed that Councilor Donim Belthzen, a gaunt, harsh-looking man, was also reading a stack of documents intently. Looking over, Lier could see the outlines of Councilor Regis Arden, a stern-looking, elderly man, and the dark-skinned, bulky form of Councilor Thinneus Whier muttering quietly to one another beneath the lowered stage lights while Councilor Tera Aiten, a blonde-haired, middle-aged woman, stared silently at the Judicator. Councilor Marcus Toren, the sixth and final Councilor, eyed the Judicator over with an altogether disapproving stare.

Lier addressed the arranged Councilors; "I am Judicator Ames Lier, the Council summoned me today for an assignment."

Councilor Arden regarded him with a nod and several other Councilors followed suit, the expressions on their faces looked as though they were expecting him to say more.

Finally, after a second of silence, Councilor Arden rose from his seat. "Judicator, as you know, our war against the Aprion Republic has run into a problem. The speed and efficiency of the enemy's response to our attack was exceptionally well executed. Several of our Lord Marshals have requested large numbers of auxiliary troops to replenish their losses. We have, of course, planned for this setback and have the resources needed to meet our military's demand but I do not particularly like the fact that we are already digging into our reserves this early into the conflict."

Councilor Toren abruptly cut Arden off. "Perhaps we should tell the Judicator his assignment?"

Councilor Arden regarded Toren with an icy glare. "Very well, Marcus, although I would see to it that you resist interrupting a fellow Councilor in the future.

Lier tried his hardest to keep a neutral expression as the two Councilors quarreled with one another. Several of the other Councilors didn't remain as dignified and he could have sworn that he saw more than one smirk flash across their collective faces at their peers' petty quarreling.

Councilor Arden began speaking once again. "As I was saying before I was interrupted by my esteemed colleague, our plans are already in jeopardy and I do not believe that we will be able to maintain the initiative if we have more problems on the front. We've had some... difficulty with certain senior members of the Confederate Military. The man in question is General Nicholas Etton. Now, we haven't gotten the entire picture here but it seems that Etton has been unexpectedly involved in certain operations that are vital to the Confederacy. Arden's face grew harsh; "there may be major repercussions if this information is not properly contained. Normally we would simply follow the necessary containment procedures when someone such as Etton is exposed to such delicate intel, but a sizeable portion of the General's forces are fiercely loyal to him; it seems that Etton holds quite a bit of sway amongst many servicemembers. We cannot risk the outcry to having him disposed of in the normal fashions without good reason. Your task is to "advise" him and ensure that he carries out his orders."

Lier nodded, somewhat confused about what the Councilors were asking him to do. "And what, exactly would that entail?"

Councilor Whier replied in almost a murmur. "Upon your arrival, when you find the General to be unfit for leading our forces, you are required relieve him of his command and bring him to Clarion Central Command for a summary review and discharge."

Still unsure of what he was being asked to do Lier interrupted the councilor; “I’m sorry Councilor, but what if I cannot find any problems with Etton?”

This time Councilor Toren replied; his features ominous. “The General has seen things that he should not have seen, investigated things that could jeopardize our entire war effort. The Council is positive that you’ll ensure that the General’s reprimand is comparable to transgressions.”

Lier nodded, still unsure of what that exactly meant but not wanting to push the issue he followed along. “I see.”

Councilor Belthzen nodded at Whier and began to speak, his tone businesslike and removed. “We have already arranged for your transportation to the Clarion Front. Prepare yourself Judicator; you’ll be leave tomorrow afternoon. I will send you’re updated clearance codes to you after the briefing.”

The Council Members then proceeded to go over a variety of objectives that the High Council had deemed critical to the success of their investigation, which basically meant that they were things Lier had to do if he wanted to keep his job. After almost two hours the briefing ended and the Judicator was given a number of files before finally being escorted to the exit by two Hall guards. The full force of what he had been asked to do left him feeling somewhat confused; Judicators rarely visited war zones, so this was very unusual, nigh unprecedented. Members of the Judicariate were a mainly used as a means of maintaining internal security against terrorism, crime, and other dangers that posed a risk to the stability of the Confederacy, not as political detectives.

Lier left the Council Chambers and made his way back through the Great Hall, his head so full of questions that he hardly noticed the magnificent architecture that had hypnotized him earlier.

When Lier got outside he realized that the scenery had changed while had been in the Council chambers; it was late afternoon now and the midday heat that had baked him earlier had all but disappeared as the sun had settled lower in the sky, amber rays beaming in between the cracks of the city’s skyline. Much to the Judicator’s relief, much of the sweltering summer heat had disappeared along with the sun.

As he walked, a man wearing a dark driver’s uniform appeared, seemingly from nowhere, behind the Judicator. “Sir would you like me to get your vehicle?”

Lier shook his head; wondering why this man had approached him, the Council Chambers, as well as the majority of Government buildings had valet services but only to regular personnel. “No, I’m fine, I already have a driver, he’ll be here any minute. Thanks anyway.”

The man nodded quickly, looking somewhat unhappy. Lier regarded him with a strange look before the man wandered away, walking as though unsure of what to do next. Uncomfortable, Lier began to walk in the opposite direction and as he did he could swear he felt the man’s gaze on him, making a mental note of the man’s face.

As the Judicator left the council chambers the council members stayed silent, watching Lier leave fixedly. As soon as the doors had closed behind him councilor Tera Aiten shot up from her seat and pointed at Regis Arden, her tone burning with anger; “Why would you even think of involving the Judicariate? That’s the last thing we need

here. Even worse, they've sent us a pup! He's no older than his mid-twenties! How could you even think of pulling a stunt like this without the complete consent of the Council?"

Arden met her stare, seemingly no less intimidated by his fuming peer than a man to an insect. "I believe that you are misinformed, *Councilor*. I was not the only one on the council to approve the involvement of the Judicariate, in fact, everyone here, save you, approved the use of a Judicial agent."

Aiten looked around the room at the other councilors, attempting to find some trace of evidence on their faces to disprove Arden's words. She found none. Feelings of betrayal, anger, and confusion came all at once and she had to fight the urge to scream at Arden's smug face. "Why was I not included in this decision?" She looked around the room at the other councilors, waiting for a reply, but there was none.

Arden's smirk widened and he sat down, staking a pile of papers nonchalantly; "We didn't deem you to be necessary for this particular matter. Regardless, your voice against it wouldn't have made any difference, the Judicariate is involved and they will stay involved."

Tera Aiten stared at Arden with a look of pure loathing before nodding; she understood that there would be no point in pushing the issue. It was finished. However, the temptation for the last word proved to be too great for her. Councilor Aiten pushed in her chair and before stepping away from the table she looked Arden straight in the eye; receiving the slightest satisfaction from Arden's sudden nervousness as she spoke. "You have introduced yet another variable into this already complex equation. If something goes wrong, you and you alone will take the blame." With that, Councilor Tera Aiten left, leaving her fellow councilors to mull over her words.

Macharius picked up Lier shortly after the man who had asked to get his car had approached him; Macharius was the Judicator's permanent aide and bodyguard and had been assigned to him since he had acquired the rank of office.

A solid man; Macharius was all muscle and deterred most conflict by his mere presence. However, the Judicator's aide was no brute; his mind was as sharp as his reflexes and within his skull sat the mind of a prodigal tactician, a gift that had saved the two of them on more than one occasion. Macharius had been dishonorably discharged from the Erebian Military Academy for the accidental death of a fellow soldier in advanced training. He was disgraced and most likely would have either wound up a criminal or a mercenary later on down the line.

Macharius's assignment to Judicator Lier at that time had been an unbeknownst blessing to him, while it was not the most glorious job a former soldier could ask for he now had a sense of purpose. He had served under Lier for a number of years with professionalism and skill unparalleled by anyone the Judicator had ever worked with, utilizing his military knowledge to save the Judicator on countless occasions.

After they had driven a good twenty minutes or so Macharius tried to start something of a conversation; noticing how quiet he was in the backseat. "Sir, if I may say something?"

Lier broke his gaze from the window and looked at Macharius, nodding. "Of course, Macharius. Please, call me Ames for once."

Macharius nodded, turning off the main highway. “What’s wrong, Sir? Something seems to be troubling you.”

Lier shook his head half laughing at Macharius’s stubborn use of his formal title and looked at the aide. “Nothing, Macharius. Just something about my new assignment.”

Lier saw the aide look at him strangely through the rear-view mirror before replying. “Before you met with the High Council you were happier than I’d ever seen you, now you leave and you look as if someone died.”

Macharius knew that Lier couldn’t really tell him about the details of his assignments but Lier still found it nice that Macharius was concerned. “No, don’t worry. It was just a minor detail. I am excited to get this assignment, I really am. It just might be a little more challenging than either of us are used to.”

The trip to his hotel was long and uneventful. Macharius had memorized the route perfectly in the short time that they’d been in the city and managed to go through the traffic laden highways with little difficulty. Regardless, the route to the hotel was long, giving Lier plenty of time to think about his new assignment as they followed the twisting expressways that snaked in between the towering skyscrapers city planners had crammed into the limited urban zones of Erebus City.

One of the things that puzzled Lier most about the assignment he had been given was that from the importance the Councilors had stressed. It seemed to make almost no sense to give him, a mere child when compared to some of the more senior members of his office, such a high priority assignment.

Several possibilities came to Lier’s mind; either the Council members didn’t care nearly as much for the assignment as he believed they did, which would account for why they assigned such a low importance operative to the task, or they needed a relatively ‘green’ operative for a mission that they could afford to cut loose upon the ops completion or should the investigation happen to go awry.

Suddenly, another, far more disturbing possibility came to mind; the possibility that the Judicariate had sent him for the same purpose. An assignment such as this was an infrequent occurrence and he could not think of any government agency that was specifically suited for such an undertaking. Either way Lier had no false pretences; he was expendable, and he knew it.

After Macharius parked the sedan in the bottom level of the Hotel garage the two men made their way towards the elevators. As they walked through the garage, the scent of damp cement filled Lier’s nostrils and the mainly vacant garage echoed their footsteps in an unnerving fashion. Lier strode quickly, partly because of the strange feeling that he’d had in the back of his mind about the garage and partly because he wanted to get to his room quickly so that he could review the documents about his assignment that the Councilors had given him.

The elevator doors opened immediately, revealing an embroidered compartment with thick carpeting that smelled slightly of flora. Lier shook his head; the hotel was a plush and extravagant establishment that was more tailored to suit the needs of the Confederacy’s elite. Indeed, some of the higher profile Erebian Cabinet as well as several renowned Councilors had graced these halls with their presence, which made the experience even more enjoyable to ever enthusiastic Judicator. Lier didn’t particularly like the décor but it was where he was assigned so he didn’t complain.

Lier watched in silence as lift ascended to the fifth floor in silence. As the lift stopped its ascent and the Judicator and his aide exited the compartment and stepped out into the long hall Lier stopped in mid-step, sensing that something was wrong. Macharius sensed it too and immediately pushed Lier back into the elevator. An armed man in a black bodysuit stood in the hallway, firing several rounds at the Macharius before turning to run the opposite direction making his way down the far-end stairwell. Lier saw the rounds whiz past Macharius as he scrambled to his feet. For a moment the Judicator thought that Macharius gotten out of the encounter unscathed until he fell to the floor, clutching his abdomen tightly. Lier's expression turned to horror as a dark puddle began seeping into the thick, white carpeting.

Lier ran to Macharius, moving his hand to reveal a gruesome wound; a round had struck his side; breaking through the weak spots in his body armor. Macharius's eyes had turned foggy and he mumbled something unintelligible to Lier; reaching out to his friend in a feeble gesture with a bloodstained hand before slumping to the ground, hopefully, Lier thought, from unconsciousness.

By now several of the other guests had appeared in the hallway in varying states of undress. Lier shouted at a man in briefs and a dirty T-shirt who had stepped out of a nearby room. "This man needs help! We need a medkit here now!" He watched the man disappear back into the room before yelling back, "And call for help! Get the paramedics here now!"

Several of the guests just stared in shock as they watched Lier struggled to control the bleeding. He realized in the back of his mind that my friend's wound was extremely severe; from the looks of it the bullet had ruptured at least one internal organ and Macharius was losing a lot of blood. After an eternity, a very sleepy looking, half naked man ran up to him and handed over a small medical kit. There was some gauze, disinfectant, and some other supplies but the kit had nowhere near the amount of equipment that was needed to stabilize his aide's condition.

The man in the briefs stood there, staring at the man on the ground; his mouth slightly agape, nervously shifting his weight from one foot to the other. Sensing that the kit wasn't anywhere near what the Macharius needed he tried to add, perhaps in an effort of self-consolation. "I called the paramedics. They should be here any minute."

Lier ignored the man, instead focusing on controlling the bleeding with the meager roll of gauze. Macharius had passed into total unconsciousness by now; and Lier hoped that it wasn't because of blood loss.

Within minutes, the paramedics arrived and began loading Macharius onto a stretcher. Lier got up, utterly exhausted and relieved at the paramedic's seemingly angelic arrival. The two paramedics began rushing the stretcher back towards the elevator, with Lier in tow. One of the medics, glancing back, noticed the Judicator following them and yelled back at him; "We're taking him to Clarion Hospital. You need to stay here with the arbitrators." Lier stopped running as the stretcher reached the lift and disappeared behind the closing doors.

The arbitrators; the Confederacy's national police force, arrived just as Macharius was shuttled away, Lier sidestepped an approaching officer as he tried to cordon off the hallway, flashing the officer his badge of office. As much as he wanted to get to the hospital, he knew that he had to find out as much as possible about the man who had tried to kill him. Lier made his way to his hotel room and quickly gathered his belongings.

The floor had been completely sealed off by the time Lier exited his room and a number of forensics officers were currently poring over the immediate area, complaining about the Judicator's blatant disturbance of the crime scene. Lier ignored them; he knew that they weren't going to find anything helpful; instead he left down the opposite end of the hallway, towards the stairwell stepping past the pair of somewhat distracted arbitrators who were busy cordoning off the area from curious civilians and hotel staff. As he was walking, he pulled out his comm. and dialed the only person he could think of; his old friend and colleague; Senior Judicator Thomas Napier.

Thomas Napier, Lier's direct superior, and also one of the highest-ranking Judicators in the Judicariate, sat at his desk going over a debrief from an operative working undercover in a local terrorist cell. As a Senior Judicator, Napier was not required to, and often prevented from working in the field. A grunt at heart; he would've much rather been out in the field rather than sitting behind a desk. It was common knowledge that he had deftly evaded promotion for over two years, only accepting his long-overdue promotion because of the combined pressure of the High Council and the several of his peers. A worn, but jovial man, Thomas Napier emitted an almost paternal aura to many of the younger members of his office and was considered to be almost a legend amongst many in the Judicariate.

It was Thomas who had received and relayed Lier's instructions to come to Erebus to meet with the High Council. He also served as a representative of the High Council, which was why he had been moved to the Confederacy's capital upon his promotion. Thomas's comm. rang suddenly, shattering the silence in his office and pulling him from the dull report he had been reading. Napier recognized the voice instantly and instantly felt refreshed; it was Ames Lier, one of his favorite operatives. "Hello Ames. How's everything going? Did you're meeting with the Council go well?"

"Thomas, I have a problem. A big one."

Napier frowned. "What is it son?"

"I was attacked outside my hotel room."

Thomas inevitably interrupted after the last comment. "What! Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

Lier answered quickly, apparently prepared for that particular question. "Yes I'm fine, but Macharius isn't. He was hit pretty bad. The gunman escaped, I didn't get a positive ID."

Napier's brow furrowed and he closed the file he had been reading. The conversation had gotten his full attention. "Is he alright?"

Lier's voice sounded strange; there was an echo now, as though he was in a wide open space. "I don't know. He was bleeding pretty badly. I'm heading to the hospital where they took him right now... listen, I'm sure that this was meant for me."

Napier's voice carried a hint of worry now. "Ames, do you need anything? I can send someone to get you."

Lier declined. "No... that won't be necessary, but if you could meet me. I have something I need to do first but I'll be at Clarion Hospital soon. I want to talk to you in private."

"Of course, Ames. I'll meet you there."

“Thanks Thomas.” Napier put the phone down and exhaled deeply, feeling a chill crawl up his spine. Before this was over he’d have to have some things cleared up. As he’d suspected, someone hadn’t been very happy about the Judicariate’s involvement. He’d been afraid of this.

Lier cut the connection and found that he had wandered down to the hotel’s main lobby. It was a huge room; constructed entirely out of smooth, dark marble and occupied by numerous mahogany furnishings arrayed around a quaint fountain. From the high vaulted ceiling hung several dozen crystal chandeliers from which radiated thousands of glittering prisms all across the lobby, granting the entire space an almost enchanted atmosphere. Noting several expressions of shock and horror that were being directed towards him by the other guests, Lier suddenly noticed that his hands and overcoat were still covered in blood. He quietly slipped them into his coat pockets and made his way towards the registration desk.

Lier approached the desk and asked the hotel manager, a balding, overweight, squirrely-looking man to go over the security recordings. He was hesitant at first, probably because of Lier’s appearance, but gave in hesitantly after Lier flashed his identification. The man’s beady eyes shot back and forth between his badge and then Lier several times before glancing at several of the arbitrators who were roaming the lobby before nodding at the Judicator and ushering him behind the counter. He showed Lier into a back room that looked as if it hadn’t been disturbed since either of them had been born. A man sat in a swivel chair with his hat over his face and his legs propped up on the desk, snoring loudly. The fluorescent lights flickered on and off every couple of seconds as if trying to decide to whether or not they wanted to continue working. By now Lier was not amused. The manager squirmed at the questioning glare he received from the imposing agent.

Lier still couldn’t believe the room’s state; stacks of data-disks were piled all over the paltry eight-by-eight foot room and a lone computer screen was half-buried underneath it all. The manager timidly pulled a fold-up chair out from under a pile of disks and handed it to Lier. As he turned to leave, he informed Lier that if he needed anything else that he would be outside. As he closed the door, a stack of disks fell to the ground with a crash. The guard remained asleep. Lier shook his head and got to work.

It took Lier about an hour to find the camera feed to the fourth floor hallway from the mess of feeds. The recorder was buried under a half-eaten half-decomposed sandwich whose contents he couldn’t hope to identify. What the camera revealed wasn’t nearly as helpful as he would have hoped; the man was wearing a black bodysuit with a black mask that prevented him from seeing his face. The stairway camera proved to be just as useless; all it had caught was the gunman’s back as he escaped down the stairway. Nevertheless, Lier copied both files.

Frustrated, Lier left the room and thanked the hotel manager who, from the expression on his face, was still embarrassed and anxious about the whole ordeal. As he reached the door, Lier thought of checking with the arbitrators just in case they found

something but decided against it. He needed to get to the Hospital. Almost on cue, the comm. rang.

It was Napier. His voice sounded worried. "I'm at the hospital. Ames, you might want to get down here. I need to talk to you, in person."

Thomas's tone didn't sound good. "How's Macharius doing? Is he alright?"

There was a short pause over the comm. and he could hear a small sigh before Thomas began to speak, "His condition is critical but they've managed to stabilize him for now, I don't know much more than that." There was another pause before Napier spoke again. "Listen; Ames, just get to Cardion Hospital as quickly as possible. It's important."

Lier nodded. "All right, I'll be there as soon as possible." He said, doing his best to keep the worry out of his voice.

Thomas began to say something else but he stopped short, Lier cut the connection and ran down towards the parking lot stairwell.

Lier started the sedan, realizing how strange it was not having Macharius around with him. There was an unusual amount of traffic for such a late hour; the sun was beginning to set and the sky was a brilliant mixture of red, orange, and violet light. Lier was forced to sit in the car for over an hour leaving plenty of time to go through the myriad questions and events that had overwhelmingly descended upon him in the last few hours.