

Chapter 6

*“Like anything else worthwhile; war cannot be rushed to completion.
We must persevere to the glorious conclusion at any cost.
For what is more important than achieving total victory?”
- Lord Militant General Elias Mortian (3538 P.C.-3605 P.C.)*

Lier made his way into the hospital in a sort of dazed stupor and it only took a few wrong turns before he found himself completely lost. The hallways all looked alike with their sterile white walls and immaculate tiled floors. Lier suddenly realized with a pang of distress that this was the first time he'd been in a hospital since his childhood. They were one of the few things that made him uneasy and perhaps, though he wouldn't admit it, frightened him; to Lier they embodied pain, loss, and death and he hated them for it. Finally snapping out of his reverie, Lier banished the painful memories away and asked a hospital worker to direct him to the emergency ward.

When Lier finally located Macharius's room he found Thomas Napier standing outside in the small, private observation area looking through a glass panel at the doctors who were hunched over the prone form of Marcharius in the operating room. Amazingly, he looked even more tired than my mental image of him.

“Ames... I'm sorry about...” Napier muttered. “Look, if you need to I can get someone else to take over for you. You've been through a lot tonight.”

Lier shook his head. “No, that's alright Thomas, the Council gave me a job to do and I intend to do it. Macharius would want me to do my duty.” Lier looked through the window ruefully, “How's he doing?”

Napier nodded, motioning through the glass towards the two doctors who were bent over Macharius's large form. “Well, not much has changed since I called. The Doctor gave him an anesthetic, knocked him out cold.” Lier stood there in silence, watching the doctors' work when he noticed Napier looking at him with an ill-disguised expression of worry. “Look at this Ames,” Napier said, producing a bullet from his pocket. “The round was still inside of him. It was when they removed it that I noticed that we had a problem. Take a look.” Thomas fished a small plastic hospital bag out of his pocket revealing a small, perhaps centimeter-long round. However, the shell was very different from that of normal firearms, even compared to the rounds used in Lier's custom-made Judicator's pistol. Strange characters were inscribed laterally all along the bullet; the sight of them unnerved him greatly. As he reached for it Thomas snatched his hand back defensively. “Careful.”

Lier looked at him, surprise and confusion showing all over his face. “What?”

Lier's question was immediately answered as Thomas carefully prodded the tip of the bullet with a scalpel. Lier almost jumped as the sides of the bullet flew apart, forming dozens of cruel-looking, miniature razors. Thomas tapped the tip of the round with the scalpel again and the blades retracted back into the bullet with lightening-fast speed. “Found that when they were removing the bullet from your friend. One of the doctors got a little careless and fwish! Hand got all cut up.”

Lier stared at the bullet in Thomas's hand with a mixture of revulsion and fascination. “What is it?”

Napier shrugged. “My guess is that it's some sort of special ammunition, very effective, if it hadn't been for Macharius's armor vest then there's a very good chance he

wouldn't be alive right now. I'm guessing that there are sensors in the tip that somehow allow the bullet to sense when it hits an object, at which point it deploys. As you can tell, it's essentially an extremely high-tech shredder round. I've never seen anything remotely like that before. It's certainly not Confederate."

Exasperated; Lier pointed at the bullet fiercely, as though it were some kind of stinging insect. "How could anyone make something like... that? We're talking about micro or even nanotechnology here! We never had that kind of tech even before the Great Conflict and we sure as hell don't have anything remotely close to that now!"

Thomas blinked. The expression of concern displayed on his features showing all that Lier needed to know; he'd thought the exact same thing. "I don't know what that thing is or who made it but what I do know is that whatever's going on out there, you're going to be caught up in the middle of it. I want you to be careful out there Ames. Someone wants you dead and already it's almost gotten someone killed."

Napier saw the pained expression briefly flash on Lier's features and he instantly lightened. "Listen Ames, what happened to Macharius's wasn't your fault. He was wounded while fulfilling his duty to the Confederacy and to you. You can't blame yourself because I know that Macharius wouldn't even think of blaming you. Don't ever forget that or it'll tear you apart, you can take my word for it."

Lier nodded; "Yeah, you're right. I just..."

Napier looked at him with a gaze of understanding as though he knew exactly what the young man was going through. The two Judicators stood there in silence for a long time until Napier's comm. rang, shattering the quiet rather thoroughly. Lier watched as the older man answered it, turning away in an effort to lessen his voice. After a minute Napier switched off the comm. and turned to Lier. "I, I'm very sorry.... I need to go now Ames. Something's come up that I have to deal with. Are you sure you don't need anything?"

Lier looked at Napier and shook his head. "No, I'll be fine. Just make sure that Macharius is alright while I'm gone."

"Of course, I'll get someone to keep an eye on him while you're away." Napier said, "You don't have to worry about him, he'll still be here when you get back" Carefully placing the strange bullet into Lier's right palm before turning to leave. "Well, I have to go now Ames. I'm old you know, and it's past my bedtime. I'll see you when you get back." A somber grin spread across his face when he saw Lier slightly smile. With that, Lier was left alone in the room.

Lier suddenly realized that he felt exhausted, both physically and mentally. All the thoughts that had been bouncing around in his mind began to come to him as though the floodgates of his subconscious had suddenly given in to the intense pressure. He thought of his attacker, of Macharius's sacrifice, and his own mortality. Death was no stranger to someone in his line of work; he had dealt with it before. Like anything else; one can become desensitized to death without knowing and never even grasp the finality of it until it slaps them in the face.

Lier sat in the hospital for what seemed like hours, watching the doctors operate on his friend and assistant with deep concern until all of the horrible memories, the bad dreams, everything, began to come to bear on his beleaguered mind and he suddenly felt as though he was being suffocated.

With one final look at Macharius, Lier turned and left the room.

Just as he began walking away from the ward a man exited a door perhaps three meters down the hallway dressed in hospital fatigues. The strange thing was that he was holding something under a stack of towels in his right hand that looked very similar to that of a firearm. Instinctively, the young Judicator ducked, dipping his head a fraction of a second before the gun went off; Lier heard a whine as the round tore past, less than a centimeter from where his head had been.

Two more rounds tore past, both coming dangerously close to hitting him. He scrambled into a bathroom doorway and pulled out his own pistol. Lier flinched as more rounds impacted on the doorway, sending splinters of wood and bits of plaster flying outwards, dangerously close to his face. In the midst of the fighting he realized that the man he was facing was good, too good to be an average hitman. Judging by his accuracy he was undoubtedly ex-military and very experienced. Lier fired a few rounds from around the doorframe more in an effort to keep his attacker from advancing on him. Then, suddenly there was no noise whatsoever. Lier took a cautious peek past the doorway and saw the gunman had broke cover and was running down the hallway just about to turn the corner.

All the anger and frustration that had been mounting inside him was suddenly unleashed as Lier finally found an outlet for his rage. Lier tore down the hallway and rounded the corner without stopping, cursing as he slid across the waxed tiles. The slip had saved his life; as he fell to the floor a round impacted the wall behind him, just missing him. Too preoccupied to comprehend his good fortune, Lier sprang to his feet and fired off a pair of rounds at the fleeing man while jumping over a cowering janitor.

The gunman reached an elevator bank and disappeared inside one of the lifts, the door closing in Lier's face, leaving him with an alarming mental image of the man's smirking face. The man's cold blue eyes seemed to bore into the soul and for the split-second that Lier's blood went cold; it had been the same man who had offered to get his car outside the Great Hall. The man had been trailing him for gods know how long and what scared Lier the most was, he'd been completely oblivious.

The closing lift doors broke Lier from his trance-like state. Searching for a way to follow the man, Lier ran to the nearby stairwell, noting from the illuminated light above the lift that he was headed for the garage. Lier half ran, half fell, down the stairwell and reached the garage just in time to see the lift door open, bright light filling the darkened garage. Lier cocked his pistol and approached the lift cautiously; using what shadows he could to his advantage.

When no one exited Lier crept closer to the door and when he was certain that it was reasonably safe, called out. "Come out with your hands up. You are wanted for the attempted assassination of a Judicial operative and possession of an unauthorized weapon." There was no reply so Lier moved into the lift but to his surprise it was completely empty. Looking up, he found that the escape hatch on the top had been opened. After considering going up after the assassin, a crash from the parking garage caused him to change his mind. Lier left the elevator and made his way, gun in hand, through the garage, alert for the slightest noise.

Lier's comm. rang suddenly, crashing the oppressive silence, startling him nearly enough to cause him to misfire his weapon. He took cover behind a small sports car while fumbling for the device and quickly thumbed it off. Only after his ears had adjusted did Lier realize that the ringing had been replaced by the sound of heavy footfalls. He

attempted to get up from behind the car that he'd taken cover behind but the sudden arrival of several rounds impacting the hood of the car were effective in dissuading the Judicator's pursuit. Lier peeked over the hood of the car, snapping a few rounds for cover, and retrieved one of the rounds that had dug itself into the car's crimson chassis. The projectile, albeit mangled, resembled the one that Napier had given to him earlier. A single thought ran through Lier's mind at this discovery. *This is the bastard who shot Macharius!* Just as it dawned on Lier that the return fire had stopped, he heard an engine rev and squeal of tires on pavement screeching through the garage. Poking his head out, Lier had just enough time to see a black, window-tinted van roaring out of the garage.

Lier ran to his sedan and keyed the ignition. Looking through the rear-view mirror he saw the van fly out of the garage, nearly running over a hapless security guard in the process. Lier pulled out of the space and tore after him; he could see the van a ways down the road as it took an abrupt right turn into oncoming traffic, causing several collisions. Lier slammed down on the pedal and gave chase; maneuvering around the smashed vehicles, barely missing several pedestrians. The van had made its way through the street and disappeared around a bend after crashing through a chain-link fence into a narrow alleyway. Lier followed suite in a somewhat more controlled fashion. Nevertheless, he still lost both mirrors and he could have sworn he'd heard something break off when he went over the flattened chain-link fence. Lier stayed right behind the van as it made its way through the alley until the vehicle finally came to an abrupt halt Lier slammed on the brakes, slowing the car down just enough to prevent a collision. Then, the van had turned again back out onto a main roadway straight into a half-kilometer long traffic jam. Lier grinned. *Dead end. You're mine.* He stopped the sedan in the alley and jumped out, not bothering to even close the door. The faint sound of sirens in the distance meant the arbitrators were now involved. Unfortunately, Lier knew they'd take far too long to respond to be any help to him; he was on his own for now.

The assassin fired several more rounds over his shoulder as he leapt from the trapped van causing Lier to take cover behind the door. Hesitantly, he peeked over the hood of the car to see the assassin leaping over a black sedan, the driver screaming obscenities at the man until a stray bullet through his windshield caused him to scream wildly and duck down into the car. Lier saw the man run between another car and a huge transport in a mad dash for the opposite side of the street, firing wildly behind him, sending screams of terror from drivers as seemingly invisible forces shattered their windows and impacted their vehicles.

With a moment's hesitation and several curses, Lier followed the man through the street, seeing his target run into yet another alleyway. His brain instantly screamed out to him, warning of a trap. A narrow alley was not a place you'd want to be stuck in while being fired at. Nevertheless, he couldn't afford to lose this man; if the assassin could be caught then this whole mess could be cleared up and he might even be able to find out who wanted him dead so badly and why.

The Judicator ducked into the alley, taking cover behind a dumpster, waiting for the sound of gunfire. When none came he snuck a glance around the side of the dumpster and saw that his quarry was gone, although he could still hear the echoes of footsteps ringing off the brick walls. Lier renewed his pursuit; running through the alleyway as fast as his legs would carry him, his lungs began to burn and his undershirt began to dampen from perspiration.

Suddenly, he came to a two-way split; a pile of trash blocked one way while a shaking barbed wire link fence stood in front of the other. Noting the movement, Lier ran to the fence and began to climb over until the fabric of his overcoat got caught in the barbed wire and eventually tore as his weight pulled down while he descended, albeit less gracefully than he had planned. Once again, blind luck had spared his life; there were the telltale whishing noises of at least three or four rounds as they flew past him as he fell.

Rolling behind a nearby crate, Lier discovered that his elusive prey had disappeared; he sprang to his feet and ran out of the alley, somewhat shocked by his surroundings. The assassin had led Lier into a decrepit warehouse district, the perfect place for someone who doesn't want to be found. The sun had completely set and had been replaced by the dark blue twilight canvas that preceded the coming darkness.

Lier kept his head down, scanning the darkness for any sign of movement. After what seemed like an eternity he caught a glimpse of a dark blur moving just out of his peripheral vision. The assassin had changed into a black bodysuit and was moving at a rapid pace; taking cover behind the numerous storage crates and other detritus. Lier made after him, struggling to stay far enough away to prevent being seen should the man look backwards while simultaneously keeping him in sight. Lier followed the assassin for over twenty minutes, by now he had completely lost his way and was having a hard enough time keeping tabs on his quarry. To the Judicator's relief, the assassin began to slow, finally coming to a stop just outside a warehouse. The assassin glanced around; looking back and forth, briefly holding his gaze over the mess of crates Lier had taken cover behind before stepping through the doorway. After he entered the warehouse, Lier sprang out from behind his cover and began creeping towards the large structure.

The building wasn't anything out of the ordinary given his surroundings; an old dilapidated storage building with huge doors that could very well have housed an aircraft if not for the lack of runway space. A light breeze whistled through the myriad broken windows, creating an eerie howl that reminded Lier of a wild beast. Cautiously, Lier approached the door and, with a tentative grip, opened it. Despite looking as though the slightest movement would send a piercing screech through the air the door slid open just as silently as they had for the black-suited assassin, Lier took a tentative step inside.

The interior of the warehouse was poorly illuminated. Much of the internal lighting had failed over the unknown length of its neglect and only a few of the bulbs still burned, many of which flickered on and off sporadically, causing a strobe effect for several large areas of the warehouse. The inside of the warehouse had been arranged in an unintentional labyrinth; there were numerous crates and boxes that filled the vast majority of the immense warehouse's space, all of which were stacked several layers high. Lier stepped forwards, unsure of what to do. He had no idea which way the assassin had went and so he chose the nearest path and began walking, trying to keep the noise from his footsteps down as much as possible.

Eventually, he came to an old, rusting, spiral staircase; yet another representation of the warehouse's state of disrepair. Lier shook his head in amazement; over the years he'd become somewhat acquainted with municipality building ordinances and to his knowledge the current construction standards of the Confederacy forbade the installment of spiral staircases nearly a century ago. *Who knows how long since this building, this whole district for that matter, has been in use?*

The rusted, almost pathetic looking conglomeration that was the spiral staircase looked as it would break apart on its own and Lier didn't have any real desire to help it but running around in the maze didn't seem to be getting him anywhere; by gaining elevation he would be able to have a better picture of how the warehouse was organized. Reluctantly, Lier began to climb, wincing as if struck by each sound, as they seemed screamed out into the cavernous space.

Upon reaching the top of the spiral staircase Lier found himself about fifteen or so meters off the ground, providing an excellent view of the paths that carve through the cargo containers; many of which were stacked so high that he could probably touch them from the catwalk. Lier despairingly noted that the catwalk that the staircase had led up to was made of a material that was impossible to walk on without producing noise; grated metal.

The time it took to cross the catwalk seemed to last forever and although Lier was still debating the intelligence of his decision, he ventured across the catwalk as silently as possible. Near the end of the grating he spotted a solitary light coming through what looked to be an observatory of some kind, most likely an old security office located at the top of the warehouse for better observation. It shone like a beacon, and the Judicator's subconscious screamed at him to stay away. Nevertheless, the light could only mean one thing; he'd found his man. Moving as stealthily as possible, Lier made his way over to the office, crouching in order to prevent him from being seen through the office window. He moved up to the wooden door and readied his pistol, checking the clip and clicking off the safety, before he kicked in the door in with a roar; "Get down! Judicariate! You're under arrest."

To his surprise the room was empty. Aside from a rusted file cabinet and an old desk with a broken leg, both of which were covered by about a millimeter of undisturbed dust, the room was empty. The subconscious voice in the back of Lier's mind reached a fever pitch but by then it was too late; the office had been a trap and he had taken the bait. The blow to Lier's spine folded him over; his pistol flying out of his hand as he was thrown into the desk, missing a savage looking wood stake by a hair's breadth. Lier struggled to his feet; still disoriented from the sudden strike when his attacker hit him again, this time with a chopping strike to the throat. Lier fell back on the desk, coughing as tears began welling in his eyes, blurring his vision.

A hand grabbed him by the neck of his overcoat and pulled him from the desk, and although he was disoriented Lier could see his attacker's hate-filled, icy-blue eyes and instantly recognized them as those belonging to the man who he had seen earlier. His attacker's face was just as shocking; his harsh, narrow features accentuated the sense of hatred that the man seemed so intent on acting on.

Lier's attacker threw him to the ground and there was a loud clicking noise over his voice as he began to speak. "My, my, my, Judicator. You wouldn't believe how much trouble you've caused me. You couldn't have just taken the bullet in the hotel could you? Couldn't have just died there and saved everyone all this trouble. My superior will be most displeased with the commotion caused by our little chase through the city, and I doubt that idiot doctor's family will be very grateful when they discover the poor fool's remains at the hospital. Not to mention that idiot bodyguard of yours either. No, I think that everyone involved would have been better off if you had just died like you were

supposed to at the hotel,” he sneered through gritted teeth as he picked Lier up off the ground, “Don’t you think?”

Lier made a feeble effort to shake the assassin’s grip; one which merely made him chuckle. “W-what?...W-why?”

He shook Lier hard, causing his head to roll around painfully. “What’s that Judicator? Speak up now, I can’t understand you.”

Lier tried to formulate words a second time, with similar results. The assassin threw Lier onto the desk again. He felt something sharp prodding into his side, causing a groan to escape involuntarily. His vision fogged.

The assassin just laughed even more maniacally. “Well, that just won’t do. You know, I’m disappointed. I expected more from one of the Confederacy’s elite peacekeepers. How very disappointing, here I was expecting a challenge.”

Lier felt a kick to his side, causing yet another involuntary grunt.

Looking over, he could see the assassin pick up something from behind a broken shred of wood from the now obliterated desk. As the light glinted off its metallic surface he instantly knew what it was. A gun. His gun.

The assassin spoke once more; a truly sadistic glint in his eyes as he spoke; “Well, Judicator, I’m afraid that playtime’s over. Don’t get me wrong, I had plenty of fun with you but sadly you’ve wasted enough of my time.” The man brandished the pistol, looking it over with satisfaction as the realization dawned in Lier’s face. He had picked up Lier’s fallen pistol. Before I go I have a question for you; how would you like to go? “Do you want to see it coming or do you want it to be a surprise?”

Lier tried to close his eyes as he heard the familiar click of the pistol’s safety and prepared himself for the end; cursing this twisted bastard who was gloating even as he was preparing to kill him.

The assassin lowered Lier’s own firearm towards him in an almost dramatic fashion, as if wanting to soak up every second of the situation. “Isn’t it ironic, Judicator, that you’ll die by your own weapon?”

A seemingly deafening blast ran through the compact space and Lier instinctively closed his eyes, even while the rational part of his brain told him that it was a useless gesture. However, to his great surprise he found himself very much alive and unhurt after the sound had receded. Only after this fact was fully realized did he open his eyes to the sight of the assassin; his would-be killer’s body, dropping to the floor with a smoking hole in his forehead. Lier slowly brought himself to his feet. He stared in disbelief at a young man in full stealth combat gear standing about a meter down the catwalk; the black bodyarmor he wore only visible thanks to reflection from the observatory light.

Lier kept his distance, his knees were quite weak and it was a Herculean task to simply stay standing. He really didn’t know what to say the man. “Thanks a lot. I really appreciate your saving me.”

The man remained completely motionless, taking a few seconds before replying, as if surveying his surroundings. “No problem.”

Lier looked back into the office, surveying the wreckage. The assassin’s body lay facedown at his feet, a puddle of blood forming around the corpse. Lier shivered, more at the very real possibility that he could have been killed than at the body. Glancing back at the man on the catwalk, Lier suddenly became aware that his rescuer was looking at him, his arms crossed, and head cocked slightly to the left, as though amused by the

Judicator's actions. Lier realized that he didn't know what to say, so he simply repeated; "Thanks a lot. I really appreciate it."

The man approached, his full form becoming visible as he entered the office. He looked at Lier for a moment and then removed the black facemask along with his night vision goggles, revealing a clean-shaven, black-haired man with intense, yet roguish green eyes. Lier was shocked; the man looked no older than he was. *Who the Hell is this guy?*"

No doubt sensing the look of surprise on Lier's face, the man laughed. "What? Not what you expected?"

"Who are you?" Lier managed to stammer.

The man stepped forward and holstered his pistol. "Specialist Draylan Barret. Confederate SpecOps."

Lier began to introduce himself but was interrupted yet again as Draylan interrupted again. "I know who you are Judicator, I've been assigned to protect you."

Lier's face knotted in confusion and he began to say something before he was cut off once again.

"Listen buddy, I'd love to stay here and chat but unfortunately I wasn't the only one who followed you here; the arbitrators are going to be swarming this area within minutes and who knows who else may be after you by now. He motioned down the catwalk; "Now if you don't mind, we need to go."

Lier managed to produce an exasperated sigh and waved over to the assassin's body. "But what about..."

Once again, Barret interrupted. "Sorry, you're not supposed to be looking into this stuff. Lets just leave and forget we were ever here, ok?"

Lier bent down over the assassin's corpse to retrieve his pistol when he felt something in the man's jacket pocket, he quickly slipped his hand into the pocket and produced small chip enclosed in a strengthened polymer casing; a datastick.

Barret, still standing out on the catwalk yelled over to me. "Hey! You deaf? Didn't you just hear what I said about forgetting you were ever here? Leave him alone, don't go sticking your nose where it doesn't belong or I'll have to shoot you... and I'm not sure if you're even worth the bullet yet." Barret paused after a second. "That was a joke by the way."

Yeah, but which part? Lier wondered silently as he slipped the chip into his pocket, picking up the discarded pistol before getting to his feet. He turned around and faced Barret showing him the weapon. "I'm not leaving my gun."

Barret nodded with almost a comical look of understanding and then reverted back to ordering him to hurry up and leave. "Come on, buddy, I can hear sirens! If I have to I'll throw you off the walkway and meet you at the bottom."

Shrugging off Barret's threats, Lier ran down the catwalk and proceeded down the rusty spiral staircase as fast as he could, still expecting it to collapse and impale him on the rusted metal bars. They made their way through the maze of cargo crates and ran through the warehouse door when Lier suddenly realized that Barret wasn't behind him anymore. He could hear the sirens in the distance and in a moment of panic thought that Barret was still inside the warehouse when a massive explosion tore through the side of the building, blowing out a huge chunk of masonry in a rain of shattered glass and rubble.

Cursing, Lier ran over to the relative safety of a cargo crate and threw himself flat on the ground, hands covering his head.

A secondary and tertiary explosion followed the first, causing the building to collapse in on itself with a roaring shriek of tortured metal, crumbling brick, and shattering glass. After what seemed like an eternity, Lier managed to worm his way out from under the piece of sheet metal and other assorted debris that had landed on his back and clambered to his feet, coughing out dust, dirt, and plaster.

Over the sounds of approaching sirens and crumbling debris, he heard someone laughing nearby. As Lier stumbled through the wreckage towards the direction the noise was coming he Barret; his black suit had been turned completely grey on account of the dust but was otherwise completely unaffected by the explosion. Specialist Barret began laughing manically as he picked himself up.

Barret looked at Lier for a moment, rubbing his eyes before slapping the Judicator on the back. "Hell Yeah! Never gets old!" With that he started picking his way through the rubble, motioning for Lier to follow.

Lier stood there dumbstruck, a number of feelings all racing through him at once: confusion, anger, surprise. He screamed at Barret's receding form as he disappeared through the fog. "Are you insane?"

Lier saw Barret's now hazy form turn around and look at him for several seconds before yelling back. "Maybe, probably'd explain a lot."

Lier found himself at a loss for words and decided to just forget about trying to find a retort at the moment, instead focusing on catching up to Barret before he could disappear. Lier needed answers, and he intended on getting them whether it killed him or not.