

Chapter 7

*“A Judicator should never expect a warm welcome from anyone in the field.
Their job is to root out corruption in the Erebian Government,
Which, unfortunately, the Confederacy has no shortage of.”
-Senior Judicator Cristoph Lana (3472 P.C.-3514 P.C.)*

Lier followed Barret for several minutes until they finally came to a deserted parking lot which, judging by the cracked pavement looked as though it had been around longer than the majority of the surrounding structures. The sirens had quieted significantly and it seemed that they'd both gotten far enough away to avoid any problems. Stopping to catch his breath, Lier bent over; hands on his knees, gasping for breath before looking up to see Barret's irritatingly cheerful face, a stupid grin lighting up his features as he spoke. "Man! Did ya see that baby go up? I knew I only needed three charges."

After a second Lier got back up, "What the hell was that? You just destroyed a building! What... what were you...."

Once again, Barret cut Lier off, bringing him an inch from shooting the stupid, smug grin right off Barret's face. "Come on now, the thing was gonna fall apart anyway. I just... expedited the process a little bit."

Unable to control himself any longer, Lier pulled out his pistol and cocked it in one fluid motion, bringing it to bear on the grinning Specialist's forehead. "Who the hell are you and what do you want with me?"

Barret glanced at the pistol and then at Lier, an almost hurt look replacing the stupid grin. "Oh, come on Ames. You're really gonna kill me?"

Lier tightened my grip on the handle and cocked the hammer, his voice in a controlled, level tone. "How do you know my name Barret?"

Barret rolled his eyes, as if staring down the barrel of a gun was completely natural to him. "Please Ames, if were going to be working together lets cut stop all these formalities. Call me Draylan. Anyways, as I've said before, I'm Confederate Special Ops, my assignment is to ensure your safety."

"A bodyguard." Lier muttered, finally understanding.

Barret nodded and Lier felt a brief flash of irritation towards Napier until he realized that he wasn't really sure who had sent Barret to protect him. Nevertheless, Lier was curious, he wanted to know. "Who sent you?"

Draylan shook his head; "Can't tell you that, sorry."

Lier waved the pistol at Barret as though trying to reiterate the fact that he had a loaded weapon pointed at him, annoyance building inside him. "Listen, I'm tired of playing games. In the last six hours one of my close friends has been severely wounded, I've been shot at, and a building practically blew up with me inside to it no thanks to you. Don't push me!"

Barret stared at him unfazed. "Sorry, I really can't tell you that. The penalty for revealing that sort of information would be far worse than anything you could do to me if they found out. Believe me." Lier held Barret's gaze for several seconds before holstering the pistol. Barret eyed the Judicator cautiously for a moment before speaking again. "You're scheduled for transport to the Clarion front Regional Headquarters tomorrow afternoon; you should get some rest before we leave. You look dead."

Lier began to protest but realized that he was, in fact, quite tired. As the events from the day began to weigh on him he decided not to argue. "Yeah, maybe you're right. I could use some sleep." Lier followed Draylan as he walked behind a mound of crates, discovering a small parking lot which was empty save a few vehicles which looked as though they'd been largely undisturbed for some time.

Barret moved towards one of the more modern looking vehicles; circling it once, glancing at the interior before smashing the hilt of his pistol through the driver side window. After fiddling with the wires for a few seconds the engine sprang to life and the passenger side door unlocked. Barret leaned over and opened the door, motioning Lier inside, looking very pleased with himself

Lier shook his head and got inside the car.. He looked at Barret, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "So, decided to throw Grand Theft Auto onto the platter? You know, saving my life will only get you so far."

Barret chuckled at him, paused to scribble something onto a shred of paper and threw it out the window before gunning the engine. The car quickly exceeding any safe velocity, pushing Lier back into his seat before he truly realized what was happening. "Nah, not stealing, more like... *borrowing* without asking. Anyway, I wrote a contact who'll compensate them onto that note so it's all good. Besides, we need to get to headquarters and I'm sure as hell not walking."

Lier would have answered if he hadn't had his eyes locked on the buildings, shacks, crates, and machinery that Draylan was miraculously weaving the car around. He was content with just holding onto his lunch right up until the point where Barret clipped a crate, causing Lier to shout a curse. "You know, you could use a road as opposed to hurtling us around randomly placed obstacles."

Draylan gritted his teeth as he spun the wheel sharply, just missing a stack of rusted I-beams before tearing down a narrow alleyway between two huge warehouses, missing the assorted detritus at some points by a hairsbreadth. "Yeah, but the police will be all over the main roads soon. Don't worry though, we're almost through." Barret said; looking at Lier, causing the Judicator to panic and scream at him to keep his eyes on the road. Ignoring Lier's curses and errant shouting, Barret guided the car through a chain-link gate that some careless guard had presumably left ajar decades ago. They sped down a narrow side road for several miles before finally reaching a main highway where they escaped back into the city.

It took them about an hour to reach the Erebus City National Defense Headquarters, which was, ironically, located just outside one of the most gang-ridden neighborhoods in the city. As Barret drove to the main gates of the building Lier could feel the fleeting stares of everyone they passed, watching them with dull, bleak expressions of apathy. Lier, who had prior knowledge of much of the Confederacy's capital city as well as many others like it, knew all too well what those people were thinking.

In a way, he felt sympathy for them; many of the urban centers of the Confederacy had been left inadequately prepared for yet another war and their inhabitants paid for it. Many areas of the nation had fallen on hard times as a result of the numerous conflicts its government had either started or been forced to contend with over the years

and this most recent war had brought the problem into the even the Confederacy's capitol.

They made it through the city without incident, with the exception of a close call at an intersection, a pair of dents on the passenger side door, a broken muffler and a slightly smoking engine the two made it to the Defense Headquarters unscathed. Once they had reached Headquarters and had passed through the required security checkpoints they were directed to the main Command Center to meet with Brigadier General Atlan; the base's commanding officer.

An extremely bored-looking Private by the name of J. Rheas greeted Lier at the entrance of the Command Center. He said only a handful of words to them before moving down the hallway which amounted to; "You're here for the General huh? Follow me and don't wander."

The route they traveled to the Brigadier General's Office was a twisting, labyrinthine path that seemed almost as though it had been devised with the deliberate intent to throw off visitors. Lier was lost after the fourth turn and a quick nod from Barret told him that he wasn't only one who had lost their orientation. *Who the hell designed this place?* Lier wondered absentmindedly.

When they finally reached the General's office the Private snapped to attention, outside the open doorway and saluted; "Sir, a Judicator Lier is here to speak to you."

A lean man with thinning, peppered hair and a graying moustache looked up from the stack of files that were scattered around his wooden desk and dismissed the Private with a nod before motioning for Lier and Barret to enter. Atlan put his pen on his desk and entwined his fingers, waiting for the two of them to sit down before speaking. "Well, Judicator, I don't have you scheduled for transport until..." Atlan paused, sneaking a quick glance at his watch before resuming, "... several hours from now. That eager to get out of this hellhole?"

Lier nodded. "Yes, well, I have a small problem and that's why I'm here. I don't have a place to stay anymore. It seems that someone out there is pretty dead-set on killing me, pardon the pun."

Atlan nodded, chuckling slightly. "So you figured you'd surround yourself with a bunch of guns, eh? Smart move, some of the Confederacy's best are right here on this base." It was then that he noticed the pair's numerous scrapes and bruises; he uncrossed his legs and sat straight in his chair, eyes narrowing slightly. "By the way, you two wouldn't know anything about an explosion south of here? Seems that terrorist rebels placed explosives in a warehouse and completely leveled the building. It was located in an old storage district and there's now a bunch of unstable structures located around the blast." Atlan leaned closer, his tone conspiratorial. "Funny thing is, I don't know where rebels would be able to get high powered explosives, do you?"

Lier glanced at Barret and shrugged. "Uhh.. No. Sorry to hear that but we don't know anything about it."

Atlan stared at Barret for several moments before uncrossing his fingers, shrugging. He returned his attention back to Lier; "I suppose that I could arrange for you to stay here until your departure, however, as you aren't a part of the Erebian Armed Forces you will be designated as an on-site civilian and will be treated accordingly. That goes for your friend too. Do you understand me Judicator?"

Lier nodded at the General, wincing inwardly at his use of the word bodyguard. “Of course.”

The General grinned. “Very good then, Private Rheas will escort the two of you to your quarters.”

Turning to leave, Lier caught Atlan staring at Barret as they left, a strange gaze that he couldn't read. When Lier shot him a questioning look Draylan Barret turned away and looked downwards.

The Private led the two of them to their quarters without so much as a cough or gesture. They followed him through the base in discomfited silence until finally reaching their destination; a string of rooms set in a secluded part of the base, far from the typical traffic and chaos that a normal day would entail.

The Private turned to Lier with a look of what appeared to be slight envy and opened the nearest room's door. “Here are your quarters. If you need anything else you can contact the base personnel with the phone inside.”

As the door opened Lier was slightly shocked at their accommodations; As Lier stepped in the room he was greeted by a scene that would have very well fit in with the hotel he'd been staying at the earlier that evening; the bed had a beautiful vyxewood frame which had been varnished to a near red color which matched with the carpeting. There was even a data terminal on the desk, which hummed quietly on standby mode.

Although Lier was at a loss for words Barret voiced his thoughts perfectly; “Damn! What're you guys running here, a hotel?”

Private Rheas looked back at Barret with an expression of apathy and slight irritation. “We use these rooms on the rare occurrences when diplomats, politicians, and other guests are needed to stay on-site. Now if you don't need anything else I have other things to do.”

Lier thanked Rheas as he unlocked Barret's door and proceeded to disappear down the hallway. He nodded at Barret before stepping into the room; closing and locking the door behind him before activating the tiny static field generator built into his badge of office, which would interfere with any bugs and monitoring devices that had undoubtedly been planted throughout the room, allowing him some small bit of peace at mind from the knowledge that at least for the time being he was safe. As he sat down on his bed he realized he was dead-tired. Nevertheless, fighting off fatigue, Lier reached into his overcoat pocket and withdrew the datastick he'd taken from his assailant's body, inserting it into a nearby computer terminal.

From what he could tell, the device had a large number of data files saved to it and all were heavily encrypted. Lier had neither the time nor energy to try to begin cracking the encryption so he transferred them to one of Thomas Napier's former aliases; one, which Lier knew had been inactive for quite some time and was therefore less likely to be under surveillance. He knew that Napier checked them regularly as a means of covert communication with his subordinates in the field. Given the anonymity of his attackers and lacking any real knowledge of who might be after him, Lier decided this was the safest way to provide Napier with the information.

The computer beeped twice and the upload window closed, indicating the files had been copied and transferred successfully. He withdrew the datastick from the terminal and shut it off before collapsing on the bed. Overwhelmed by exhaustion, Lier was unconscious before he hit the pillow.

He awoke seven hours later to a loud thud on the door accompanied by the familiar voice of Draylan Barret. “Ames, we’ve got a little time before our transport arrives, you want some breakfast?”

Lier groggily stumbled out of bed, nearly impaling himself on the corner of the nightstand before his mind caught up to his body. He made his way to the doorway, taking a second to make sure that the room was in somewhat decent shape before opening the door with a yawn. “Morning Draylan.”

Barret looked as if he had been in a brawl with the mattress; his hair stuck up wildly while the grey undershirt he wore was almost completely folded in wrinkles. Lier almost laughed out loud at the sight.

“Sleep well?” He asked.

This time Lier couldn’t contain a small chuckle, “Not nearly as well as you must’ve. You look like you picked a fight with the mattress and lost.” Barret shrugged slightly, “Yeah, well the damn thing started it. So anyway, I was going to the mess hall. You hungry?”

Lier laughed, the night’s rest had done wonders for his mood; although he was still sore from the beating he’d received the night before. “I think I might try to get some things taken care of actually. Thanks for the offer though.”

Barret glanced at Lier, and then at his room before speaking again; “Just make sure you’re ready to go when our ride gets here. You know where I’ll be if you change your mind.” He began to leave but stopped in mid-stride, as though remembering some vital bit of information. “Oh and Ames, if you do decide to stop by the mess hall be sure to try their pancakes, they’re amazing.”

Lier watched Draylan disappear from the doorway in silence, finding himself wondering how someone like that could have possibly become a member of the highest trained branch of the Confederate Military.

Lier picked up the room’s landline comm. and requested the dispatcher get him Air Traffic Control. A man’s voice issued over the comm. after a moment of silence, seeming somewhat preoccupied but otherwise attentive. “Something you need, Judicator?”

“Yes, I was wondering if you had the ETA on my transport.” Lier said, trying to remember the information he’d been given by the Councilors. “Flight 14M, I think.”

The man replied again after a few seconds. “Ah, yes. Here we go. We have your transport scheduled to arrive in approximately at 0940 Hours. There’ve been some reports of a storm system moving in. That may disrupt air traffic but we should have a better idea in a little while.”

Lier thanked him and deactivated the comm., returning it to its base on the small wooden table near the bed. Lier began to pack his few belongings into his suitcase before heading for the door. Glancing at the clock he noticed that it was eight thirty in the morning. *What the hell, I’ve got time.* After a quick check to ensure that I hadn’t forgotten anything he picked up the suitcase, stepped out into the hallway, and headed towards the Mess hall.

The two of them sat alone at a table in the in the near empty mess hall, each of them with a stack of syrup-laden pancakes. It was late in the morning, a few hours before midday and only an hour or so before the transport would be arriving. The mess hall was all but empty save for one or two pockets of maintenance crew who were conveniently sitting on the opposite end of the room, far enough away to be out of earshot.

Lier stabbed a piece of pancake, inhaling it before speaking. "You were right, these are good."

Draylan downed the remainder of his juice and nodded. "Yeah, all these city installations always get the best rations. Learned that pretty quickly after I got stationed at Feron."

"You served on the front lines?" Lier asked, intrigued.

"Yeah, for a while. Back when I was a private and then once again when I was part of a killteam."

Lier nearly choked on the piece of pancake I was chewing but recovered quickly; Kill-teams were specially trained squads of soldiers who specialized in stealth, infiltration, and reconnaissance. The majority of their operations were classified to even the highest branches of the military. Lier had only heard the rumors but if even half of what had heard was true then Draylan Barret was not somebody you'd want to mess with. Lier looked at the specialist with a new sense of respect and awe; if Barret had truly been a member of a kill-team then that would make him one of the most elite members of the Confederacies' Special Forces.

"You were part of a Kill-Team?" He exclaimed, loudly enough so that several of the other people looked over at the two.

"Yeah." Barret acknowledged nonchalantly, staring right back at the gawking technicians until they looked away. "I served with this one squad for a while. Went on about fourteen missions with em' before I was reassigned. Anyway, a couple years back, when I had just joined them, we were airdropped a couple of clicks south of the Velin Forest; you know, in the Denth region."

I shook my head. "No. Sorry, not really familiar with Denth."

"It's a heavily forested region in the far north-eastern territories."

"Far north-east? That means..."

Barret nodded. "Yeah. We were behind enemy lines. It was a dangerous operation from the start. Our dropship was nearly downed en route."

"What were you after?" Lier inquired, leaning closer.

Barret shrugged. "We never found out. Our C.O. never told us."

"Never told you? Come on, how could he keep that kind of Intel from you? Weren't you briefed?" Lier suddenly became very suspicious about how much truth was in Draylan's story. "Are you even able to tell me this? Isn't this kind of stuff all classified?"

Barret just shrugged. "Well, technically it is but since the operation never took place it doesn't really matter."

Lier looked at him, admittedly a little surprised but nonetheless interested. "Never took place? What happened?"

He shook his head. "Our Captain; Rorke I think it was." Draylan held his fork to his mouth for a few seconds, reflecting. "Yeah, it was Rorke. Well, anyway, after we touched down we encountered more resistance than we had originally anticipated. turns

out the enemy had armor support as well as a couple of Brigades of infantry that the satellite's thermoscan had somehow missed." Barret leaned back into the chair, throwing his napkin down onto the plate. "But hey, that's intel for you right? Go figure." He added bitterly.

Lier looked at him for a moment. "So what happened then?"

"We lost half of our team right at the start. Rorke ordered us to pull out even while Command ordered us to stay and complete our task. Rorke disobeyed a direct order and saved our lives. There was no way we could've finished our mission against odds like that and the Rorke knew it."

"Well." Lier said in between the last forkful of pancake. "I can't imagine that your superiors were too happy about your commander."

"They weren't." Draylan stated bluntly, his face dead serious. "Turns out that the operation had been ordered from none other than the High gekking Council."

At this point Lier was genuinely confused. "What was the Erebian Heads of State doing requesting an Operation for?"

Sitting back, Draylan exhaled deeply. "Don't know. All I know is that Rorke got screwed over pretty badly; he was demoted and reassigned to some backwater post. Last I heard it was some island somewhere in the Farus region.

Lier looked at Barret with disbelief. "All that because he disobeyed one order?"

Barret looked around for a moment before leaning towards me, his voice hushed. "Listen, Ames. I don't know what exactly is going on around here but the Confederacy's becoming more and more restrictive lately. They're taking more and more control. Consolidating their power for something."

Lier nodded; the Confederacy's government had recently passed dozens of laws and regulations as a means of removing resources from local rebel factions and terrorist cells that had been springing up all over the Confederacy. These restrictions hadn't sat well with the general public. In fact, he'd heard rumors from others in his agency that the laws had done just the opposite; rebel cells had been growing faster than ever.

"The Confederate government is strengthening its hold on not only the public but also the military. If they had the power to remove a decorated officer from his post for a minor infraction years ago I'd hate to think of the kind of grasp they have over the military now."

Lier could tell that Barret was absolutely serious, and he suddenly thought of the mission that the Council had given to him as well as Councilor Toren's icy glare when he'd questioned Etton's guilt. Lier suddenly felt very disconcerted.

Noticing Lier's concern, Barret spoke again, his voice even softer this time.

"Listen Ames. I don't know what your assignment was but, for your sake, you'd better see it through. These men aren't known to be very forgiving towards failure."

Lier nodded, wondering what he'd gotten himself into.