

## Chapter 8

War is a tool that can be forged out of the most insignificant of events but affects millions.

-Ancient passage extract (Unknown date and origin)

The trip to Clarion was relatively uneventful. The Gero-class transport had arrived to pick up Lier and Barret on time despite the storms that had begun to form in the southwest skies. Unfortunately, they were accompanied by a gaggle of technicians who had had fallen victim to a last minute switchover and had been rerouted to the transport.

Almost the entire duration of the sixteen-hour trip, with the exception of the parts in which sleep mercifully took hold of them, Lier and Barret had to endure one of the techs, a man named Vin, who just couldn't take a hint that they could care less about the differences in fighter's and transport's electrical systems. Needless to say, it was a pretty safe bet that they now knew as much about the transport in which they were flying as half the mechanics that had worked on it.

When they finally landed and were allowed to leave the transport's cabin it felt like a weight had been lifted off Lier's shoulders. He followed Barret rather eagerly down the ladder onto the tarmac with the group of technicians in tow; Vin still chatting endlessly about seemingly incomprehensible technical babble as well as an overabundance of information that Lier really could have done without.

The transport had dropped them off at a bustling airbase that seemed to extend for miles. Shadows were beginning to creep down the runway as the orange-red sun began its descent, casting a surreal almost lavender hue across the frost covered base. Their destination had originally been a smaller outpost to the southwest of their current position but due to a recent Aprion offensive they had been transferred to Helmsly Forward Command. Lier exhaled deeply, watching the steam of his breath dissipate into the chilly air. One of the technicians on the transport had mentioned to Lier that the complex had been named after a brilliant Erebian tactician who had completely routed a major Republic assault thirty years prior, an event that undoubtedly contributed to the short-lived armistice that the two nations had enjoyed until recently.

Surveying his surroundings, he stepped down the transport's stairs out onto the tarmac; the complex was extensive and well guarded, not that it surprised him seeing as the base served as the only major frontline command post in the Clarion region. All along the dozen or so airstrips were hangars; some of which were open, exposing the aircraft inside to the waning sun's golden rays. Lier saw a cluster of buildings to the east of the base, no doubt the command center and support structures.

A convoy of jeeps met them on the airstrip, ferrying Barret, Lier, and the rest of the technicians to the main command center where they were to endure numerous security checks before being cleared for entry. After being frisked over twice, Lier placed his sidearm and other metallic possessions in a bin and passed through one of the security scanners. A guard who had looked through the bin found Lier's badge and nodded at him. "No firearms past this point," Lier caught an uncomfortable glance from Barret, who was going through a similar ordeal. Sensing the pair's uncertainty, the soldier quickly added,

“Don’t worry, you’ll get them back when you leave. The Lord Marshall has been waiting for you, Mr. Lier. Follow me.”

Lier began to follow along with Barret but the guard stopped pointed at him companion. “He’ll have to wait here. The Lord Marshall made it clear that he speak to you privately.” The man’s face told Lier there was no point in pushing the issue.

Barret looked as though he were about to protest but stopped, noticing the soldier’s emphasis on the word ‘privately’ because he just nodded. “Alright. I’ll just be here then... waiting.” He turned back down the hallway and sat down on one of the several wooden benches that lined the otherwise bare hall, staring at the ceiling tiles.

Although he wasn’t exactly sure, this was the first time Lier had seen Draylan show any hesitation and for some reason Lier in turn felt a small sense of dread begin to creep into the pit of his stomach for what lay ahead. Nonetheless, he quieted his doubts and turned towards the trooper. “I’m ready to see Mannus.”

The Lord Marshall was standing in the center of the main command hub when Lier arrived. Mannus was easily identifiable in his immaculate gold-trimmed, matte-green uniform. The room was swarming with activity; officers scurried from console to console, taking quick, almost rodent-like glances at the myriad computer screens and holo-displays before punching readings down onto their datapads or shouting commands to their subordinates. The hub itself was huge; the grated ceiling looked to be about seven meters high and the room’s size seemed comparable to that of a large entrance hall. Holograms cast a dim blue-green glow throughout the space; creating an almost subterranean feel that permeated the room. The soldier who Lier had been following approached the Lord Marshall and saluted dutifully, clearing his throat to let the man know that someone was behind him; “Sir, the Judicator from Erebus is here.”

Mannus turned; returning the salute quicker than Lier had thought physically possible, “Thank you private, dismissed.”

The soldier turned and left the command hub, the heavy double doors hissing closed behind him, throwing the room back into its subterranean feel as the white glow that had been dueling with the light from the holograms suddenly disappeared. The Lord Marshall turned to Lier, looking him over.

He was a tall, dark-haired man who looked to be in his late forties. Needless to say, he showed no real signs of aging other than a slightly furrowed brow and a small streak of grey that had began creeping up from his temples. An impressive figure; illuminated by the shadowy holograms he resembled pictures of the ancient heroes of Erebus that were synonymous with holo-movies. The Lord Marshall’s commanding aura seemed to permeate the room and Ames was certain that the he was as intelligent as he was powerful.

The man approached Lier, a completely neutral look on his face, his arm extended outwards. “Welcome Judicator, I am Lord Marshall Jacob Mannus, Commander of Confederate military operations in the Clarion front.”

Lier took his hand. “Judicator Ames Lier. I was sent by the High Council.”

Mannus nodded, Lier could have sworn that he saw the slightest scowl creep across the Lord Marshall’s face as he heard those last words. “Yes, I believe that I have a fairly good idea on what the Council has sent you to evaluate, Judicator.” As

Mannus spoke; hearing the way he accentuated the title with the slightest hint of venom, Lier instantly knew then and there that his job was going to be much, much harder.

Lier cocked his head slightly, feigning innocence. "Sir, I think we have a bit of a misunderstanding here. I was sent—"

"I believe I have a very accurate understanding of why you're here Judicator. But I realize that you were probably conscripted into this by some bureaucratic bullshit like half of us out here are anyway so I guess I can't really blame you." Mannus interrupted suddenly. "But," he continued rather forcefully, as though making sure that Lier couldn't possibly try to resume talking. "That doesn't make you any less of a pain in my side."

Lier tried and failed to keep the look of utter surprise and shock from his face, managing only to gain the quizzical stares of several adjutants and service members.

"A word of advice to you Judicator," Mannus continued. "Do what you need to do and then get the hell out of my territory."

Lier nodded his head, still slightly perturbed by the Lord Marshall's unanticipated curtness. "Yes sir. I understand."

Mannus looked away almost immediately. "Good, now get out of my command center," he said with a wave of his hand.

Lier wrung his hands together and offered the man an exaggerated bow before following the waiting trooper out of the room. The private led him back to the entrance, moving over to speak with the two guards.

Barret instantly shot the Judicator a questioning glance; his expression betraying what he was about to ask; "So... how'd it go in there?" He said, his tone almost anticipatory as though he was expecting a specific answer.

Lier sighed heavily, still going over his conversation with Mannus; "Well, I don't think the Lord Marshall is happy having to play host."

Barret nodded; a slight grin on his face. "Well, I figured as much. You sort of have that affect on people. You piss someone off enough to get a hit placed on you and now you've made friends with a Lord Marshall."

Barret's mention of the assassin and consequently the events back in Erebus City suddenly brought Macharius to mind. Lier found himself speechless for a moment; unable to prepare a retort. Barret realized the effect of his words and abruptly decided that his shoes were far more interesting than pursuing the current conversation. The two both stood there for several seconds, Lier lost in thought while Barret stared at the ground, unsure of what to say.

The private who had escorted Lier out of the command hub finally finished talking with the security guards and approached Lier; informing them he was to show them to their quarters in a dry tone that suggested he'd really rather be doing something else. Eager to jump at any distraction that would allow them to bypass any more awkward apologies or silences the two of them both followed the private out of the command center into the darkening horizon. They were led out onto the grounds of the base, slowly moving away towards any sizeable structures until they found themselves in the midst of a sea of tents too numerous to count.

"It probably isn't something you're used to but it's all the Lord Marshall could procure on such short notice." The private said, holding one flap of the tent open so

that the sun's rapidly diminishing illumination could reach inside. "Is there anything else you need?"

The three of them arrived in front of an old matte-green field tent located near the far end of a nearby airstrip. This wasn't the only tent either; they stood amid a sea of dozens of identical structures, which were all identical in both color and design. Lier had a sneaking suspicion that Mannus had deliberately stuck them here as a small means of tipping them off to the fact that he didn't want them there. Regardless, he had endured far worse conditions in his career. Lier would have taken the tent over the wurm-wraith infested apartment that he'd been assigned years ago without hesitation.

Barret ducked under the private's arm and went inside and Lier followed suit, placing his bags on an old metal cot in the far corner. The private stepped inside and looked at the two men almost sympathetically as they unpacked, silently waiting until Lier finally noticed him. "Make yourselves comfortable. I have to return to my post but a guide will be assigned to you and will meet you tomorrow."

Barret paid the man no heed and continued unpacking a stack of shirts, placing them into neat piles, so eventually Lier nodded at the man to show that at least someone was paying attention. "That's fine, we appreciate everything. Please tell your superiors that our accommodations are acceptable."

The private nodded and withdrew, closing the tent flap behind him. After a minute Barret looked at Lier, "Do you actually talk like that? I mean, like normally?"

Lier laughed before answering; "It's my job. You get too used to dealing with bureaucrats and you end up like me." From Barret's expression he seemed to find the response to make perfect sense. "Needless to say, I don't think that Mannus was very happy having us around.

Barret's head shot up from his bag with a look of feigned surprise, "Really! Even with all that fancy talk and that good ol' charm of yours he still didn't like you? I'm shocked."

The two of them broke out into laughter and for the first time in what seemed like a lifetime Lier felt unburdened by the outside world. "I'm as surprised as you are. It usually works on people. But really, I don't think it was me in particular. I think Mannus's reaction to me was more about the Council's interference in the military."

Barret's tone quieted noticeably and he nodded. "Yeah, a lot of the top brass have been that way recently. They wouldn't take kindly to a civilian breathing down their necks. Hell, they have a fit when the press is sniffing around, let alone a government stooge, no offense." Barret's eyes wandered off as if he was lost in thought. "I'm gonna step outside for some air. I'll see ya back here later." With that, Barret disappeared into the darkness.

Curious, Lier contemplated trailing him but decided against it; he owed the man who saved his life at least that much. Instead, he took advantage of being alone to pull out his datapad to see if Thomas Napier had come through and found anything for him; he wasn't disappointed. Thumbing through his inbox Lier noticed a message from one of Napier's old aliases, one that was rarely ever used, the message was red flagged and had an attached file. Curious, Lier opened it and discovered a line of red text that read: Thought you might want to know about this. At the bottom of the text there was a copy of a communiqué as well as video file.

Lier scrolled down past the text and went to the video file. *Better check this out first.* After pressing play a newscast appeared on the screen and two traditionally superficial news anchors cheerily read through a variety of tragedies and disasters before finally arriving to what he was looking for: "On battlefield news; High Councilor Toren announced that an additional half-million men will be sent to the front lines by the end of the month, bringing the year's total mobilization number to approximately three-million. Councilor Toren stated in a recent press conference that this year's dramatic increase in recruitment does not reflect in any way the progress the military has made as of yet."

Lier skipped through the rest of the video and scrolled back to the remaining message and was presented with what was probably a highly restricted government document. Lier found himself wondering how Napier had come upon this information but in the end he just accepted it; his boss had an uncanny ability to obtain good Intel, presumably through his many contacts. Nevertheless, Lier found the files' contents to be quite interesting to say the least:

**From:** Ricus Telford, Office of Army Intelligence  
**To:** Lord Marshall Jacob Mannus  
**Decryption Key:** Altus  
**Subject:** Clarion Progress/Strategic Battlefield Advancement  
**Date:** 296.3745

Lord Marshall,

As requested the Council has approved your request for an additional 50,000 soldiers. I do not need to stress to you the importance of maintaining your momentum at all costs. If this war were to result in yet another stalemate the public would quickly turn against not only the military but also its government leaders. It is imperative that this does not happen.

A number of my peers have conferred and we suggest that you launch an offensive to the Far East. Command has been given strict orders by Councilman Arden that you include all original elements of the initial discovery of the site for this operation as to limit the potential for future breaches in security. The Eastern portion of the Clarion region is an important link to the neighboring regions and will allow our forces to support the neighboring Delai region. In addition, our intelligence suggests there has been increased activity on the fringes of the Clarion region, we do not yet know if the enemy knows of the site, however, satellite imagery suggests that a large force is mobilizing uncomfortably close to the site's location, they cannot be allowed to discover it.

It is imperative that the units assigned to this operation remain unaware of the true nature of the ruins if at all possible. As with all possible technological findings these must be kept secure at all costs.

Glory to the Confederacy,  
High Councilor Regis Arden

...End Message...

Questions flooded into the Judicator's mind as the full weight of what he had just read dawned on him. *Something big is going on here. A lot bigger than I was led to believe.* Glancing at his chronometer, Lier closed both files and shut down his datapad, placing it in his suitcase carefully, taking great care to keep it hidden from anywhere Barret could find it and then left the tent. He had to have a little chat with the Lord Marshall.

As it turned out, getting in to talk with the Lord Marshall took more than he had anticipated; it seemed that Mannus really had no inclination to deal with the Judicator at all. Mannus finally agreed when Lier told the young private barring his entrance to ask the Lord Marshall about a site in the East Clarion Region. That caused a ruckus and not long after Lier was led into Mannus's office with fervor he hadn't seen in a very long while.

Two troopers escorted him into the Lord Marshall's office and sat him down rather forcefully into a nearby chair, which, Lier noted, wasn't altogether too comfortable. One of the two troopers announced, rather unnecessarily in Lier's opinion, that he was the man who had wanted to speak with Mannus. The look on the Lord Marshall's features showed that he clearly wasn't surprised at all. Mannus dismissed the two of them and ordered them outside. The last man out closed the door as he left, leaving the room silent for several seconds before Mannus finally spoke, an expression of part anger and part disbelief; "How did you know about the Theta Site?"

Lier kept his face perfectly straight as he took note of the new information before speaking; "The Theta site was brought to my attention by one of my... most reliable sources. I've known about it for quite some time now." Lier studied Mannus's expression, trying to predict what he was about to say next, from the look of it, the man didn't believe a word.

Mannus glared at him, his eyes seemed to bore into the Judicator's thoughts "You're lying."

Lier cursed inwardly; *Damn. But, all is not lost. Maybe I can still play him into getting what I need.* "Well, regardless, I don't see how it makes much of a difference. I mean, the fact that you called me in here at the mere mentioning of a Theta site seems reasonable evidence to confirm that I know of something that is relatively important. And it is reasonable to assume that you would have at the very least a major headache if word of this were to leak out to the public. Am I right?"

Mannus leaned forwards towards Lier; his hands clasped together so tightly that the knuckles were white. Mannus spoke in a startlingly clear, calculating tone for someone being blackmailed by the equivalent of an ant. "I could call the MP's in here right now, string you up on a charge of treason or some other goddamn crime against the State and you would be spending the rest of your life in a military prison, civilian or not."

Lier kept up the pressure, taking a chance with his gut feeling. "Yes, but you have no way of ensuring that this information stays secret by locking me up. If I were to be arrested or become otherwise incapable of my duty then the information might somehow find its own way out into the world, and neither of us want that."

Lier could tell from the scowl on Mannus's face that he'd cornered him. The Lord Marshall sat back into his chair and exhaled deeply, all the while staring at Lier with an intense loathing. After a few moments he unclasped his hands and ran a hand through his hair before finally speaking. "What do you want?"

Inwardly, Lier breathed a sigh of relief; his bluff had paid off. “I want access to a complete background of General Etton’s military career. In addition, I want to be embedded within General Etton’s Command until either my superiors or myself deems that my mission is complete.”

Mannus shook his head; “No, that’s not a possibility Judicator. I will not allow it. I cannot allow it.” He sat back into his chair once again, his face growing slightly red.

Still, the Judicator sat there unmoving, looking back at Mannus but not saying a word. The Lord Marshall sat there quietly for a good minute before finally looking at Lier with a surprising mixture of simultaneous respect and disgust. “I’ll give you one thing, Judicator, you are well-informed. Whoever that source of yours is does a damn fine job. I’ll move you to Etton’s Command... for now. I’ll be better off with you pestering him anyway. But if you ever try pulling this stunt on me again you won’t be liking the situation you’ll find yourself in.”

Lier nodded with fake sincerity; “Of course Lord Marshall, I wouldn’t dream of it. However, since my... quarters are quite a distance from the main Command Center do you think that you would be able to find some room somewhere a little closer?”

Lier laughed inwardly as Mannus glowered back, his face turning into a scowl. “It would be best if you left Judicator.”

Lier nodded at the Lord Marshall. “Of course. Just asking.” As he turned to leave Lier could have sworn he heard Mannus muttering about security as he left the office.

Lier returned to the tent to find Barret lying on his cot, absentmindedly tossing a bullet in the air. Barret stopped as he saw the Judicator enter, giving him a curious look. “Where were you all this time?”

“I had a little chat with the Lord Marshall. We’re going to be embedded with Etton.”

Barret studied him closely with a disbelieving stare. “How’d you manage that? Sold your soul to him or something? Not many people can heckle with a Marshall and win you know.”

Lier nodded, reviewing the meeting with Mannus. “It wasn’t that hard, just needed to have the right tools for the job.”

“Really? You’ll have to tell me how you did it; hell knows I could use that kind of negotiating when my taxes are due.”

Lier looked at the suitcase that contained his datapad for a split second before looking back at Barret. “You have no idea.”