

Chapter 9

*Lies and deceit often craft a meandering labyrinth that can ensnare even the most astute of men
-Ancient passage extract (Unknown Date and Origin)*

Nicholas Etton stood at the viewport of the mobile command crawler *Imperator* as it trundled alongside the main command column making its way through the snow-covered forest of the northern Clarion region. The MCC, as it was designated by the Confederate military, was a heavily armored, six-story tall engine that acted as a mobile base of operations for the Confederate military. The *Imperator*, true to its name, was a massive rectangular construct with an exposed observation platform that allowed Etton, as well as his fellow officers, a commanding view of the mile long procession of vehicles.

The 6th Heron Armored Battalion and the 3rd and 5th Tresdeon Infantry Divisions had been assigned to Task Force C-23.4, which had been under the direct command of Etton roughly four months ago when the Theta site had been discovered during an engagement with an Aprion expeditionary force. In addition to those forces that had been involved in the Theta site's discovery were the 22nd Erebian Rifles; elements of the 2nd, 3rd, and 9th Calonus Infantry Divisions and the 3rd and 4th Calonus Armored Divisions. In addition, an archaeological survey team under the command of General Gerrald Typhus had been embedded with the task force for the study of the Theta Site. The Lord Marshall had assigned Typhus to Task Force C-23.4 but Etton had heard that the actual decision to include the man had been made by someone outside of the military. That was worrisome news to Etton for a variety of reasons, none of which were pleasant. Etton closed his eyes, remembering with little relish the day his Task force had discovered the site.

Whether the Aprion force had had a specific goal or reason for being there Etton didn't know. What he did know was that while the Confederate task force had been crippled by the initial attack they had somehow managed to withdraw into the Clarion wastes and escape their attackers. Low on supplies and with vast numbers of wounded Task Force C-23.4 had found itself virtually stranded in the snowy hell, unable to communicate and travel due to the massive snowstorms that frequently materialized with little or no warning. To make matters worse, the Aprion forces had once again followed them.

Etton remembered the decision he had been forced to make: withdraw his force from their rendezvous point, leaving behind all those who had failed to make it in time. They had embarked into the wilderness, hoping they would find a safe haven from both the elements and their enemies. Luckily, the gods had bestowed deliverance upon them; a massive cavern wedged between a valley wall and a sea of Thornwood trees.

As they arrived at the mouth of the cave they had been greeted by a stunning sight, though classifying it as a cave had been a considerable understatement. The entrance spanned several dozen meters in length and was at least thirty meters in height. Initially, Etton had been too preoccupied with getting his men into shelter to notice several of the strange qualities the seemingly natural, if not incredible formation displayed but after the remnants of the 6th Task Force had settled in they began to notice that their refuge was not all that it seemed; tests on the ice that had formed over what had initially been believed to be rock revealed a mineral that had a reflective, almost metallic

quality and upon closer inspection scouts had discovered evidence of inexplicably intricate designs that appeared to have been etched into the stone. The teams that Etton had sent ahead to scout out the interior of the cave returned to report that they had come to a dead end; a seemingly impenetrable wall of ice several storeys high.

Puzzled, Etton had gone to see for himself what had gotten his officers rattled. He shuddered inwardly, remembering the nipping cold of the snow as emerged from the Command Crawler into the frigid air and had encountered firsthand the strange discoveries that his men had made. He remembered as his flashlight's beam cut through the ice to the metallic rock and how the light had glinted off the strange surface, illuminating strange yet familiar geometric patterns that seemed to shift and change before his eyes. Determining there was little chance of the cave already being occupied, Etton had ordered his men to set up camp and survey the area in an effort to find out as much as possible about the strange formation. When the storms finally ceased and the task force had been able to begin its long trek back towards Helmsly Forward Command they had determined that the cave was an artificial structure that had been lost to the Clarion wastes for possibly hundreds of years. Command had been interested, very interested.

General Typhus strode up beside Etton, his voice snapping Etton from his reverie. "So General, what can we expect when we arrive? The reports that you've filed were... vague and I would very much like to understand our situation before we arrive, particularly the geography of the site. Is the area defensible?"

Etton broke his gaze from the convoy of vehicles and turned to Typhus. "The site is extremely defensible. There are several cliffs surrounding much of the northern and eastern entrances, which along with the natural fortifications provided by the cavern itself should allow us to defend the site rather easily."

Etton paused as an adjutant holding a datapad in one hand approached the two Generals, paused, and saluted smartly. "Sirs, communiqué from Command."

Both Etton and Typhus returned the man's salute, Etton taking the datapad from the adjutant with a nod. As Etton read the script he felt a chill run through him and the room suddenly seemed to grow unbearably cold, as though someone had left an entrance hatch open. The message contained only two lines of text:

```
Dispatch to Task Force C-24.4 from Helmsly Forward Command:  
Judicariate official en route, arrival within two days.
```

Typhus snatched the datapad from Etton and read it over, his features never changing. He eyed Etton with a calm expression of hesitation, as though he was waiting to see what the man would do next.

Etton's mind raced as he fought back a fresh wave of dread. *The Council has sent them. I know it. What do they want?* He slowly looked back at Typhus, trying his best to keep his expression from revealing anything. "There are things I need to attend to... can you take over for now?"

"Of course."

Etton turned to the rest of his officers and the *Imperator's* command crew. "General Typhus has command."

They were about six hours into the flight when the storm began, Lier found himself grasping the transport's arm-rail to keep from being thrown across the cabin by the intense turbulence, fighting to keep himself from vomiting. Barret just looked on, apparently unconcerned with the increasing turbulence that was knocking his companion around mercilessly.

Lier struggled back to his seat after a bone-jarring jolt that had almost sent him flying out of his seat. "How the Hell doesn't this bother you?"

"This is nothing; you should've been with me at Tellum. My transport got hit during deployment and the pilot had to make a crash landing. I almost didn't make it outta there; most of my squad didn't."

Lier nodded, not feeling any more comforted than before. He yelled towards the cockpit at the pilot. "We must be in some storm for it to be this bad."

The man shook his head. "Nope. Not where we're headed it's not. This is just a windy day out in the wastes; count yourself lucky we're not in a storm."

Lier looked at Barret, who was staring at the deck in front of him, surprise and shock evident before the Judicator yelled back at the pilot. "How often are those?"

Lier just managed to hear a chuckle over the sound of the wind outside. "Oh, just about everyday."

Barret broke out in laughter at Lier's discomfort. "Don't worry. These babies are built tough, the best the Confederacy can buy. Hey, if it makes you feel any better just think about what it would be like if we had to drive all the way out here. Now that would really suck."

Lier was just about to reply that he'd rather walk the whole way as opposed to sit for ten minutes in the flier when, in the background he heard the co-pilot announce cheerfully over the P.A.: "I'm sorry ladies and gentlemen but we are experiencing some minor turbulence due to adverse weather conditions. The pilot and myself would like to ask you all to kindly buckle your safety restraints and to please refrain from moving about the cabin at this time. Thank you for your cooperation."

Barret began to chuckle loudly and Lier turned away from the laughing man as another jolt almost lifted him out of his seat.

Task Force C-23.4 had reached the Theta site approximately eight hours ago and Etton had just received confirmation from command that the Judicator's transport had been dispatched to the area and would be arriving shortly despite a minor blizzard that had formed an hour ago.

He sat in his quarters, staring at the glass of sael he was holding intently. It had been two days since he'd gotten the communiqué from Helmsly about the Judicators' impending arrival and he'd been worried ever since. He twirled the glass around in his hand, causing a tiny whirlpool to form in the golden brown liquid before he drained the glass, and exhaled deeply, not at all contented by the drink's effects on him.

He knew why the Judicator had been sent; he'd screwed up during his last operation. He'd let the enemy outmaneuver him and had almost lost the entire taskforce. Task Force 6 had lost much during the battle, and Etton himself had also paid dearly. That was why they had sent Typhus along-to take over when he was removed from command-but what confused Etton was why they had sent a civilian to deal with a military matter. He also wondered why he'd been redeployed back into the field before

his superiors had sent in their hounds to remove him from command. Etton looked at his empty glass contemptuously and reached over to pour himself some more of the amber liquid until he realized that this was most likely the last his men would ever see of him before he was taken away and probably discharged for gross negligence. *Do I really want to be taken away in shackles as a raging drunk?*

The crushing weight of his failure came down on him like a waterfall, relentlessly streaming over him, forcing him to his knees until he remembered another way out; no easier but much more honorable. Etton got up from his chair and moved to his officer's chest, opening the small wooden case gently before reaching under a framed picture that, regardless of his eye's futile attempts to avoid, unleashed a sudden wash of sadness. Although it was hard for him, he turned the picture over, repressing the painful memories. Underneath was a small compartment that had been overlooked when security had swept Etton's belongings upon entering the *Imperator*. Since weapons weren't allowed in the sleeping quarters and decks of the *Imperator* without special authorization, Etton had been forced to smuggle one to his quarters.

Etton opened the compartment and saw the weapon lying there on its side, safety on. He took the weapon hesitantly, as though the sidearm were a living thing that could strike him without warning. The pistol was cold in his hands; the metal seemed to leech all the warmth from his fingers as he looked at the weapon absorbedly, his eyes slowly running over the gun, studying it intensely. Etton tried to raise the pistol to his temple but was surprised to find that his body wouldn't obey his command. Etton sighed deeply, *No. This is the easy way out. I don't deserve it. I will face whatever punishment command sees fit. I owe it to those who died because of me.*

There came a sudden rapping from the door followed by a familiar voice, causing Etton to jump involuntarily, once again acknowledging the outside world. "Hello? Sir? Are you in there?"

Etton quickly stashed the pistol under his mattress and got to his feet, briskly striding over to the doorway. "Yes, Lieutenant, I'm here."

Etton opened the door and was greeted with the sight of Lieutenant Andrea Brize, a young, intelligent-looking woman whose striking presence was accentuated by her stunning attractiveness and calm demeanor. She was dangerous as hell and an excellent fighter, an aspect that was underplayed by her slim gymnast's physique that seemed to show regardless of what she wore. Etton had sparred against her once about six months ago and had chosen never to do it again; his shoulder was still ached from time to time, though he'd never admit it. Brize had served under Etton during his previous operation and had performed well in the line of duty. He felt an almost paternal feeling for the woman; who had essentially become like family to him. He had high hopes that she would become a capable officer one day. *That is if she doesn't get caught up in all the bureaucratic crap that's screwing the world over these days.*

Lieutenant Brize wore a look of part concern and part curiosity. Etton had opened the door practically in her face. "Sir. The Judicial representatives have arrived as of ..." Brize glanced down at her chronometer quickly but Etton cut her off before he could finish.

"Lieutenant, cut the crap. You've served under me for what? A year? You know I hate all those formalities. I don't have time right now. Just take me to the Judicator so we can get this over with."

Lieutenant Brize looked as though she'd been slapped across the face and Etton immediately regretted being so harsh on her. "Yes sir. Follow me. They're waiting for you at the command deck."

As they walked through the bowels of the *Imperator* the two remained in an uneasy silence until Etton couldn't take it anymore. "So Brize, how's your little brother doing? He's what? Fifteen years old now?"

Brize didn't look back but jumped at the question eagerly, "Gedrin. He's actually sixteen this past month sir. He's doing fine." Brize laughed slightly. "He wanted to know if I could get him a tank since he got his license."

Etton laughed inwardly. "You told him that you'd be court martialled for that right?"

Brize's face instantly became serious. "Of course sir, that's why I told him I'd get two."

"There you go Lieutenant. There's hope for you yet."

"Of course sir. Let's just hope you haven't corrupted me too much."

They arrived at the command deck to find it relatively empty save for a few technicians and communication officers who were too busy monitoring incoming messages to notice the Etton and Brize enter the spacious room. In the center of the observation platform Etton saw Gerrald Typhus speaking to two men; the one was easily recognizable as a member of the Judicariate due to his steel grey overcoat with his badge of office on both sides of his lapel. The other man was harder to identify; he wore an outfit that was clearly high-ranking military but his black uniform displayed no unit patch or insignia. Etton had never seen the man before and had certainly never served with him, yet here he was, standing on the command deck of the *Imperator* like a mute assessor who would unquestionably find him guilty. As he saw them a stray thought wisped through his mind. *Why would a Judicator have a military bodyguard? This makes no sense at all.*

Seeing that the two men were looking at something behind him Typhus finally noticed Etton and Brize approach, exclaiming loudly. "Well, speak of the devil. Here he is now."

Etton remained expressionless as stepped past Typhus slowly and deliberately making his way towards the Judicator and his bodyguard, an uneasy smile creeping its way across Typhus's face.

He studied the Judicator over; he was thin but from the way he carried himself Etton could tell he was no weakling city boy. Etton also noticed how young the Judicator was; he was probably about half of Etton's own age. In fact, the man looked an eerie similarity of himself when he was younger.

The other man, the bodyguard, had a much more distinguished appearance; Etton's protocol-obsessed subconscious, a remnant of his years of training and instruction, noted that the man's hair was at least an inch and a half past regulation standards and the obvious use of hair gel was just blatant disregard. He was tall and looked as though he could put many of the drill sergeants back at basic to shame. There was no doubt in his mind that the man had at one time been in the military.

Etton extended his hand to the Judicator after a moment. "I am General Nicholas Etton, as my fellow General has no doubt informed you."

The Judicator met his hand with a firm grip. “Judicator Ames Lier, and this is my associate, Specialist Barret.”

Etton’s eyebrow rose in curiosity. “Specialist? If I may ask, which branch did you serve under?”

Barret whistled noisily, prompting a strange look from both Etton and Brize. “Well, that’s kind of a long story. You wouldn’t be interested anyway, trust me.”

Etton nodded. *How am I supposed to trust someone who has come to condemn me, no matter how guilty I am?*

Lier withdrew his hand and motioned outside the viewport windows, at the encampment that had sprouted up over the course of the past day and a half. “This is an extensive operation, must be something important you’ve got out here.”

Brize jumped in immediately, attempting to parry the accusation. “We’ve gotten reports from our satellites that there has been increased Republic activity in the wastes. We’re here to strengthen our presence in the region.”

Lier nodded but Etton could tell that the Judicator didn’t believe the Lieutenant’s half-truth, prompting Etton to wonder just how much this man knew, and how he knew it.

As though on cue, Typhus broke his silence. “Judicator, I’m surprised you came all the way out here. Your kind aren’t usually seen in the middle of a military operation so you can understand our curiosity.”

Lier shifted slightly for a second, as though uncomfortable, before replying. “I was sent by the High Council to evaluate certain aspects of this operation, and due to it’s vital role in the future of the Confederacy I’d say that there is nothing unusual about wanting as much security as possible.”

Etton knew privately that the Judicator had been referring to him. The way he’d glanced at Etton a split second before talking had confirmed his suspicions: the Judicator knew about the Theta site and was here for him. *Why the hell is he toying with me then? Just get it over with. Take me away!*

Typhus nodded, apparently accepting Lier’s answer wholeheartedly. “Well, Judicator, you’re welcome to stay as long as you require. We have quarters ready for you in the Emperor. Lieutenant Brize can take you and your associate there now.”

“That will be fine, but I would like to get to work right away.”

“Of course, you may start your investigation as soon as you are ready.”

Etton and Typhus watched as Brize, the Judicator, and his bodyguard left in silence, then, when the door hissed shut behind them, Etton cursed silently. “Damn it. What the hell is going on here?”

Typhus responded remarkably quickly and his tone was one of careful observation as he spoke. “What do you think they’re really here for?”

Etton ignored Typhus, instead gazing out the viewport into the darkness, watching the activity of the base through the flurry of snowfall.

Lieutenant Brize walked down the compact halls of the Emperor in awkward silence as the two men followed closely behind. Lier followed Brize closely, studying the Lieutenant’s tense motions as she led them deeper into the *Emperor*.

As they walked, Lier went through the meeting with the two Generals mentally. Admittedly, he had been a little surprised when he’d found that he’d have to deal with not one but two generals but that was nothing too significant. Lier made a mental note to

watch out for Typhus; although surprisingly cordial, the man had seemed almost too pleasant at the arrival of an outside authority, an occasion that usually led to very bad things in Lier's experience.

Etton was another matter entirely; he had seemed utterly resigned, as though he knew exactly why a stranger had come to his command and had begun probing around. But the thing that puzzled Lier the most was that Etton had looked utterly indifferent throughout the entire conversation, as though he had been expecting something to happen.

The lieutenant was still very much an enigma; although she seemed nervous, presumably at the presence of a foreign organization, which was perfectly understandable from Lier's perspective, she was frustratingly blank on the surface. Lier wondered if the lieutenant always acted this way or if she was doing it for their benefit.

The lieutenant came to a sudden stop and Lier almost walked into her as his wandering mind registered what was going on. Barret cast a smirk towards Lier and Brize turned to face them both, slight annoyance evident as she spoke. "These are the guest quarters. This is where you will stay during your investigation. If you need anything then contact me using my comm." she said motioning at the small device on her belt, "Just make sure that you don't call me for something stupid. I do have a job to do."

Lier mentally snapped his fingers. *So she does have some personality. Good. I'm getting sick of all dealing with all these mindless drones.*

Barret put on his most serious face and mockingly saluted. "Copy that, SIR!"

Brize glared at Barret before shaking her head, looking back to Lier. "Is there anything else you need Judicator?"

An idea formed in Lier's mind. "Actually, I would like to speak to you about your commanding officer. Do you have time?"

Barret looked at Lier for a moment until the realization of what he was suggesting suddenly dawned on him. "Oh, come on! We just got here!"

Brize nodded. "How long will this take?"

"It shouldn't take long at all. I just want to know a little more about Etton."

Brize's face turned to one of slight worry. "General Etton?"

Lier's staid expression remained. "Yes. Is that a problem?"

Brize shook her head, but she still looked slightly worried. "No. No problem."

"Good, it should only take a couple of minutes. We can talk in my quarters then."

The judicator and lieutenant walked past a crestfallen-looking Barret. "This sucks, we're here for five minutes and already you're right to work."

They ignored Barret and entered Lier's room, sitting down at a pair of chairs next to a small table in the corner of the room. Lier took out his PDA and activated the audio recording program before setting it on the center of the table. Lier clasped his hands together before beginning. "Lieutenant Brize, you've served under Etton for a good while now, correct?"

Brize nodded brusquely. "Yes, fifteen months now."

"And throughout that time how well would you say general Etton has fulfilled his duties as an officer?"

"I'd say he's one of the best officers I'd ever served under."

Lier nodded, frowning slightly. "And can you tell me a little about the what happened several months ago, when you engaged an enemy force at Clarion?"

Brize fidgeted in her chair a little, as though uncomfortable. “We were taken by surprise by the second enemy force while engaging the main group and were then forced to retreat. The entire taskforce would’ve been routed if it hadn’t been for General Etton.”

“I see. However, there have been claims that it had been Etton’s fault for allowing an enemy force to flank him in the first place...”

Brize interrupted Lier suddenly, looking irritated. “Those reports are ridiculous! Our scanners were useless in the blizzards; no one could have known they were coming through that storm. No one.” Brize sat back into her chair, agitated.

“Alright, it’s just that the reports I’d read...”

Brize stood up, looking very angrily down at Lier. “You’re not here to help with anything! You’re just here to arrest Etton on some trumped up charge aren’t you?” Brize glared at Lier, eyes shooting daggers at him. “This interview is over. Goodbye Judicator.”

Brize stormed past an amused looking Barret, who had been watching the entire interview from the far wall. She left Lier’s quarters angrily, disappearing through the doorway, leaving the two men in a partially bewildered silence. After a while Barret started laughing and went back into the hallway, but not before shouting a jab at Lier; “Wow, Ames. You do have a way with women. I think she likes you.”

Slowly, Lier reached over to the table and turned off his PDA before falling back into his chair, suddenly feeling very tired. *Why is it that everyone interrupts me?*