



BATTLECORPS

BLACK MIST RISING

Prologue

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**Near Obuchi, Luthien
Kagoshima Prefecture
Pesht Military District
Draconis Combine
15 August 3067**

"Sumimasen."

The voice floated on the cool draft surging through the doorless entrance. The old man dragged a blistered and scabbed hand across clotted hair to see the entryway. Descending darkness and the harsh rainstorm kept the guttering lamp flame from illuminating the squalid room beyond liquid shadows cavorting to the relentless peal of thunder. Tucking a hank of the filthy, long hair behind an ear, he contemplated easing out of his sitting position over the chipped and tarnished water pot suspended above the paltry excuse for a fire. Thought better of it as pain dragged knives along his lower back.

His mouth began to form the proper words, but he caught them before utterance; so tired. Slipping. "Yes."

"Are you Jogen?" the indistinct figure asked. Rain slashed, and backlit lightning traced the sky in skittering flicks of a giant light pen.

"Yes."

"A package for you."

"Yes?" Something tickled his bare foot. He looked down to find a cockroach scampering merrily on its way to some food source; he gummed teeth, the aftertaste of burnt rice sitting heavy from breakfast...the only dinner tonight. Jealousy leapt and a dry chuckle answered at the ridiculousness of his situation.

But I put myself in this hell hole. Didn't leave myself an out when it all came crashing down.

"You are okay. *So ka?*"

"Yes."

"May I enter?"

The old man shook his head, the courtesy of asking (didn't just walk in, uninvited, demanding food he didn't have like the rest of

the malcontents in the area) a balm to one tossed among unproductives and workers. But such courtesy stood out like a diamond in a vat of the crude oil he helped to pump from sun up to sun down. The comings and goings of someone displaying such courtesy would be hidden for a time, as this hut hid among endless kilometers of the same—near the only moderately civilized worker housing in Obuchi—in the vast stretches of dirty industrialization outside the beauty and serenity of Luthien. But if you searched long enough—and they *searched*—the diamond would be found and despite the smear of blackness across its surface, you could not deny it was a diamond. Especially not with the methods they would use to cleanse it.

He would remind his contacts to be even more circumspect in their couriers next time.

“Leave it.”

An imperceptible movement in the darkness indicated a nod, and a slim, plasticized note lay like an invitation to a ball, horribly conspicuous among the rotted and stained wooden planks (that one, just to its left, he watched out for, as it would move and cough up splinters at a moment’s notice). Then a flash of brilliance showed only an empty doorway, lonely as he these past years.

A sigh rattled loose cheeks and he sucked in heavily, the stench of petrochemicals overpowering even the heavy wetness of the storm.

He knew he must surrender to the inevitable and retrieve the package, but old, knobby fingers sought the heat of the flames for a moment longer. Will they have finally acquiesced? They must see the logic? He longed for the creature comforts so long accustomed, but those were beyond him. Now, only his duty remained.

Only his driving need to set them on the right path; to make sure they would choose the right leader, despite stubborn reticence.

And while some within the organization might consider it foolhardy in the extreme to remain so close to Luthien City and the Eyes of the Dragon, he firmly believed in hiding in plain sight. After all, would the Dragon really contemplate looking here, of all places? For him?

Then again, there were even those within the council that would see him dead for old grievances, or who would trade him to the Dragon to cover their own traitorous actions. And they would be

as unlikely to search for him among such dregs and cast-offs as the Dragon.

A dry chuckle shook his frame until a wracking cough did bend him over and he finally spit a large chunk of phlegm into the flames; watched it hiss and spit as he regained his breath. The weather and work is killing me.

With generations bowing his back under responsibilities, he heaved to his feet, ignoring the slashing knives and creaking joints and once more headed towards the coming storm.

A storm to make the weather outside appear a spring shower.

Obuchi, Luthien

15 August 3067

Shin Yodama sat in the small chair, scratching black, stiff hair halfway covering his ears, wondering when he might be able to return to his regulation hair-cut. The smell of astringent antiseptics drenched the room after his obligatory second cleaning of the day.

One could never be too careful.

An ancient flat-screen droned in the background (*Urizen II: The Legend*, again?!). It covered any noise he might make. Like he was going to make noise. He almost convinced himself.

Easing tired buttocks in the hard chair, he stared at the dimly lit table and its contents. Bottle of bleach. A pristine white cloth. A small, modified preserving sleeve (ah, the vanity!). A wooden cutting board inside a plastic catch basin. A blade sharp enough to cut crystal-aligned steel.

At least that's what the hawkler guaranteed as he sold the blade in the back alley. But he knew better. Knew the armor of a BattleMech better than the contours of any woman he lay with in his forty-six years of life. And while a smile toyed at the edges of his mouth at the thought of trying to even scratch such armor with the blade, it was a surpassingly good knife (better be, for the one hundred ryu spent). It would accomplish his intended goal with precision.

Stop waiting!

He almost shouted at his delays. But despite the drone of the flatscreen, he knew better than to start talking to himself. Eccentricities aside, that way might lead neighbors to become informers. And on Luthien that was a path most people walked, especially the workers and unproductives of Obuchi, not to mention those living in the squalid, endless stretching worker apartments; made his own one-room residence in Obuchi proper a palace. No need to give them a helping hand.

Pain?

He knew it wasn't the pain to come. He'd survived much worse in his years on battlefields across a dozen star systems and more.

Then what?

He carefully reached for the glass of water, the cool freshness along lips and tongue and throat refreshing, before placing it exactly back on the table. Stretched neck muscles, feeling the dirty coveralls move and bunch. Would he *ever* get used to missing the clean orderliness of his Izanagi uniform? He needed a shower. But he wouldn't, because you didn't do that but twice a week. If he had the ryu for so much water then he shouldn't be here. He'd stick out, and what he was about to do would be for nothing.

No, it was *vanity*. Vanity kept him in place. Vanity that kept him from this service. He was too well known for this job, which is why his first attempts failed. And for where he must go, they needed to forget where he came from. He'd told himself that time and again.

Yet nothing changed. Other avenues dried up and the rumors built. Pressures spiking across the Combine and especially here on Luthien. And when the Eyes of the Dragon failed, every other avenue must be explored. He knew this. Knew his whole life lay in such service.

And his most distinctive feature had been masked by a unique, modified plastiflesh bandage—he'd almost gotten to the point the itching all along his chest and arm didn't bother him anymore—there was still the fact of his...*wholeness*.

Whole. That was it. He was whole in his service. This would blemish him as nothing else in all his years of service to the Dragon...

...yet the Dragon requested and so here he sat, already attempting the impossible and failing and so making the only choice to allow him to move forward.

He bowed towards a master hundreds of kilometers distant then moved with alacrity. Grabbing the cloth, he expertly wrapped it around the pinky finger on his left hand, tying it off in a tourniquet just behind the first knuckle; the silk felt cool, almost a balm, as though it too expect the fire soon to be unleashed.

Laying his left hand flat on the cutting board, other fingers and thumb drawn back, he retrieved the knife just as kabuki music sang out from the flatscreen.

The playful smile beamed, then, at the appropriateness of the moment in the movie when Urizen, having survived a bomb blast after getting out of his car to retrieve some bamboo for a tea set, swore himself and the Combine State to the traditional samurai values of ancient Japan.

“And so to have I sworn and swear now,” he said softly. Drawing the blade across his knuckle. Heaving forward with his weight to sever cartilage and meat. Breath rattled through a throat constricted in pain, eyes wide yet focused.

With the pressure of the blade on his half-severed joint, he lifted the palm sharply, snapping the bone clean, as the blade finished its work, biting into the wood. With unhurried efficiency, he drew the ends of the cloth forward and tightly bound the stub of his finger, then deposited the finger tip into the modified preserving sleeve.

Ah, the vanity—I can accomplish my goal and return in time to be made whole again! He then moved to clean up.

After less than ten minutes, he sat once more at the table, chemicals scrubbing nostrils clean with as much relish as the blood and sweat and hair once more removed from the room before others might discover his presence through such carelessness.

It had been long years since he’d traveled the circles he now looked to return to with anonymity. He carefully took another sip of water—pleased not a ripple marred the surface from hands demanding to shake from the pain—before placing it back in its same sweat ring again as he contemplated his next move.

Shin Yodama was dead.

And so it was time for him to discover how high the *Kokuryu-kai* influence reach on Luthien.

