



BATTLECORPS

BLACK MIST RISING

Chapter Two

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Erinyes, Orestes

Free Rasalhague Republic

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Colonel Neil Campbell burst through the doors, out into the morning sunshine of Orestes. Despite the pleasant breeze, cobalt sky and picturesque clouds, and fresh scents of loam as a new wing of the Tyra Miraborg Memorial Academy broke ground, he spit to the side, swore, uncaring of who might be near.

"Now Colonel. That just wasn't proper at all. Some nice janitor's gonna have to clean that up."



Standing at the top of the steps, the owner of the voice leaned casually against the railing. A handsome woman in her mid-fifties (in the Watch, you only said forties), her forest-green uniform, trimmed in red, was as freshly pressed as the day it was unsealed from its vacuum-pack; the calf boots' polish almost made Neil squint. And of course, though not officially required, she wore a flowing Black Watch tartan shawl around her shoulders—brooch so large Neil could've hit it with autocannon fire at half-thousand meters. Twin, tasseled tails hanging so low they brushed the back of her knees. It wasn't officer greens—no need to be wearing them here—but it was damn close. And for Major Annette McHenry, that was the whole point.

The frustration of the last two hours melted, pulled away by her motherly looks (he'd never tell *her* that) and disarming talk. "Ah, Major. That's just what I needed to hear."

"O' course it is. Why do you think I've been baking out here for half the day is long. Not for my health, let me tell you."

Barring the half-hundred meters of Black Watch tartan around her shoulders—and rank insignias—his uniform mirrored hers (not as pressed). As they moved down the steps and onto the graveled path through the student park, among tall cedar and low pine with wide-swinging branches hanging onto the path, he began to appreciate her dedication; even in the shade, sweat sprung along his bared upper lip and eked out of a bright red hair-line.

"I take it the boys and girls didn't like the words you had to say."

He shook his head, feeling the short queue of a Gunslinger graduate slapping his neck. "Might as well bang my head against my *Highlander's* foot for half the day."

"I imagine that might actually be more useful."

"How you figure?"

"Well Colonel. You could be running stress tests on that new armor plating you've had your techs smacking on your *Highlander* for the last half year."

The lingering frustration of the morning popped with the casual ease of a child bursting a soap bubble with pudgy hands. He laughed out loud. "Touché, Major. Touché."

"Of course."

They rounded a bend in the path and hardly noticed the twin MechWarrior students who stepped aside with extreme deference, eyes and mouths as wide as a Billfist Bass.

Neil grabbed a handful of his thick goat's beard and gave it a good yank. "It's just...good day in the morning, how could they be so naïve. Gods! I've never seen such arrogance."

"And that's saying something, let me tell you."

He ignored the jab, pounding out his points with the force of each boot hit against white crushed stones as the path passed into the heavily wooded band surround the complex perimeter. "They think aerospace fighters are everything. 'Mechs are just tin cans. I've seen more respect paid to vehicle crewman in the Combine than the MechWarriors at this academy. If it wasn't for the staff, I'd almost believe the entire crop of aerospace students on the path to becoming Lyran social generals."

"Now we wouldn't want *that* happening."

He breathed in the sharp aroma of pine, the stench of the outskirts of the capital city of the Free Rasalhague Republic mixing in, announcing their imminent arrival at the car park. Exhaled sharply, exasperated. "Now you're just being sarcastic to be sarcastic."

"Begging the colonel's pardon, just having a good conversation."

"Right."

"After all, it's not like the entire school isn't dedicated to the Republic's greatest hero."

Hesighed, knowing where this would head. Yanked the goatee once more to keep lips sealed. Once she got going, nothing could hold the boulder back. He sped up slightly as though to outpace her words. "It's not like a single, lone aerospace fighter, when all the might of Houses Kurita, and Steiner and Davion couldn't stop the Clans, bagged them cold for almost a year when she killed off their head Khan... ick Khan or something."

"ilKhan," he responded. Smile returning, despite her ability to show him up every time.

"And so when the good lord comes down off the mighty white walls o' Camelot to tell them that a knight is the only way to take and hold ground—and that aerospace forces are absolutely important, but they're part of a cohesive team—regardless of the good lord's reputation or the size of his goatee is it so surprising that the young squires start heckling and reach for their joysticks and keep their eyes pegged on the wild black yonder...."

Neil slipped from the path, shortcutting through a thin finger of the park to break free from the landscaped woods and dodged out onto the remote side of a wide, secluded parking area. Coming to an abrupt halt next to two vehicles. Beyond the small car park, the perimeter fence and a thin stretch of tramlines, and the culvert for runoff water during the raining season, the city leapt large, demanding instant attention despite Campbell's years on planet. The towering, almost fairylike buildings of Erinyes beckoned with shining glass; and beautiful streets; and happy-eyed people, personable and always willing to help out.

As though to make up for so much lost, they've turned their city into one of the most magnificent I've seen in all my travels...and their happy attitudes can be almost...cloying at times. He shook his head at the unfair thought. They were good people, even if it all seemed a tad...forced.

Then again, when the vast majority of your worlds are conquered and you're a stepping stone (a small one at that) at the door of the enemy....

"Colonel." Captain Takashi Inega interrupted his musings, stepping away from the non-descript hoverjeep. Slight of build, with thinning hair despite his youngish age, and sallow skin, his pleasant smile evoked camaraderie despite dark eyes that forever seemed closed to Neil.

"Captain," Neil said, glancing over his shoulder furtively as McHenry cleared the last of the branches.

Takashi raised an eyebrow, his Combine upbringing—despite his stint with the Second Legion of Vega—denying him the ability to ask the question openly.

Neil smiled wanly in return and shrugged.

Takashi nodded solemnly as though a solemn secret was just divulged.

"Now Colonel, you wouldn't be running from me, would you?" McHenry's green eyes sparkled, though she managed to keep her face dead serious.

"Of course I wouldn't, Major. I just wanted to get back and see how the final refit of the *Highlander* is going."

"Spending too much time on that machine."

He shrugged, a desire to grab his goatee twitching his fingers as he realized he'd jumped from one hot topic, only to find another one. He shrugged helplessly, unsure of how to answer. The tableau held for several uncomfortable moments, the horn of a passing hover transport truck blasting the air as it neared the entrance to the campus proper, passing by the small car park. The vibrations of its lift fans hummed the air as it turned in toward the main gates. The sound instantly dampened as it entered the forest surrounding the academy.

"Perhaps, Major, the colonel is simply finding proper ways to occupy himself. After all, we should be in top form at all times in our duties of guarding First Lord Månsdotter. And how better than the colonel to outfit his *Highlander* with the latest technologies? If that is the path left open for us."

They both started at such a blunt statement from Takashi, despite its circumspect delivery.

McHenry raised a hand—now beginning to show liver spots, but still strong as iron—to fiddle with the brooch clasp on her tartan. She finally nodded as though to herself. "Speaking of First Lord," she began, working into the new subject, "when you be leaving for the Star League conference?"

He nodded once towards Takashi, then made his way towards the sleek, out-of-place hovercraft tucked in behind the jeep. A polished cherry-red. Low-profile and angled skirts. At a hurried

glance, one might believe an academy pilot had landed a one-man skimmer on the parking lot as a prank.

"Perhaps another month," he said. "The First Lord hasn't provided me with his final traveling plans, yet."

"Shouldn't we be having those in order to make our own arrangements."

"Why, yes. Yes, we should."

"I assume we'll be needing to scramble again, then?"

"That depends. We're his bodyguards, but we serve at his sufferance," he said, lips curled at the euphemism. As though they were mere bodyguards. *We're the Royal Black Watch!* He lightly pounded the hood of the car, then keyed open the gullwing door and slid into the seat.

"Now Colonel, you shouldn't be driving this death contraption."

"Of course not," he said, easing into the leather seat, hands caressing near-mint controls, only *his* finger prints between his skin and the control board. Only his sweat. And excitement.

"Not regulation, let me tell you."

Fingers tapped controls, starting up the engine of the CS535, and the Crimson Streak Hover Racer came to life, fuel cells firing up the lift fans, noise instantly blotting out speech and causing McHenry and Takashi to hastily step back.

"I can't hear you!" he yelled, and throttled forward. Swinging the car through the automated gate—opening automatically at the registered SatNav—and onto the road, he punched it.

And this time he did run, though the guilt would force him to make it up to McHenry and Takashi. *They didn't deserve that.*

Ran, with the wind pulling at hair, flopping around the queue at the nape of his neck, sun sparkling across the cherry red, sleek hood and the taste of frustration still tart on his tongue.

Ran from a lame-duck First Lord and an assignment he'd lived his entire life to fulfill...

...and found only disappointment.