

BATTLECORPS

BLACK MIST RISING

Chapter Three

By Randall N. Bills

Near Imperial City, Luthien

Pesht Military District, Draconis Combine

1 September 3067

Shin Yodama walked alone through the frantically-industrious warehouse-sized assembly plant. Pulled a four-wheeled maintenance dolly behind him, the loose front wheel creaking as it spun awkwardly and gave him an occasional tug, as though a pup testing its master's leash. Marveled once again at the size of the facility.

He could easily have hidden enough DropShips to transport his entire Izanagi Warriors regiment amidst the gargantuan space—if not for all the machinery occupying most of the floor—and still have room for enough additional transport craft for the Otomo as well...perhaps even more.

The brand new Isesaki Shipping satellite assembly plant, built for its new Roku Royal II tracked landtrain, was exceptionally impressive, especially considering how eerily absent the facility was of people. Unlike so many facilities in the endless Industrial District near Imperial City which continued the long tradition of using a large stream of human labor—slave labor, some whispered—Isesaki made the rather progressive move to almost complete automation for the new pride of their growing business empire.

Servos whined and the huge mag-rail conveyer system hummed along at a good pace, running parts and half-finished mechanisms around the factory. The sound of his boots clomping against ferrocrite he knew to be almost five meters thick hardly reached his ears. *Course, might not even hear tap shoes over the din.* He smiled, continued walking. His right hand behind him, he absentmindedly smoothed the neon-blue singlesuit with his left, the ghost of a pinky tip tingling with remembered pain causing him to jerk his hand away. *Stop.*

He glared at his pinky. Cleverly manufactured latex—and a hint of make-up—made it appear as though the wound was years old. No evidence of the nightly use of a preserving sleeve and constant injection of some liquid (didn't want to know!) to speed recovery. He grimaced.

Have to remember. Years old. And I'm no longer Shin Yodama. Taro. Taro Toguchi. Hai. Hai!

That's my name.

BATTLECORPS

He nodded firmly as though to entrench the word and the accoutrements of a false-life that came with it. Then a sudden shadow blurred overhead and he ducked, a thrill of fear racing up his back, skin tingling with danger and the hair on the nape of his neck on end.

Then laughed. Forced himself to stand erect, eyes on the construct above. *Like a non-military man ducking when getting off a helicopter...blades can't get you, but such terrible death, so close, forces out the body's own defensive mechanisms the first few dozen times.*

A mammoth robotic arm. Must have been almost eight meters tall at its 'elbow,' visible myomers bunching and stretching as though living tissue, its tri-claw arm firmly attached to the metal shell of the upper half of the main body casing of a Roku Royal II landtrain tractor. The whir of the machine's elbow-mounted gyro hummed down the arm and even through the ferrocrete (tickled), as it twisted effortlessly on its magnetic baffled base housing. Passing over the small alleyway between the long assembly lines he traversed, the arm lowered the upper shell (dozen meters long and several tons, certainly) onto the bottom half which waited on the next assembly line: the engine compartment—half the size of his entire BattleMech.

He winced, expecting a thunderous clang after the almost lackadaisical way in which it pirouetted, but the robotic arms' programmers obviously knew their machines and it settled with hardly a whisper; at the very least no sound that could be heard, or felt, above the cacophony of the entire assembly plant.

A full dozen additional arms, as though spidery filaments spun out blindly, searching and questing for food at a speed that blurred, spread out from the mammoth arm, their tips expertly finding the matching male/female joint of the body case. Forgetting again (again!) under the awesome beauty of man's machines—and of course that *speed*—he didn't avert his eyes quick enough before the welding torches ignited. He swore. Blinked against the sun-bright afterimages which drew tears from his eyes and an instant headache.

A cascade of sparks fell like a light spring rain to the ferrocrete floor; the hissing, snapping sound almost akin to a large laser slicing open heavy armor across a 'Mech's torso. A shiver ran up his spine, the memory of too many close calls over the years momentarily surging over the visceral sights and smells so akin to a battlefield.

Still blinking to clear his vision, he felt more than saw the mammoth magnetic rail system shuffle the almost-completed outer shell to the next station. His eyes tracked back along the conveyer system: caterpillar system installation; section hoisted up, welded on the lower assembly in preparation for the caterpillar system; electrical installation to link the shell's systems; engine casing installation; internal components for the fusion reactor, before.... A new lower half prepped, overhead the robotic arm returned to its conveyer and hoisted up another top shell, and so on and so forth...twenty four hours a day....

Most impressive.

He contemplated removing the hardhat to alleviate his budding headache, then decided against it. *After all, a good janitor/maintenance man for such a facility wouldn't do that, now would he?*

A half smile ghosted as he pulled the maintenance dolly behind him and headed left down a break between aisles *go* and *roku*. Not that his job entailed real maintenance on any of these machines. Not even all the bought credentials and false-history in the world would allow that to fly. But basic upkeep...even he could manage that.

Another ten minutes brought him to a small maintenance room. The jangle of old-fashioned keys flowering another smile. *So advanced, yet so archaic at times...how we Kuritans love our traditions.* A quick toggle and push and he slipped into the darkened room, leaving his faithful hound of the last two weeks outside.

The darkness, and more importantly the relative silence, soothed his soul as though a zen garden in early spring, pink blossoms on a soft reflecting pool, dappled sunlight across artistically manicured lawn and white, white sands. A sixth sense, ki, abruptly pulled him from such internal serenity. He breathed deeply, but the heavy chemicals burned nostrils and hid any other scent. Still he knew. *Beat me here.*

“Doozo yoroshiku.” He said immediately. Friendly. But I know you’re there.

“Are we meeting?”

Deep, neutral, but Shin could hear the smile. “Is there another reason to be in this closet, in the dark?” he responded as neutral.

“Who am I to say what your tastes might be.”

BATTLECORPS

"Nor I you. Thought I wouldn't presume without making my intentions clear."

"Like a sigil left on the *ichi* row, column seven?" The voice managed to impart danger without a change of timbre or volume.

Very controlled. *Careful.* "Sumimasen. But I was unsure of how else to proceed."

Silence, beyond the muted roar from the main floor, filled the room thicker than darkness. Shin waited just long enough then responded, pitching voice to a hair tremulous. "I have a debt to repay?"

Silence once more.

A hitch, a little more waver...but not *too* much. "I'm but a poor *kobun*. A child who has failed my *oyabun*. I left in disgrace. My family...my clan...I am exiled. I've a debt..." he tapered off, as though unable to continue.

"*Teppodama*," the faceless voice responded with the right amount of boredom and disdain.

With the cloak of darkness, Shin's lips quirked momentarily at leading the other man down the right path. Exactly. A bullet...expendable. Schooled features and emotions to keep them from his voice. "Hai."

"And why would you not repay it to your *oyabun*?"

"He is dead."

Silence. Fingers itched to remove the helmet, to ease the growing headache, and wipe away sweat beginning to bead across his brow over the too heated room, much less the tension slicking the air with additional moisture powerful enough to be almost tactile.

"And you did not die with him?" Condemnation.

"*lie*."

"I see your shame."

"Hai."

"And what would you do?"

"Serve." Simple. Earnest. The only way. More would spark suspicion.

“What *gumi*?”

And here it came. Asking after his former yakuza lord. He’d spent weeks contemplating the best approach to this moment. The moment when he might be given the time of day by the appropriate yakuza man...the moment when he might approach and make his case to get a toe across the threshold without being eliminated out of hand. He couldn’t touch his own *Kuroi Kiri-gumi* from Marfik. Despite his disguise and years of distance, *that* smacked too close and could lead others to information that would undo him. No, he had to use something familiar enough, but distant enough—damaged enough—to make it work.

And most of all: intriguing enough.

Biting his tongue momentarily to heighten the tension just right (not that *he* felt the tension) he finally spoke in a whisper, as though to unburden a long-held sin. “*Ryugawa-gumi*.”

The hiss of breath sucked between abruptly clenched teeth marked an unerring strike. “Impossible.”

Now it was *his* time for silence, the two-edged blade biting back.

“Destroyed?” The question finally came, the voice losing its neutrality.

“*Hai*.”

“Except you.”

A momentary pause. “*Hai*. Or at least that I have discovered,” he amended with the right amount of pain. *Got to have a back door in case my research backfires.*

“Did you...” an abrupt question slipped, before teeth cut his words off with an audible click.

The tension in the room spiked to a new level, while Shin’s pinky tingled and the hair on his neck rose and fingers twitched for a blade to counter a blow possibly already heading his way, but he kept himself hunched and immobile, as though a terrified doe caught in the headlights of his betters in the yakuza. *Never knew what they might be using to monitor the meet.*

“Go.”

BATTLE CORPS

"*Domo*," he responded formally, voice thick with emotion (not *all* feigned), bowed deeply, then slipped back out of the door, grabbing the leash to his faithful companion and beginning his rounds again as though the side trip never occurred. Schooled his features to stillness, but elation brimmed.

They would contact him again. They *had* to find out. Had to know what secrets he might bring from a *gumi* that everyone *knew* was destroyed by the Smoke Jaguars...what secrets he might have about a collapsed yakuza clan's connections and how *this* clan, this *Ryuu-gumi*, might resurrect those lost connections...and reap the rewards as they doubled or tripled their territories almost over night.

Of course, he knew none of the deep secrets and held only a passing familiarity with the surface secrets of that *gumi* from his time during the Clan Invasion...but it would be enough.

Had to be.

He breathed in slightly cooler air and the stench of ozone and heated plastics as though that glade in fresh spring.

Finally...it has begun.

BATTLECORPS