



BATTLECORPS

BLACK MIST RISING

Chapter Six

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***Outskirts of Imperial City, Luthien
Kagoshima Prefecture
Pesht Military District
Draconis Combine
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Jogen hobbled down the street. His back hurt painfully this late evening; more so than usual.

A brace of Windstreak Z70 hovercars swerved erratically through light traffic, their presence almost more of an anomaly than their dangerous antics. (Downtown Imperial City, perhaps, but here?) The whine of turbines reached a fevered pitch as they passed, and he cringed nervously as though afraid for his life. A perfect mimic for the other sheep docilely moving about their humdrum routines. The dirty street dust kicked up behind the speeding vehicles coated clothing, tongues and gritted in the eyes with equal ease. The smell of the alcohol-burning engines singed nose hairs.

Hyped out. Usually didn't smell so strong. Extra booster, perhaps even some amplifiers. A smile graced lips. Nose and mind still sharp, despite the grotesque, ancient body.

As though his smile being one of relief, he glanced around momentarily; the shared experience of mere unproductives and civilians escaping death. Bearded men and young men striving vainly to mimic their elders—many wearing flat black hats, long coats—met his eyes. Friendly if guarded looks and even a few smiles before the wariness for strangers brought up appropriate shields.

His associates thought him mad for choosing a Lubavitcher community for the meet. After all, among the small, tight-knit group of Hasidic Jew descendants, he would stick out like a chrysanthemum among the fields of oil derricks and the industrial wasteland he called home. But while some things called for the anonymity of dark and lost places, at others times such anonymity could be found just as easily in plain sight. Such had served him well many times in the past; fond memories of his time on Dieron in '62 percolated then passed. After all, not even the height of Urizen Kurita II's cultural cleansing managed to kill off the Lubavitcher settlements on Luthien. Instead, House Kurita turned a blind eye, refusing to officially acknowledge the communities even existed, their towns unnamed on any Combine maps. And the ISF had watched them

like hawks for centuries. Yet, since their religious beliefs allowed them to live in harmony with the Combine, such overwatch had become commonplace, almost boring...and within such small windows, entire worlds of opportunity blossomed.

He continued his long trek, passing humble storefronts sandwiched in between apartment duplexes and triplexes straight out of the twenty-seventh century. He pondered their apparent luck. During the Smoke Jaguar/Nova Cat invasion in 3052, at the height of the battle in the Kado-guchi Valley, a Trinary Striker of the Fourth Nova Cats Regulars broke away and made their way almost directly through this community into a small industrial park within the city limits of Imperial City proper. A vicious fight broke out, finally forcing the retreat of the Nova Cat forces, and once more their track led through this community; the entire episode resulting in little damage and no loss of life. Despite the Clan's general disdain for city fighting, they'd done exactly that. And in their loss, he found it hard to credit they wouldn't lash out in anger, leveling at least a small section of Imperial City—they would have no knowledge of the community's strange relationship with the city proper, or how few would mourn its loss.

He glanced around at the clean if spartan lines of the buildings, their subdued tones pleasing to the senses. The quick pace of the people, their industriousness well known—particularly their efforts in Theodore's environmental reclamation projects to clean up the most ravaged sections of Luthien—a perfect counter-point to their places of residence and work and worship.

Perhaps their God protects them? Another smile tugged into place. Despite his Buddhist upbringing, such thoughts were alien. Not that he disbelieved in a God, or Gods, but in a long life filled with enough experiences for dozens of ordinary men, he'd come to the conclusion that good wits, luck and just keeping your head down provided more protection than any higher power.

Glancing around one more time, he smiled knowingly at the hats pulled low over deep set, wily eyes. They knew how to keep their heads down. No doubt about it.

He continued down several more blocks, the pain a continual shiv in his back, before reaching the appropriate street. Glancing up and down the street with extra care (have to avoid being hit, right?), he noticed a policeman getting out of his ground car and one of the Windstreaks from earlier settling down to the road. Didn't think the Lubavitchers would let some punks run through their streets; in some ways, he imagined they could be every bit as hard nosed as any Friendly Persuader.

He crossed slowly, reached the third doorway down, and knocked in a three-strike pattern. Waited exactly ten breaths then knocked in a five-strike pattern. He waited patiently, then inched slowly backwards on the sidewalk, craning his neck to peer up towards the second and third story windows of the triplex. Others on the street courteously wove around him, eyes averted; he gummed lips, while peering bleary eyed towards each person with a canted head, before peering upwards once more: the very image of an enfeebled man unsure of his situation, but determined to reach his destination regardless of whether anyone was there or not.

Enfeebled...not too far from the truth these days. He just managed to keep the grimace from his face.

Shambling forward once more, he knocked in an eight-strike pattern, then immediately into the ten-strike pattern. Muttering angrily under his breath, Jogen inched back once more, squinting upwards, then, shaking his head, slowly began to move away.

Just an old man trying to visit someone not home.

But the coded message in the knocks would've been recorded. A definitive response to the missive dropped at his hut's door weeks ago. After all this time and all the skeins woven with arthritic hands, time to make his presence felt once more.

Time to meet the *Tai-shu*.



Isoroku held up the holocamera and snapped another photo. Let it dangle again from the cord around his neck. Grabbed the notepad on another cord, held it up. Gazed at the holodocumentary of Hasidic Jews. Their exodus at the beginning of the twenty-third century from the Terran Alliance. Their eventual migration to Luthien. And so on and so forth. The ear piece with the accompanying dialogue was loud. Loud enough for passersby to be well aware he was a tourist.

He was bored to tears.

By the Abess, how do people watch such drivel? He'd prefer undergoing torture training again (twice!). He considered it a testament to his devotion. A test.

Despite his distaste, he appeared absorbed in the documentary. Yet he watched as the old man hammered away at the door.

Could this really be him? He found it difficult to credit. The ragged clothes? Unkempt appearance? At such odds with the man's history of immaculate dress.

He palmed a salt capsule. Drank a swig from his belt-mounted water bottle. His eyes remained glued to the holoprojection. Walked further along the street then stopped, as though directed by the voice in his ear.

A disguise? Could be. Isoroku was also a master at it, after all. His visit and discussion in General Omishita's "secret" residence proof of that.

A particularly banal comment from the documentary disrupted his train of thought. He grimaced, looking up at the sky, wiping forehead clean of sweat. Day growing hot. Glancing around, he smiled with too many teeth at anyone close by. Not even my skills would allow me to blend in with these beardies.

The old man moved backwards. Glanced up as though unsure of what to do. Began at the door once more. Raised voices brought his attention back up the street. He glanced over his shoulder, pivoted fully around. After all, an argument between the driver of a fancy hovercar pulled over by a beardy would naturally attract a tourist. Rubbernecking was probably invented the first time a wheel fell off Cro-Magnon man's cart.

The beardy stood small and resolute next to a gangly teenager who towered over him. Pimples almost big enough to see this far down the street. Thin hands waved spasmodically, voice too muted to hear. But reading lips was just one more of Isoroku's many talents. After several minutes, he smiled, and turned back, as though losing interest. The teenager was more likely to be thrown in jail for his bumbling tongue than any reckless driving.

Hand to ear, he adjusted the piece and tapped on the noteputer. Rewind. After all, wouldn't want to miss a holodocumentary. Abess! What I do for you!

The old man moved away. Had Isoroku missed something? Had he spooked the meet? They'd deemed more than one person too risky. Despite their incompetence, it might alert the Forcers. Perhaps they should've risked two.

Or perhaps this wasn't the one they hunted.

Just an old man? He lowered the noteputer. Took another drink from his water bottle. Steeled himself to finish the holodocumentary.

He knew his report would be difficult to craft.



Kyle leaned against the car, tall enough—especially with it settled onto its hoverskirt—for his forehead to touch well towards the center of the roof, warm metal tingling flesh. Waited several heartbeats after the Lubavitcher policeman's groundcar turned the corner before standing straight, relief at avoiding a ticket or jail time apparent in every line of his body, while he exhaled explosively.

"Damn almighty that was close," he said loudly to no one in particular. "Can't believe Jeng got away. Bastard!" He hefted the keys and clenched them, almost shaking them in the air. "Gonna whip his ass!" Glanced around belligerently, putting the few individuals on the street in their place (they didn't even glance in his direction regardless), before collapsing against the car once more. His arm hid a large smile.

He stood straight and noticed two individuals that stuck out like sore thumbs: a tourist on the opposite side of the street halfway down the block, and an old, disheveled man on his side of the street, almost at the end of the block. The old man finished knocking at the door he'd been single-handedly attempting to beat down and started to shuffle down the street again, while the tourist tried so hard to be a tourist it was funny.

He thinks the meet didn't happen, the poor sod. Perhaps I should let him in on the secret? Kyle smiled, bouncing on the balls of his feet (go ahead and smile, teenagers always smile) as he beeped the door open and loud, banging music started, pounding the walls of the small community like the footfalls of an assault BattleMech on the move.

Easing into the cacophonous interior, leather smooth as oiled skin against his clothing and exposed arms, he slotted the ignition key, bringing the engine on-line, turbo fans slowly elevating the vehicle as the airskirt filled.

Behind the black-as-night tinted windows, a smile exploded into a grin while a laugh threatened. After all, that's why he'd been following Isoroku for months now, waiting for just the right opportunity to broach a subject already well entrenched through numerous other channels, and what better way than to confirm what they suspected about the old man.

He revved the engine and gunned it, the Windstreak Z70 an autocannon round discharged from a barrel, arrowing down the slim streets in a whirlwind of whipped air, buildings a solid mass of smeared earth tones; he had no need to let the Lubavitcher catch him this time.

He'd wait a day or so for Isoroku to return to his safe house. Then pop in for a little chat over some tea. No. *Sake*.

Isoroku would break out the *sake* after hearing what Kyle had to say.