



BATTLECORPS

BLACK MIST RISING

Chapter Seven

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Industrial District, Near Imperial City
Kagoshima Prefecture
Pesht Military District
Draconis Combine
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Shin Yodama hunched his shoulders and attempted to burrow deeper into his meager coat against the icy rain. Unusually cold for this time of year, the rain pelted bared cheeks and forearms with jagged pinpricks that left a slimy residue; a gift from the industrial district back to its already over-burdened inhabitants.

He trudged to the corner, then stopped to survey the burgeoning lake covering the intersection from curb to curb as far as he could see in the late evening gloom. With a sigh, he stepped off the crumbling sidewalk and immediately felt the slosh of repellent liquid like maggots across flesh (*won't think about sewers that always back up in this section!*) over the tops of ill-repaired boots and down to feet only just healing from the blisters of hard manual labor in inappropriate footwear. *If they get infected again...* the sigh almost shook his frame. He fingered the mini holodisc slipped into a hidden slot in the pocket of his ratty coat. *All for the Dragon.*

He stopped dead in the street as he focused on his thumb rubbing the severed end of his pinky. *Stop that! A mark of a newly severed digit, not the act of one long accustomed to the loss.* Amazing how the body would betray, despite years of work at self mastery. Shin bared teeth momentarily, then lurched forward, stepping out of the micro-lake, his boots leaking water like a sieve, just as an old lady wrestled a decrepit, wheeled basket from a building into the downpour. Like a *toorima* from the dark startling its prey, Shin lurched into the sickly light leaching into the night from the slowly shutting door to the housing complex, causing the lady to scream and shrink back. Though his soul ached to stop and apologize and help, Shin knew he was followed, and Taro Toguchi did not care a wit for old ladies stupid enough to venture into this weather. With an off-hand wave of dismissal, he stumbled on and ignored her feeble whimper.

Another ten minutes brought him to a flickering fluorescent sign outside a door that appeared to have been fashioned centuries ago, when Luthien was first colonized. He fantasized for a moment he could almost see the outline of the original leather bindings in the ancient, pitted wood, despite the darkness. *It is time.*

He pushed the door open and stepped inside, surprise etching features as the loud brawl splashed across his senses in a wave of sound and the stench of beer and sweat and over-cooked food broiled in waves of heat. A few eyes glanced up from the dozen tables that packed the cramped space, including the barkeep, which forced Shin into motion as he stamped his feet and ran hands down his coat in a meager effort to dislodge excess water.

"Only way that's coming out is by sitting down for a while, friend," the barkeep said, coming towards the end of the bar closest to the door. The Nordic ancestry of the man screamed his Rasalhague origins, with his blond hair, blue eyes and size that dwarfed Shin and almost every other person in the bar with their predominately Asian blood.

Shin nodded sullenly, then moved to the bar.

"What'll ya have?"

"Beer. Cheap."

"That's all I got, friend," the barkeep laughed, pulling an old glass up from behind the bar, topping it off with a slosh from the tap and sliding it across the dank and oily wood.

"Domo."

The other man smiled, but didn't respond as he moved back down the bar to continue the endless cleaning of glasses required of a bar where people came to drench their sorrows and fears in an endless wash of intoxicating poison.

After all, when you're poor, what better way to forget you're poor than by spending money to help make it all worse when the headache wears off? Shin grabbed the glass, sloshed some onto his dirty shirt as though a punishment for such ridiculous philosophy at such a time and place as he lifted it back and greedily sucked down half the vile concoction. *'Mech coolant would taste better.* But he'd gotten used to it. Despite his years of service directly to the Dragon and the opulence such service often brought, his roots on the rough streets of Marfik came back easily. *Perhaps too easily.*

He sloshed the rest down and banged it on the bar loud enough to bring the grinning bear over again.

"Damn cold night," he said as he topped the pint off again.

"Hai," Shin coughed up grudgingly. Hugging the drink as though it alone mattered in the universe, he made his way towards one of only two vacant tables, back against a wall devoid of adornment beyond a rusty, sagging, and completely ubiquitous dart board. Kept his eyes straight ahead, knowing his contact was already here and watching him like a hawk. *Taro doesn't talk to people unless he has to. Taro avoids eye contact just so he doesn't have to talk. Taro, Taro, Taro...* Even after all these weeks, he found it useful to run the mantra. Often.

Easing into the decrepit chair, Shin winced at the sliver delivered to a chilled leg and shivered uncontrollably for a moment as the extreme difference in temperature between his flesh and the room finally began to work its magic. Knotted muscles tried vainly to relax, but the other tension of the night kept them firmly twisted into bands of stress across continually sore shoulders and back.

Eyes down, nurse your drink, don't look around. It was considerably more difficult than he imagined, and the minutes became an interminable cycle of endless sips of the drink, and a growing furrow in the tabletop as his finger picked away, body desperate for some action. After a while, he doffed his coat and slapped it across the back of an empty chair at the table. *Was that long enough?*

The hour became truly late, and Shin nursed his fifth drink as a few more stragglers arrived, hailed by apparent friends that made room at already over-crowded tables; not a single person departed. Despite its seedy appearance, the gloom outside, and the darkness within over the meet, the homey ambiance of the bar inexorably stole over him and muscles relaxed slightly as eyelids drooped; he slowly felt more at home than at anytime else in the last several months. He knew that was the beer talking more than anything...but it was enough.

"Anyone else at this table?"

Shin actually blinked several times before straightening to focus on the face of the momentarily disembodied voice, surprised it was not completely an act. Cleared his throat and squinted. "lie."

The non-descript man (*thirty-five, maybe?*) dropped with a heavy sigh into the chair that creaked as alarmingly as Shin's hours ago, his own drink sloshing over a hand even dirtier than the table-top. "Gods what a night. Thirty-six hour shift and this is what I get to walk home in. Piss and vinegar but it's just not fair. Rains like this

shouldn't be here for another solid month, if not two. Troubling times, I tell you. A warning that troubling times are coming."

Shin nodded and kept averting his eyes in normal fashion, as he scrutinized the man surreptitiously, trying to determine if it could really be his contact or not. Despite the heavy Asian features, his accent spoke of years spent abroad. *Perhaps a down-on-his-luck merchant?* In the current depressed economy it was easier to take a step and miss kicking a dog than it was to find a merchant suddenly on the street...and dogs infested this part of the Industrial Sector of Luthien like blood ticks on an expanse of inviting, virgin flesh. *How often have I eaten rotting dog meat of late?* He slowly nursed another nasty sip.

The other man kept up a steady prattle as he finally took off his own dirty coat and attempted to wring out the water, pushing Shin's coat aside slightly without a by-your-leave to lay the coat down; he shrugged momentary with a raised eyebrow towards Shin as though to apologize as the other chairs were long since taken to fit in additional bawdy friends at adjacent tables. The man then set about actually trying to get most of the rain out of his shoulder-length hair; not effeminate gestures per se, but close. *If you're not a bankrupt merchant, you're doing a great job at acting the part.*

Almost an hour passed as the man continued his steady stream of drivel despite Shin's steadfast reticence. After the fourth attempt to subtly engage the man in the code passed to him a week ago, Shin finally realized this man could not be his contact and shut down even further, avoiding all eye contact and sealing lips tighter than an Elsie's fist around a billfold, hoping the man would take the hint.

Another glass gone, and the booze and warmth of the room truly began to take its toll as the clock marched inexorably into morning hours. *This buffoon has spoiled it. I've got to be up in three hours and after all the effort to set this up... Nothing. How much longer until they might agree to another meet?*

Grudgingly giving up, he noticed that some were donning coats and after a last hurrah from friends tossing off every last drop from beer glasses before making their way into the night and its storm that refused to let up. With a grimace not feigned in the least as he heaved into the air, Shin swayed momentarily as the room spun. He grabbed his coat and almost snarled a reply to the good-natured goodbye from his oblivious companion. Sliding on his coat, he wrenched open the door and stepped into the hellish night.

The cold and wind were magnified a hundred fold from his memories made distant by too many beers and long hours in a cozy bar. The hazy funk of drunkenness was torn from him in a bracing drench of icy water, as though slivers of a 'Mech's pulse lasers were tearing straight through already ravaged armor.

What a waste!

His shoulders automatically shriveled into their accustomed hunch, and his hands separately swam into too-thin-lined pockets to try and stave off the cold already leaching warmth from fingers as he almost stopped, and then pretended to slip and go down hard in the cold. He gingerly rose to his feet after a choice epithet or three and continued on his way, the surprise of finding a key in his pocket still thundering within; he knew instinctively, without checking, the minidisc was gone.

Superb. An exchange of that caliber, right in front of my eyes. He fingered the key, knowing it would give him access to a room at a date and time to be passed along to him. *Once they've verified the contents of the disc. And if it's lacking, I'll walk into the waiting arms of death.*

A feral light gleamed momentarily in eyes kept too dull for too long.

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"So you say?" Isoroku said. He sat straight-backed on the polished wooden floor as though it were the most opulent of the Order of the Five Pillars' temples instead of a safe house dive in the back-end of nowhere. Eyes narrowed to slits, Isoroku's nostrils flared; pulse beat at an extended vein along his forehead.

Kyle sprawled against the central post holding up the roof in the almost vacant room. *Poor sod. Doesn't know what hit him*; Kyle hid the smile (even sprawled his height topped that of the straight-as-a-rod Isoroku).

"So I say...and can prove." Kyle responded. The casualness of his statement, coming as it did in the context of their discussion, was more effective than any spittle-flying tirade. The pulse on Isoroku's bulging vein increased... Kyle let the beginnings of a smile slide into place.

"Then do it."

"Oh no, Iso," he tossed out a diminutive to further rattle the man. "You're a small fry on the food chain, and we both know it. No, I want to speak with your *budojin* keeper."

"That is not possible."

"Oh, sure it is. You just tell her what I told you, and quick as you like she'll let me into her secret garden." He watched as the innuendo sank home, further rattling the man (*poor neophyte sod...doesn't stand a chance against a rho/rho*), then let his smile blossom further to continue the barrage.

"The ISFers cleared her."

"And you believe them? We both know how incompetent they are...how close the Coordinator came to assassination at the betrayal from their own ranks." At this point Kyle felt no need to add an accent to the end of that statement. *You've added it yourself, haven't you? And with the doubts already in place after all these years...*

The other man finally graced Kyle with the barest of nods (almost an insult) before responding. "I will pass along your...request."

"You do that, Iso. You tell your master I've got proof that Abess Tomade Yamiro is a *Kokuryu-kai*. And the price for this proof... well...it won't be *too* painful."

The other man winced as though struck, and Kyle laughed.