



BLACK MIST RISING

Chapter Eight

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Star of Cameroon
Nadir Jump Point
Tharkad, Donegal Province
Lyrar Alliance
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"Who do you think poisoned him?" Hohiro asked.

Neil hardly heard the comment in the small briefing berth on board the JumpShip *Star of Cameroon*. Instead, his attention focused on the small piece of plastic paper adhered by static charge to the desk in the microgravity. Mind still churning its message over, equal part bemused speculation and alarm.

"Commander?"

The slightly more strident voice pulled his eyes from the missive to Hohiro's. "Mmm."

"Am I boring you?" he asked, voice even and eyes questing.

Neil shook himself to dislodge the thoughts chasing each other round his gray matter like polecats in heat. *Hohiro delivers a PPC in a porcelain tea cup...without even changing his tone.* Considering how much he'd come to respect the other man in the months of their voyage from the world of Orestes to the Tharkad system they had entered twenty minutes ago, his gaff was an insult that left unmarked cheeks stinging. Within the confines of the chair that held him firmly in place, he bowed deeply.

"*Sumimasen, Hohiro-san.* I did not mean to give offense."

The other man nodded slightly, with a casual wave. "*lie.* The missive obviously has been bothering you. Shall I leave?"

Neil shook his head, knowing the time for Hohiro to be leaving would come all too soon. He wasn't about to precipitate it beforehand. *Course, his comment could be an obtuse way of asking if I want to discuss it. So Kuritan.* "No. Sorry. You were wondering who could've poisoned the First Lord?" He knew his voice sounded rushed, but he didn't care. *Not going to send the Commanding General of the Star League Defense Force packing because I'm distracted!*

The other man held his silence through several heart-pounding moments before softly nodding ascent. "*Hai.*"

"Can't say. Of all the First Lords, Månsdotter has done the least—" he paused awkwardly, a momentary lump in his throat at his usual anger (*done the least and forced us to do nothing!*), "—done the least to create enemies."

A mirror to his own frustration moved in Hohiro's eyes, though he was much too polished, much too...Kurita, to allow any more emotions—regardless of how much they might reflect Neil's own—to show. And even that was gone almost before Neil could recognize it.

"What I find most interesting," Hohiro continued, "is that the First Lord has gone to such great lengths to hide the act."

"Yeah, those microgravity plastic surgeries have got to be hard, and painful." Neil's smile slowly died at the reproving look on Hohiro's face. Neil's right-hand fingers paced slowly across the cool metal desk until they slid onto the plasticized memo, causing him to jump slightly, as though burned; he just managed to keep the red from his ears.

"Perhaps he doesn't wish to strain the Star League too much?" Neil jumped in, hoping to cover his embarrassment, yet knowing it useless. "We've both read the reports of left-wing publishers in several Houses accusing the Star League of being a sham. That it was a political tool to destroy the Smoke Jaguars, and has been abused ever since. Perhaps knowing the First Lord has been poisoned will show a weakness in his armor that he is not willing to give the pundits. The vultures would be on it like blood limpets to a fresh kill." Neil tried hard to ignore his own beliefs along those lines.

Hohiro nodded slowly. "*Hai*. That is one possibility."

"Course," Neil continued, "could also be he's hoping to flush someone out at the Star League conference. If he shows up looking and acting as though nothing happened, maybe whoever was involved will be shocked into a wrong move?"

"That implies, of course, that whoever did the poisoning will be on Tharkad."

Neil slowly nodded, well aware of what he'd implied. The Star League had felt hollow for years, but despite it all, he desperately wanted it to succeed. Yet for someone attending to have poisoned the First Lord...if you attended, you were a interstellar player, usually with noble blood and all that implied. If that were

the truth...that might unravel the Star League faster than anything he could think of. "Which is why," he found his tongue, "the Star Lord hides his disfigurement. He's trying accomplish both goals."

"Hai," Hohiro responded, easily able to follow the half-spoken statement.

Both men turned towards the hatch as it abruptly swung inward. A man in his mid-forties stepped through—magslips adhering to the decking without a wobble of uneasy footwork—nodding easily towards Neil and Hohiro. The iron gray shooting through the jet-black crew-cut gave his rugged features a distinguished look; a look further accentuated by piercing green eyes. Though Neil had only met the man once before, the absolutely immaculate Northwind Highlanders fatigues, pressed as well as any dress uniform—a crease down the front pant leg you could only get with a too-hot iron and overzealous pressure—were a spot on memory.

Hohiro sized the man up, then glanced at Neil after a brief skip across the missive still adhered to the desk between them, a questioning look pulling at his lips before his facade slid back into its usual Kuritan semblance. Without a further word, he extricated himself from his own latching seat on the other side of the desk, nodded briefly towards both men and departed.

The silence left by the Commanding General went unfilled as both men stared at one another. With thoughts of the consequences of the poisoning of the First Lord still rampant, Neil's mind refused to slip tracks for long seconds before he finally managed to find his voice.

"Lieutenant-Colonel Jaffray."

"Colonel Neil Campbell."

Neil casually waved towards the seat so recently occupied by Hohiro; Jaffray moved with easy alacrity to ensconce himself securely.

"I must admit, Jaffray, your request to board our vessel caught me completely by surprise. Last I heard you were on Ueda."

"Call me Loren. And last I heard you were on Orestes, but here we are. And I've got to thank you for accepting my request. The Lyrar Port Authority, despite credentials, was ready to board the *Star of David*. Seems they're a bit antsy for some reason, and having an unscheduled JumpShip arrive got their back up." The other man smiled easily.

"Well, it *is* a Star League conference, and everyone wants to bring along a pet WarShip. Allowing *enemies* into your capital system—much less toting WarShips—would make anyone nervous.

"Enemies? But this is the Star League. Aren't we all friends?" The humor in Jaffray's tone practically slicked the walls.

"Why are you here, Jaffray?"

"Please, call me Loren."

Not likely. "Why are you here?"

The other man sighed expansively, as though hurt to the quick, and finally responded. "Did you receive the recall order?"

Neil's mind chewed on that unexpected question several moments. "Of course I did."

"For the first time in centuries all the Highlander regiments are called home to help elect new Clan Elders, and you don't respond?"

"I will always be a Highlander, as are all those of the Black Watch. But we are not *of* the Northwind regiments any longer. Our ties bind us to the Star League. To the First Lord. The other regimental commanders know this."

"Yet you received the recall order?"

"Courtesy only. The matter of the death of the Clan Elders is important for any Highlander, regardless of how far from Northwind fate may take us."

Jaffray waved his hand, as though dismissing his argument. "Did you know that Vicore Industries sent a representative to Northwind in late '66?"

Once more Neil took long moments to respond at the whiplash train of thought coming from Jaffray. "No, I was not aware."

The other man nodded, eyes burrowing. "Would seem they came bearing gifts. Extensive plans and a generous licensing agreement for Cosara Weaponries to begin producing the LGB-12C *Longbow*. As I hear it, since the *Black Watch* is the same tonnage as the *Longbow*, converting the line to begin producing the *Longbow* in limited numbers...perhaps even a whole new production line...well, snap," he said, snapping his fingers dramatically. "Seems like a good deal for all involved. More cash for Vicore, a new mar-

ket for Cosara, an extremely solid design for the regiments to pick up for a steal, new jobs for the Clan Elders to crow about. What's not to like?"

Neil absorbed the information, leaning heavily back into the chair, the metal edge a hard set of fingers to knead a tired back. "That all sounds reasonable."

"Does it? Some of the Clan Elders weren't enamored of the idea. Seems Jason McDermitt spoke against the deal, citing the rumored connections of Vicore to the Blakists. And then what do you know, he happens to die in the Tara Suborbital Port incident. What an astonishing coincidence."

"I didn't realize the accident had become an incident. You must have heard a news briefing from Northwind I'm not aware of?"

The other man again waved a hand to minimize Neil's words. "You've got to see the connection here."

"How many other Clan Elders were speaking against the deal?"

Now it was Jaffray's turn to be taken a back momentarily. "What?"

"You said 'Clan Elders.' Plural. How many others?"

Jaffray's eyes narrowed.

"There were no others, were there?"

"I've good information that says other Clan Elders were suspicious."

"But nothing that means anything on the surface."

The other man slowly nodded, lips stretched taut.

"And Jason was the only vocal opponent. And since four Elders died within weeks, don't you think that's going a little overboard? I can see killing off two in the suborbital incident to cover their tracks. But Paul in the climbing accident? And Patrick in the gale? Isn't that overkill?"

"That's how I'd do it."

The cool tone struck home, reminding Neil of Jaffray's roots with shocking clarity. "I'm sure you would have," Neil responded, tone equally frosted. "But raise your hand if you think even your vaunt-

ed Death Commandos have weather controlling capabilities? The Blakists? Patrick was killed in a gale. A *storm*."

The other man blanched, taut lips almost disappearing as green eyes lit with bale fire. "Have you seen the autopsy report?" he ground out between clenched teeth. "Have you verified any of the police report's findings? I haven't...but I plan on it. If a gale was coming, and I knew it a few days ahead of schedule...even a few hours...it would make a hit that much easier. To commit. To cover up."

Neil had faced death numerous times across many battlefields, yet the sheer presence of Jaffray's rage gave him pause, stilling his tongue before he tossed out another flippant comment at such ludicrous notions. *Careful, Neil. Death Commando. They're not just a cool name.* The heavy pulse beating at his jumpsuit collar was a stark reminder, despite his attempt at humor, that he remembered that fact all too well.

Neil slowly nodded in an effort to cool Jaffray down. "I apologize. I meant no disrespect. But your very origins breed you to be suspicious of everything. Of course, that's not a bad thing. Especially with how often we highlanders have been screwed over the centuries. But I don't see the connection. Where is the Word of Blake's awful goals in all of this?"

Jaffray lurched forward as though attempting to slide home a rapier past his defenses. "Because we're part of the Allied Mercenary Command! The AMC has been sticking it to the Blakists for some time now, and that's got to stick in their Hegemony-craving craws."

Neil slowly shook his head. "But the Highlander connection has been pretty low-key to date. The Fusiliers have clashed with some Blakists on Ingress. Compared with what the Dragoons or others have done hardly rates on the radar. Anyway, why don't you make the arguments to the Clan Elders? Why here? Now? Me?"

The other man looked away, and Neil almost felt the lancing jade beam of Jaffray's eyes slide out of the wound that pinned him back into his chair. A few heartbeats and the other man glanced back up, his emotions safely bottled. "Because of my origins. Because of my...unorthodox ways."

Neil tapped the desk as he nodded. "Right," he pulled the word into several syllables. "And because of your successes."

"Exactly. Some of the Clan Elders don't particularly like me. Not to mention one or two of the regiment commanders who still don't trust me after all I've been through."

The green eyes turned inward, leaving Neil all too aware of the hollowing anger still buried within the other man. *Something's got to be done about that, or he'll break. Eventually. He's strong, but....* "And making such an argument," he continued, "with no real facts beyond circumstantial evidence..."

"Exactly. I can see their discussion after my presentation. 'Paranoid Capellan showing his true colors again.'" His lips disappeared in a face of clenched teeth, neck muscles stretched until Neil could discern a heartbeat even across the desk.

Neil churned it over and came to the only conclusion possible. "But if the commander of the Black Watch presented himself before the Clan Elders and supported you..."

"Exactly. You're the epitome of what it means to be a Highlander. Your words would force serious consideration that the Vicore deal is too good to be true. That the Word of Blake was involved in the death of the Highlanders. That despite our low-key clashes with the Blakists, they've not gone unnoticed...particularly in the face of the regiments returning home."

A tone rang through the depths of the ship, announcing that DropShips were cleared to disengage and begun the burn in system towards the distant planet of Tharkad.

Neil leaned forward. "Look, Jaffray, you obviously are convinced, or you wouldn't have chased me across two hundred light years. But you need more evidence. I'm not convinced this is some huge conspiracy. And I've my own duties to attend to. But I'm also open-minded. I know our history as well as any, and we've been manipulated in the past. There is potential in what you say."

The other man looked none-too-pleased, but didn't respond beyond an accepting nod. Neil unlatched the seat and unfolded from the position, surprised at the aches in his legs from sitting in the cramped metal chair for too long. On the verge of leaving, he surprised himself by turning back towards Jaffray. "You coming to Tharkad?"

The other man smiled, the complacent mood slipped back over his previous rage as easily as a glove. "Are you kidding? A Star League Conference? Can't miss such a historic occasion."

Dangerous indeed. Neil opened his mouth to respond, but Jaffray cut him off.

“Don’t worry,” he said, raising both hands palm up, as though to say he didn’t have any weapons. “I’ll be good and keep out of the way.”

Neil snorted, well aware of how much a weapon Jaffray could be naked and hog-tied, but nodded nonetheless and moved to the hatch without waiting.