



BLACK MIST RISING

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Chapter Nine

Triad, Tharkad City
Tharkad, Donegal Province
Lyrar Alliance
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Hohiro Kurita stood resolute in a corner of the grand ballroom.

Having arrived early, he watched the endless parade of nobles and dignitaries from across the Inner Sphere. One might argue that he'd traveled to more destinations than any scion of House Kurita in centuries, yet at times he still found the experience...unsettling. He knew all too soon he would need to make the rounds as required by the four stars of the Commanding General of the Star League on the sash that rode over the resplendent red, white and black uniform of an officer of the Draconis Combine Mustered Soldiery. Yet until that moment arrived, he would wield his Combine stoicism like a shield, deflecting potential sycophantic conversations and chit chat.

Even when Neil Campbell and Loren Jaffray closed in, their traditional highlander kilts making them stand out even in a room filled with a myriad colors and clothing styles that added to the visual cacophony, his shield easily pushed them aside. *I'm sorry Neil... we will talk another day. Not today.*

Eyes roved the room. Evergreen wreaths and bushes (cedar?) trimmed in red velvet ribbon clung to every vacant space on the walls and columns like a plague run a muck. Artificial snow drifts covered the nooks and crannies of the floor, while glowing icicles hung like cold, skeletal fingers from branches teeming with red barriers; the soft, twinkling lights reminded him of lost souls clinging to skeletons, unable to escape the hell of this un-ending night, trapped in faux-icicles.

I sympathize. He snorted at the ludicrousness of such feelings. But on this night the sheer gaudiness of the spectacle made him... uneasy. *What I would give for the quite of the garden and the master's hand at subtle treasures placed with immaculate care to softly remind one of a given holiday....not beat you over the head like an autocannon to the cockpit.*

A particularly large commotion broke out at the main entrance to the ballroom and Hohiro watched as Isis Marik in a sparkling dress

and silver-dusted skin swept into the room. Despite her youth, she carried herself well, chin just the right height to be inviting but keep the timid at bay, while her straight shoulders spoke of an inner strength he could detect despite the distance. *Strong chi there.* His eyes shifted to her companion and he smiled. Victor, wearing the simple white uniform of the Com Guards, with its hooded cape-of-rank, almost disappeared next to the glittering angel at his side. *Astute move, Victor. Very astute.*

With Victor in the room, he knew the time to mingle and pretend this night meant more than it did had arrived. On the verge of stepping forward from his personal revetment, a large shape moved into his field of vision, almost too close. Though not startled, the features of the large man didn't register at first, the surprise of his presence at the fourth Star League Conference on the Lyran Alliance' capital world of Tharkad taking long seconds to fully register before Hohiro's jaw fell open.

The man smiled large and kind—a Buddha incarnate—before speaking. "Cousin, you shouldn't let your mouth hang open so. That can only reflect poorly on the great House Kurita." The man smiled bigger at his own humor as his pudgy hands patted the brilliant scarlet robe he wore, over-laid with a purple vest festooned with dragons.

The all too familiar banter immediately set Hohiro at ease after the assault on the senses of the too extravagant surroundings and he found his voice. "Is that the only outfit you own, Uncle Chandy?" *What in the world are you doing here?* "Since I was a child it seems that is the only clothing I've ever seen you wear."

The other man puffed up (even more, as though that were possible), his doughy face turning haughty with a voice to match. "I will have you know that the finest minds from Karlston to Fuchida to Einstein kept a closet full of the same clothing so as to not distract their brilliant minds from contemplating the universe."

Hohiro just managed to suppress a grin. "And is that what you do, Uncle? Contemplate the universe? I did not know the universe could be found in this room."

The other fell out of the silly guise easily enough, but a serious mien (more than just another mask) replaced it quickly. "The answers to *our* universe may just reside in this ballroom this night, cousin."

Hohiro contemplated a quick riposte then realized his uncle was serious indeed. “*Hai*, uncle. But what are you doing here? Hachiman business?”

The other man shrugged, setting the large out-swept shoulders of his robe into motion as though a scarlet kite preening its plumage. “There is always business to be had with the Lyrans. Luckily your esteemed father has seen such wisdom, unlike so many Coordinators before him, and allows limited trade. Still too limited for my taste, but who am I to council our beloved Coordinator?”

Hohiro did smile then at the ludicrousness of such a statement. Uncle Chandy (Chandrasekhar Kurita) was the richest man in the entire Draconis Combine. More importantly, by Theodore Kurita’s own admission, the man had more contacts—particularly external to the Combine—then the Coordinator himself, giving him a base of power that a less secure Coordinator might find unnerving. Deadly un-nerveing towards an uncle that wielded such influence. But if one thing both father and son knew about “Uncle Chandy;” despite his often very un-like Combine demeanor, he was loyal to a fault to both the Combine and to House Kurita. *Just loyal in your own way, right, Uncle?*

A particular pungent aroma of too-strong evergreen plugged his nose momentarily, causing Hohiro to sneeze.

“Bless you.”

“Thank you,” he responded, rubbing his nose before continuing. “I don’t buy it, Uncle. Hachiman business? Any liaison could achieve what’s necessary without requiring the chief operating officer of Hachiman Taro Enterprises.”

The other man smiled. “I didn’t say it was Hachiman business. I said there was always business to be made with the Lyrans.”

Hohiro abruptly stared hard at the smiling face of his uncle, knowing full well his cheery disposition a façade as strong as any stoic look. “Do I want to know? Are you here as part of father’s retinue?”

The other man waved a hand easily. “Theodore is aware I’m here, but I did not travel with him. Such visible connections are too...ostentatious...for this simple, old man. I came of my own accord, for my own business.”

There is absolutely nothing simple about you, old man. “Again, Uncle. Do I want to know?”

"lie. Nothing so dramatic cousin. Simply meeting old acquaintances. A personal touch. I'm sure you understand."

Hohiro nodded, not at all convinced.

"A personal touch I believe you need to extend yourself this night, cousin," Chandy said, arm sweeping to embrace the hall.

Hohiro thought he kept the distaste from his face until his uncle smiled all too knowingly.

"Don't worry cousin, the evening will be over quickly enough. Time for us to do our duty.

Hohiro nodded, girding himself mentally as though mounting his 'Mech in preparation for battle and marched forward.

Luthien
Kagoshima Prefecture
Pesht Military District
Draconis Combine

Jogen sat still as a statue, keeping a small footprint.

Despite the long hours of preparations, the years of menial, hard labor left their indelible mark on skin, hair and face; marks no amount of soap and water might remove. Though everyone wore masks, the finery of their clothing—not to mention some of the ornate masks—spoke of rich and powerful men. His own clothing and mask were shabby by comparison. *A mongrel among peacocks.*

Through the eye holes of his own cheap mask Jogen continued to survey the meeting well underway, keeping his own council as the war of words raged. As with all such secret organizations, an outsider might consider it a monolithic entity, but such is never the case. Instead they are cults of personality, with numerous charismatic persons wielding their influence in an attempt to sway the mob in the desired direction.

And when a secret organization is hurt as badly as the *Kokuryu-kai* had been over the last decade...they were understandable riven.

"We cannot make such a bold move, yet," a voice from his left spoke, a *bakemono* mask in deep red floating above a voluminous black robe that hid all features. "The devil Ninyu has plucked far too many of our numbers since the Avengers debacle."

Though no mask turned in his direction, all eyes moved to center on Jogen. Years earlier the heat of their hatred and disdain might have stained his skin. But the years of his exile brought a clarity only hard labor and contemplation might achieve; absolved him of all previous mistakes, regardless of how badly the *Kokuryu-kai* suffered from the failed attempt of the now-dead Alshain Avengers to take their homeworld back from Clan Ghost Bear.

You loath me. But I would not be here if you did need me. I have experience you deem worthy. The only key not yet unlocked was which personality finally allowed his exile to end? Which black dragon used their considerable influence to allay the hatred and fear of him to bring him to this meeting? Until that was discovered, he must walk the path of least resistance.

"Why?" Another masked individual spoke to Jogen's right. The lilting female tone at first surprised, but the irony of the situation soon emerged. An irony he knew most of them missed. *You tout your traditionalist ways, harkening back to a Combine that adheres to your visions of propriety...a vision of a pre-Theodore Combine, when our only connections to the other Houses came at the end of a PPC barrel and woman knew their place. Yet you would use what ever means necessary to achieve that goal, including allowing woman to wield considerably power among you.*

"Would you have us cower like Lyran merchants? Bold moves are required." At her bald statement, Jogen smile, glad of the mask. *A woman talks of bold moves, as though a samurai. That one is a warrior, no doubt. She shames you and you've not the sight to see it.*

"Bold moves are one thing," another spoke from the far side of the large circle, the dimness of the room almost making his white mask a phantasm in the darkness. "This is ludicrous. Incredibly dangerous. Think of the cost."

A merchant. Your constant harping of money matters betrays your origins.

"Have we not already paid enough," the female continued. "Our numbers have paid in a river of blood. The Combine has been rotted from within and continues to be eaten away. This cancer has grown so pervasive that subtle moves will never excise it."

"This is not just a matter of the cost of blood," the first voice rejoined. "Or the cost of a rotting society. What is proposed...it could cost the Combine dearly. How much resources will be poured into its creation. How pivotal is it to the ultimate defense of the Combine? And if the plan fails and such resources are lost, how weakened will the Combine become? Clan Ghost Bear may have been hurt during the war, but they are Clan, always looking for glory. And House Davion? They have been ravaged by a civil war, but their hatred of us runs Kentares deep. Can we afford to so weaken the Dragon?"

The words ran out leaving the soft whisper of clothing moving uncomfortably to such stark truths. Jogen eased his own tired muscles on the concrete-hard *tatami* matt.

"If a body, regardless of its importance, is too corrupted, can it be saved? "

Jogen did move his head this time, as did almost all present, towards the deep voice. The first time speaking this night, the giant of a man in all black clothing at Jogen's right wore a simple cloth veil; strange juxtaposition amongst the bouquet of exotic masks. *You mock them. Mock their enjoyment of hiding. Who are you that you so loosely hide your identity?* Of all those present, Jogen knew this man wielded more power than any present.

"Should it be saved?"

Jogen squinted at the question, not liking the direction this was going. Despite his pariah status, he'd been brought here for a reason. By someone. "We have traveled that path," Jogen finally spoke, causing all to glance sharply in his direction; the two on either side of him actually swayed away as though from a bad stench. "Do we wish to move against his person again? I think you will find such paths difficult in the extreme after the last a failure." He knew more of failure than any of them.

The room fell into deathly silence at his words, waiting for a response. "You misunderstand," the giant slowly responded. "If a body is corrupt, should it be saved? The *entire* body?"

Confusion reigned across the room in mild mutters and shaking masks. Jogen's mind raced, trying to find the obtuse answer. *What do you mean? Where are you going with this?* Abruptly, a glimmer of the meaning became clear and Jogen's jaw fell open. *You cannot mean...* He licked too dry lips and uttered the words. "You cannot mean..." he couldn't finish.

"I do."

The rest continued in ignorance and shock overcame all propensity for self preservation. "You cannot," he said, voice raised. "There is always a way. Always!"

"How long have we trod this path?" the giant responded, voice an anvil as hard as crystalline steel. "How long have *you* trod this path? And nothing changes. Corruption and perversion runs rampant. We lay with our enemies and allow filth under our roofs and call them liegemen when they rule their domain absolute with only lip service to the Dragon. The dream itself is as corrupt as reality. If such cannot be corrected...then the dream itself must be allowed to die."

Jogen could not find the words to respond, air rasping in a throat clenched as tight as a fist. What this man suggested went far be-

yond Jogen's wildest imaginings. Far beyond the most avarice dreams of a young duke that wielded his power to climb the ladder of the Combine into a Warlord's seat...and his subsequent fall from grace from the continued use of such power. Never in all his abuse of that power and his conspiring against the Dragon did such thoughts ever enter his mind...never did he ever imagine he would find that Hassid Ricol, the Red Duke, would feel a conservative against such radicalism.

This man, this giant who wielded immense power in the Combine (who are you?!) talked of the death of the dream itself. The dream of Shiro Kurita. This man spoke of allowing the Draconis Combine itself to die if the corruption of Theodore Kurita and his ilk could not be undone.

Hassid Ricol began to shake uncontrollably.