

BATTLECORPS

EIGHT NINE THREE

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Lyrans Protectorate
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Hikotoro Yamashita strolled toward the front gate of the Gaines Port Authority, nodding and smiling pleasantly at his death as if it were his oldest and dearest friend.

Right now his death was dressed up like a Lyrans soldier, a twenty-year-old boy with hard eyes and a suspicious hand on the holstered needler at his hip. The soldier stepped out from a small guard shack. "You there, stop."

Yamashita obeyed, carefully lowering to the ground the burlap sack he carried. The bottles inside clinked together as the sack shifted. "*Ohayo gozaimasu.*"

The soldier's face twisted in confusion. "What?"

"*Sumimasen*, uh, excuse me, uh, Sergeant." Yamashita said, deliberately misstating the man's grade.

"It's corporal," the man snapped.

"Oh. I apology. I didn't—"

"Your name," the soldier said brusquely.

"Watanabe," said Yamashita cheerfully, handing the man his forged papers. "Kiichi Watanabe."

The soldier took a couple steps back before he glanced down at the papers. Smart.

Yamashita was careful not to glance at the gate as the soldier examined his papers. Instead he looked up at Big Smoker, the immense cinder cone that loomed over the horizon. A wisp of gray smoke curled away from the volcano's summit. Yamashita sensed the mountain's anger, smelled it in the sulfurous stink that soured the perfume of a late spring day, tasted it in the fine grit carried on the wind.

It was an evil portent.

Ukawa would've said this was a stupid stunt. But then Ukawa was dead, killed when a Lyrans tank's PPC bolt blasted through the bulkhead of his APC, turning everyone inside into a fine red paste.

Most of Yamashita's comrades were dead. The rest were gone: the last DCMS unit on the planet had been evacuated the week before, leaving Altai to the Lyran Commonwealth. Yamashita was stranded on an enemy-held world. The smart thing would've been to go to ground.

Yamashita was never one for doing the smart thing.

He glanced at the corporal. The soldier was dressed in well-worn fatigues, the patch on his right shoulder marking him as a member of the Eighth Donegal Guard. Yamashita noted other things about that uniform: the astringent smell of Altaisian mud, a scorch mark on his left boot, a faded brick-colored stain over the right arm.

This guard was a combat soldier, one who'd survived this long by being careful and smart. He wasn't going to stop now just because his officers had stuck him in front of a gate.

This was going to be hard.

"OK," said the soldier, handing the papers back, "what's your business here?"

"I'm here to see the Port Commissioner."

The soldier studied "Kiichi Watanabe" for a moment. Yamashita's hair was slicked back and he wore a dark suit jacket with long sleeves, a garment obviously too hot for the day. "Watanabe" looked like a shady businessman.

Which was not so far from the truth, after all.

"Is he expecting you?" the soldier finally asked.

The question was a trap, an invitation to lie.

Yamashita played his only card. "No. But I guarantee he'll want to see me."

The soldier's eyes flickered to the sack resting on the ground. "What's in there?" He bent down.

"A gift for the Commissioner. Four bottles of New Ross Private Reserves, the finest wine on Altai."

"Four bottles?" asked the soldier, obviously noticing the fifth bottle in the sack.

"Hai, four." Yamashita smiled gently. "Each worth a couple hundred C-bills."

The soldier's gaze flickered back to the guard shack. Perhaps he wondered if there was enough to share with his comrade. The soldier pulled a bottle from the sack and held it up. Sunlight filtered through the ruby-colored wine. "I'll need to verify your identity."

"Of course," said Yamashita easily.

He'd make it through a fingerprint analysis or a retinal scan, but there were other checks, more basic checks, and if the soldier realized Yamashita was a soldier of the Draconis Combine, he would meet a sudden and violent end.

If he was lucky.

This thought didn't trouble Yamashita overmuch. He had learned to live with the reality of his death as one learns to live with the weather. Some days it rained and some days it did not and since you could never tell beforehand which it would be, the wise man was always prepared for both.

Besides, there were secrets to be learned, if one had sharp eyes.

After patting down Yamashita, the soldier pulled an optical scanner from his belt. "Hold still." He brought the device up to Yamashita's left eye, pressed a button, and studied the readout. "Kiichi Watanabe," he said softly.

The soldier stared at him for a long moment with those hard eyes. Yamashita tensed, waiting for the order to strip to his waist or roll up his sleeves.

Instead, the soldier turned and bellowed, "Comstock."

A Lyran PFC stepped out of the guard shack. "Aye, Bernie?"

"Take this gentlemen," he glanced at Yamashita, "to the Commissioner's office. If he gives you any trouble—" The soldier didn't finish, instead flashing a tight little smile.

A cruel smile.

Neither Yamashita nor the PFC had to ask what that smile meant.



It was a long walk from the front gate to the Commissioner's office and Yamashita spent every bit of it watching and listening.

A LoaderMech painted heavy-equipment yellow bent down to pull shipping containers off a line of parked trucks, setting each of them down on the ferrocrete deck hard enough to produce a long, hollow gong. Longshoremen in hardhats scrambled to unload the containers while bored soldiers looked on.

Most of the containers were marked "Willas" or "New Ross," meaning they had come from one of the planet's spaceports.

But not all of them.

Yamashita watched the longshoreman unload a series of trucks marked with the seal of the Lyran Commonwealth.

Working quickly, longshoremen unbolted the shipping container from the first truck. An overhead crane riding on rails fifteen meters above the port's deck centered itself over the container. Riggers moved in and attached wire cables to the lift points. Then the crane hoisted away, lifting the container smoothly into the air. When it set the box down again, more workers pried it open.

Yamashita caught a glimpse of what was inside as he and the PFC walked by.

A rack of short-range missiles

It was the same drill with the next three LC-marked boxes.

But not number five.

The fifth container was moved to a different spot altogether. As a special military shipment it wouldn't pass through customs.

Yamashita would've bet quite a lot that container number five didn't hold short-range missiles.



The office was a long, narrow room with one wall fashioned entirely from ferroglass so the Commissioner could look out over the port. Yamashita was careful to take a chair facing away from the window, even though he was itching to watch the port's activity.

Because he was itching to watch the port's activity.

The Port Commissioner, Colonel Rudolf Drescher, seated himself behind a mahogany monstrosity of a desk. The other officer in the room, Hauptmann-Kommandant Angus MacPhail, remained standing, his face carefully blank, his only concession to comfort the fact that he leaned stiffly against the wall.

"Well, Mr. Watanabe, you talked your way past our guards," said Drescher. "That's impressive enough. What do you want?"

Drescher was a big man, big and soft around the middle, 120 kilos of muscle running to fat, all of it stuffed into a dress uniform. His dark hair was regulation, but only just.

This was a man who enjoyed the finer things in life. And although he was a Lyran officer, he was not a member of the Donegal Guard. He was a logistics expert, brought in to manage the Altaisian ports.

Exactly the kind of man Yamashita had hoped for.

Yamashita shrugged. "What does any man want? The chance to do a little business."

MacPhail leaned forward. "And do ya expect us to believe ya have no loyalty to the Combine?"

Yamashita glanced at MacPhail.

Unlike Drescher he was a lean whip of a man who wore fatigues without any adornment at all, not even a regimental patch. Except for the subdued insignia that indicated his rank, the Kommandant was a cipher. This was the kind of man who traded in secrets.

Exactly the kind of man Yamashita had feared.

He met MacPhail's eyes. "I don't know what the war means to House Kurita or House Steiner, but to me all it means is a change in market conditions." He glanced at Drescher. "One that brings opportunity."

Drescher and MacPhail exchanged a look that spoke volumes.

These two men didn't like each other.

"What did you have in mind?" Drescher asked softly.

"I can get things," said Yamashita.

"Aye," said MacPhail tightly. "Ore from the mining concerns. Equipment from the factories."

"No." Yamashita shook his head. "Nothing of military value. I'm talking about luxuries. Wine. Altaisian caviar. Spiced beef. Diamonds. Saltgrass."

Drescher leaned forward. "In exchange for..."

"Offworld luxuries. We sell them here for a healthy markup and split the profits. I pay you in Altaisian luxuries that you turn around and sell offworld for another big profit. You win twice."

Drescher sat back, his face suddenly blank. Yamashita could almost see the numbers percolating through the man's brain. "Most interesting," he said softly.

That was too much for MacPhail. "Gods, man," he snapped. "This is a Combine citizen—"

"A *former* Combine citizen," said Drescher. "Altai is now a protectorate of the Lyran Commonwealth."

"Just so," said Yamashita.

"Ya canna trust 'im. Give me a few hours with 'im, Colonel, and we'll see just exactly what he is."

Yamashita sat up a little straighter. If Drescher passed him into the Kommandant's custody he was done. MacPhail was not a man he could keep secrets from. Yamashita knew this at some deep level, but he would not allow himself to *really* know it, would not reveal himself through fear.

I am just a simple businessman, he thought. One who cannot even tell the difference between a sergeant and a corporal. Crooked, *hai*, but in a way you can understand and exploit.

"What's in the bag?" Drescher asked.

Yamashita reached down and pulled out a bottle of wine. "A gift." He handed it over to Drescher. "A token of good will."

The man studied the bottle with the gleam of avarice in his eyes. They had a deal. Yamashita could feel it.

"What happened to your finger?" MacPhail asked.

A shiver wriggled down Yamashita's spine.

"What, this?" he said as coolly as he could. He held up his left hand, revealing a pinky that had been severed at the first joint. "An accident. I used to work in a factory. It happens."

"Aye," said MacPhail coldly. "Especially on this world."

Drescher put the bottle of wine down and sat back in his chair, a new calculation plain on his face. "This is quite nice," he said, not even looking at the wine, "but if we are to do business, I require more."

Yamashita's stomach clenched. He knew exactly what the colonel was suggesting. He wanted a name.

If Yamashita didn't give him one, Drescher would turn him over to MacPhail to sweat one out of him. And if he did give him one he was a spy and so, again, MacPhail.

Either way he was a dead man. All because MacPhail noticed his finger.

"I am not a spy," said Yamashita stiffly. "But I have done business on this world a long time. I know who the players are. Recently, some new names have surfaced, rather, ah, rapidly."

"Oh," said Drescher easily, "who in particular?"

"Sumiko Tawara," said Yamashita. "Junshi Nomo. Charles Hanson."

Tawara and Nomo were innocents. But not Hanson.

Hanson was a *Tai-i* in the service of the House Kurita's feared Internal Security Force.

If the names were all valueless, Drescher would conclude Yamashita was an agent protecting his network. If the names were all ISF, Drescher would know Yamashita was an agent spooked into betraying his people. If there were a mix, Drescher *might* decide that "Watanabe" was just a businessman who'd noticed some things.

Drescher peered at Yamashita for a long moment and then he stood, leaned over the desk, and shook his hand. "Shall we drink to our deal?"

The wine was sweet and full-bodied with a note of ripe raspberries and a rich, leathery bouquet. Drescher seemed to enjoy it very much. MacPhail didn't have any.

When Yamashita stepped out of the Commissioner's office, he knew he was lucky to be leaving with his life. This was going to be a dangerous business.

Absentmindedly he pulled up his right sleeve to scratch an itch, revealing a dragon tattoo the color of sapphire coiled around his wrist.



After leaving the port, Yamashita caught a bus across town and transferred twice to lose any tail, stopped to eat at a Thai restaurant just to be sure, and then stopped at Body by M.

He slipped in the side door, strolling past a score of housewives in leotards doing aerobics to the driving beat of the latest jazzpop hit.

Yamashita hated to give Ikeda any credit, but using the health club as a front had been a stroke of genius. It was the last place anyone would suspect of housing an anti-Lyran cell.

The club was a brightly-lit place full of potted ferns, the smell of sweat, and frumpy people chasing after beautiful bodies. The owner, Margit Devaux, was a real fitness expert who saw it as her mission in life to help people lose those few extra pounds.

It just happened she was also a patriot.

The club was so far beyond reproach that two members of the occupation government worked out here. Ikeda and his three lieutenants had memberships, too, and the thought of the occupiers working out next to ISF always made Yamashita smile.

He did *not* have a membership. There was no point. The elaborate tattoos that covered his back, chest, and both arms would instantly mark him as yakuza. And from there it was a short leap to the conclusion that he'd served with the First Ghosts, the yakuza regiment that had been all but wiped out at Carlingford.

Yamashita slipped down a side hallway and tapped a six-digit access code into a keypad beside the door to the storage room. The door clicked open and Yamashita stepped inside, surprised to find himself alone with cases of power shakes and bottled water. Yamashita frowned.

Where was Ikeda?

Not one to waste an opportunity, he walked across the room and punched a second combination into another keypad, popping

open Margit's wall safe. He reached beneath the pile of contracts and cash receipts until he found a slim blue folio.

He pulled it out and flipped it open.

The ISF had broken the encryption on the black box fax machines the Federated Commonwealth used for secure comms. (The DCMS had been fortunate enough to capture one of the black boxes during the Fourth Succession War.) The folio contained the latest intercepts. Yamashita pulled the first one out.

"You're not cleared for those," said a gruff voice.

Yamashita flinched. To rifle through ISF secrets was to invite death. Or worse. Still, he looked up and said, "*Kashira*."

Ikeda scowled as he closed the door behind him. "What?"

"You're not cleared for those, *Kashira*," said Yamashita. "I am a Talon Sergeant of the Draconis Combine Military Service and I will thank you to address me as such."

Ikeda grunted.

Yamashita would never get the respect he deserved from a man like *Tai-sa* Kazutoshi Ikeda, even though he and his brothers had paid for it with their blood. The colonel was an old-line conservative, unwilling to acknowledge the worth of a "gangster thug."

The irony was Ikeda tolerated Yamashita for the same reason he despised him: he was yakuza. Yamashita had been born on the street and he could get anything. Ikeda was happy to rely on Yamashita's skill, but he'd never show him any sign of respect.

It was an old issue for the yakuza, long regarded as the dregs of Combine society. The very name "yakuza" came from the Japanese words for the numbers eight, nine, and three, a losing hand in the traditional card game of *Oicho-Kabu*.

No one believed in yakuza.

Except Theodore Kurita. The Combine's *Gunji-no-Kanrei* had given the yakuza the right to fight for their nation. And because of that, Yamashita would bear any burden, pay any price to justify the *Kanrei's* faith.

"You're late," said Yamashita.

Ikeda stalked across the room and jerked the folio out of his hands. "Planning to sell these secrets to your friends?"

"I have no friends on Altais," Yamashita shot back, "only loyalties."

Ikeda shoved the folio back in the safe and slammed the door. He was a short, fireplug of a man. His iron-gray hair was cut in a military crew cut and he wore a stylish blue suit that fit him badly. He looked exactly like what he was: a military spook. It was a wonder the Lyrans hadn't picked him up already.

"I hear you were down at the port today," Ikeda said.

Yamashita nodded. "I saw some interesting things."

Ikeda inclined his head.

"The rumors about the JumpShip command circuits are true. I saw them unloading military equipment from containers marked with a Lyran seal. Probably rushed here to deal with the Second Ghosts before they evacuated."

"So?"

"Jigoku," Yamashita snapped. "We have to do something."

Ikeda shook his head. "The best we can do is gather information and feed it back to the DCMS."

"Listen, Altais is the deepest penetration of the Commonwealth Thrust. They're going to use this world as a jumping off point to attack Algedi and Rukbat, Alya and Shitara, maybe even Tsukude."

Ikeda's eyes narrowed. "How do you know that?"

"I can read a chart. The point is they're going to use this world and we have to stop them."

"What you're talking about is suicide," said Ikeda indignantly. "That's why the world government surrendered. Why the Second Ghosts cut and ran. We don't have the forces to fight them on Altais."

There's always a way to resist, Yamashita thought, if you're not too stupid to see it.

"Did you see anything else?" Ikeda asked gruffly.

"They're smuggling."

Ikeda offered him a contemptuous smile. "A fact I'm sure you found most interesting."

Yamashita said nothing, but he thought, *You bet I did.*

"I also heard you made a deal with Commissioner Drescher."

Yamashita snorted. "Well, you don't think I got in by politely asking for a tour, did you?"

Ikeda's jaw set. "Hanson was just arrested. That's why I'm late."

Yamashita blinked. "What?" The lie was so good he almost believed it himself.

Ikeda leaned in and jabbed a thick finger into Yamashita's chest. "If I find out you had anything to do with Hanson's arrest, I'll turn you into the Lyrans myself."

And then he turned and stalked off before Yamashita could speak any of the false denials that came automatically to his lips.



Yamashita first noticed the tail when he was coming out of a meeting with an agent for an *agrat* farm, the taste of salty black eggs still heavy in his mouth. The *agrat* was a local pseudo-amphibian about the size of a monitor lizard whose eggs were supposed to taste like sturgeon roe.

Yamashita didn't know if they really did or not—he'd never tasted real caviar—but the fact that some thought so made the contract he'd signed for 200 kilos of Altaisian caviar very valuable.

He was making a killing. Even considering Drescher's cut, he'd made more money in the last month than he'd ever made before.

So this was why people became collaborators.

Yamashita watched the tail out of the corner of his eye. A young man with short, blond hair who'd tried to dress like a local, but missed the mark.

One of MacPhail's.

Yamashita had taken a cab to the meeting, but he decided to walk a couple blocks and look for a likely place.

He ambled past an open air fish market, where native blue snappers and six-legged crabs were laid out on beds of shaved ice.

People crowded round the displays and called out their orders. Bills flashed back and forth.

Yamashita pushed his way through the crowd and glanced back. He'd lost the tail.

He sighed heavily.

Yamashita doubled back and pretended to examine something the fishmongers called "prawns" but looked more like roaches to him. After a few moments he saw a familiar blond head in the crowd.

He walked past the fish market, paused to window-shop in a little jewelry store and then ducked down a side street that turned out to be a blind alley.

Perfect.

Yamashita glanced around like he was lost. His right hand drifted down to the small of his back where he felt a little patch of slickness beneath his shirt.

How long was this going to take?

He heard a small sound behind him. He didn't turn. Instead he muttered, "I'm sure she said this was the place."

Something hard and heavy smashed against the side of his head and the world dimmed. Yamashita lurched to one side and fought to keep his feet.

He staggered around and threw a punch in a random direction, landing a glancing blow to his attacker's jaw.

It wasn't enough.

Another blow slammed down, the ground rushed up to meet him, and—



Yamashita had a nightmare about being beaten, blows raining down again and again until he curled up into a ball on the floor and just took them. Later he woke up and found out that it hadn't been a dream.

A tight pain in his chest told him they'd broken two, maybe three ribs. His mouth tasted like blood and the blurry vision in his left eye hinted at a detached retina.

But the worst was his head. Whenever he moved, molten agony shot through his skull, incandescent white light filled his vision. Concussion.



Or worse.

He reached back to touch the small of his back and found they'd stripped off his shirt, no doubt looking for the tattoos they knew had to be there.

Hopefully they hadn't looked too close.

He lay there for a long time, his body and face pressed against the cold concrete floor, eyes closed, waiting for what came next.

After a time a voice said, "It seems ya dinna lose your pinky in an accident after all."

"No," Yamashita croaked. He didn't open his eyes. Didn't look up to confirm that today his death had dressed up like Angus MacPhail. It was enough to hear his voice.

"You're yakuza."

"Hai," said Yamashita in a gravelly voice that hurt his throat.

"First Ghosts or Second?"

"First." Yamashita slowly opened his eyes and saw a blurry shape.

The shape nodded. "I especially liked the bit about the health club. Course it dinna do any good in the end, but no doubt you're a clever jake."

Yamashita said nothing.

"We've rounded up all your friends. Rest assured, ya won't die alone, man."

"I can—"

"Can what? What do ya have to trade this time?"

"Sabotage," Yamashita whispered.

There was a long silence from the MacPhail-shape as he thought this through. "A nice try," he said finally. "But before we're done you'll beg to tell us all about it. And even if ya dinna break, sabotage is something we can find ourselves. Have ya got anything else?"

Yamashita fell silent.

"That's what I thought. You'll never see the outside of this cell, Watanabe, or whatever your name is. I promise ya that."

"Drescher won't—"

MacPhail's harsh laughter cut him off. "Colonel Drescher is in no position to help ya now. Trust me." The blurry shape stood. "May as well rest. We'll talk more later."

A door clicked shut and Yamashita drifted back into comforting oblivion.



For some amount of time that Yamashita couldn't even guess at, the world turned off. And then someone bent over him, a dark shape blocking the bright glare of the naked bulb overhead.

Yamashita tasted something cool and clean. The man was trickling water into his mouth.

He grunted and rolled over onto his side.

"Oh, so you're awake," said a voice.

"Hungry," Yamashita croaked.

"Sure, I'll feed you. The Kommandant says you have to be strong enough to talk."

The guard turned to pick up a tray.

Yamashita reached down to the small of his back and felt the slickness there. He peeled back the two sheets of plastic, one from the other, careful only to touch the edge.

"Here we are," said the guard.

Yamashita's stomach growled at the thick smell of beef stew.

The man set the tray down.

Yamashita moved like lightning. He ripped the decal off, lunged forward, and slapped the plastic surface against the man's face.

The guard stumbled backwards and fell. The decal was coated with a fast-acting neural agent; the guard never had a chance. He collapsed, overturning the tray, and spilling beef stew all over the cold, hard floor.

He lay there seizing violently for a moment and then he was suddenly, terribly still.

Yamashita staggered to his feet and almost blacked out. He stood there for a few minutes, breathing hard, clawing his way back to reality.

Then he bent down and picked up the guard's M&G flechette pistol.

An exact replica of one of Yamashita's tattoos—an orange tiger—marked the dead man's cheek. It was masterful work. Even looking for it, Yamashita had a hard time seeing the nearly invisible plastic.

But he found it at last and peeled up the decal. Then he turned to go, leaving MacPhail with nothing but a dead guard and a mystery.



Two days after escaping from MacPhail's safe house, Yamashita recovered enough to drag himself up the five flights of stairs that led to the top of an abandoned factory a couple clicks from the Gaines port.

Yamashita hobbled past long-silent air handlers and exhaust fans until he reached the building's edge.

Today Big Smoker was silent and still. Yamashita hoped it was a good omen. Hoped all he'd paid had purchased the prize he sought.

He raised binoculars to his face and looked out over the port.

He was too far away to see much detail, but what he could see brought a grim smile to his lips. The Lyrans had set up a vast field of shipping containers. Box after box lined the tarmac and they were opening every single last one of them.

Even better, they had crews inspecting military equipment. Heavy tanks, APC's, even BattleMechs were getting the once over.

No doubt looking for sabotage.

Yamashita could've laughed.

Until he heard the click of a round being chambered. He slowly lowered the binoculars and extended his hands so whoever was behind him could see them. Then he turned around.

This time his death was dressed up like *Tai-sa* Ikeda, pointing a weapon straight at his head.

So the old bastard had survived after all. Yamashita had to give the man points for that. "How'd you get out?"

"MacPhail suspected you all along. I read about it in the intercepts. I just had time to destroy them and get clear."

Yamashita puffed a mouthful of air out past his lips.

"They found the cell through you," said Ikeda. It wasn't a question.

Yamashita glanced at the gun in Ikeda's hand and then he nodded. He didn't feel like begging for his life. He doubted it would do any good anyway.

"Yakuza scum," Ikeda whispered. "I *knew* you were no good."

Yamashita said nothing. What was there to say?

"I told you if you betrayed us, I'd give you to the Lyrans."

Yamashita shook his head. "If you have to kill me then pull the trigger, but don't undo my work."

"Your work," Ikeda sneered.

"Some men think war is a matter of honor and valor. Men like you think it's the interplay of secrets. But what war is, the thing that's truly at its heart, is logistics."

"I know that," Ikeda snapped.

"No you don't. You just think you do."

Ikeda scowled.

"Have you ever moved a thousand keys of heroin? A shipment of bootleg trivids? A container full of milgrade needlers?"

"Of course not," Ikeda snarled.

Yamashita raised his left hand with its severed pinky. "The yakuza take a finger to teach a lesson, so that it's never forgotten. Do you know what lesson I needed to learn, *Tai-sa* Ikeda?"

The colonel shook his head.

"I was late with a shipment." He paused and glanced at the port. "Logistics is life, *Tai-sa*. If you live on the street you understand that more deeply than a man like you ever could."

Ikeda glanced at the port. "What did you do?"

"MacPhail suspected I was a plant from the beginning. I had to give them Hanson to let me in."

Yamashita saw Ikeda's face tighten, saw the gun shake in his hand.

"Drescher looked the other way because I made him a lot of money, but I knew MacPhail wouldn't let it go. I didn't want him to. For my plan to work he had to catch me."

"And everyone else, too."

"*Hai*," said Yamashita with real regret. "I'm sorry about that."

"You betrayed us."

"Not betrayed. Sacrificed. Traded their lives for victory. What DCMS commander wouldn't do the same?"

Ikeda snorted. "Victory."

"I told MacPhail I had committed sabotage. He believed me because he found a real resistance cell. And for another reason. Because unarmed and badly beaten I found a way to escape. He had to believe I couldn't have done that without help."

Ikeda's eyes narrowed. "How *did* you do that?"

Yamashita remembered the mark of the tiger on the guard's cheek. "I used a weapon only a yakuza could use," he said softly.

"Or you're still working with the Lyrans and all this is just an elaborate lie."

"Look out there, *Tai-sa*," Yamashita shouted, stabbing his binoculars in the port's direction. "They are searching through every container, disassembling every weapon system, looking for sabotage that doesn't exist. It will take them at least a week to figure it out. I, working by myself, have halted the entire FedCom advance from this world for a week, and all it cost was the lives of five operatives."

"A week," said Ikeda dismissively.

Yamashita said nothing. Yakuza heard many things that others did not hear and he had heard a word, a secret word.

OROCHI.

Yamashita did not know what it meant and he did not want to know. All that mattered was the *Kanrei* had found a way to save the Combine, if only his soldiers could buy him the time to execute his plan. The week by itself might not be enough.

But it was a start.

"So you are a hero, then." Ikeda's voice shook with fury. "I should let you go. You should get a medal."

Yamashita met Ikeda's angry gaze. "Do whatever you must," he said calmly to his death. "I am yakuza and it is my honor to serve the *Kanrei*."

Then he turned his face away and raised his eyes to the summit of the great volcano, waiting without fear for whatever would happen next.

The End