



BATTLECORPS

BLACK MIST RISING

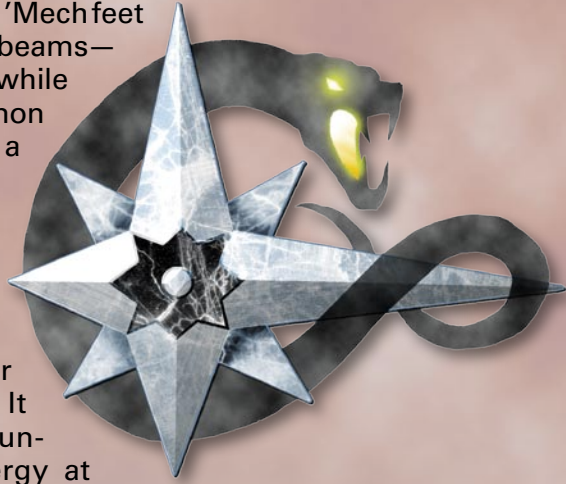
Chapter One

By Randall N. Bills

Proving Grounds
Focht War College, Tukayyid
Free Rasalhague Republic
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Hohiro Kurita planted both 'Mech feet wide. Fired twin cerulean beams—savaging his opponent—while his thundering autocannon chewed only a line of sod a half dozen meters long.

In place of a return shot, the one-hundred ton *Daishi* backpedaled across the endless, rolling grassland of the Focht War College Proving Grounds. It raised both forearms to unleash its own hellish energy at a Kuritan OpForce 'Mech dashing in close on a hard oblique angle from Hohiro's right.



Despite the ash-gray SDR-C *Spider* pushing towards a hundred fifty kilometers per hour inbound, most of the *Daishi*'s weaponry unerringly found their mark. Energy and autocannons punched through the weak armor of the light 'Mech. Sent it careening. Crashing into the ground in a horrible tumble of twisting and madly gyrating 'Mech more parts than whole.

Another ash-gray 'Mech—a *Raptor* D—instantly darted inwards from the far left, veering around a small series of knolls, bringing the machine closer and closer to the *Daishi*. Even at this distance, the *Daishi*'s malevolent logo of the First Royal BattleMech Regiment—a black serpent coiled around a Cameron Star, fanged jaw open and ready to strike—promised death to any who dared cross *this* MechWarrior's path.

His *Tai-Sho*'s DI network and battle computer already syncing up with incoming telemetry from the *Raptor*, cycled through the master command/control/computer carried by the eighty-five ton BattleMech, Hohiro did indeed dare; as soon as the PPCs finished recharging he squeezed into another shot.

Despite the extreme range and the Herculean effort of his opponent to jink and backpedal out of range, azure fire washed across the jutting torso. Hohiro's computer projected a thirty percent loss of armor to an already-savaged location. The machine staggered under the onslaught while Hohiro coped with the heat wafting through the cockpit—heat sink network overtaxed with his repeated salvos—sweat stinging his eyes, breathing shallow to keep from pulling in the hot air.

Hohiro pressed forward, following up his marked advantage. Despite the just-off-the-assembly-line-no-one-has-piloted-me-yet smell of the machine, hitting nostrils so accustomed to 'Mechs decades—if not centuries—old, the *Tai-sho* performed exactly as the CEO of Independence Weaponry had assured him it would.

The *Daishi* in obvious distress, he clenched his jaw to open up a commline. "It would seem the lack of Clan firepower is more than made up for, *so ka*, Andrew?" As close to a tease as he might find within, Hohiro chuckled softly.

"*lie.*" Andrew said.

It came out *eye-yah*, and Hohiro winced. "Perhaps if you practiced more..." Which could refer to his friend's abominable pronunciation, as well as his piloting. But this he left unsaid. No need to offend.

"If I took you one-on-one, I'd dismember you," Andrew Redburn groused back.

His smile stretched further at the colonel's fake wounded tone; Andrew got the subtle hint, no doubt about it. "That I have no doubt. Then again, a hundred ton Clan 'Mech to a mere eight-five ton Inner Sphere machine is hardly sporting."

"Neither is your damned C³-equipped company, either. Doesn't matter how many gnats I punch down, when every 'Mech on the field can have their way with me. No wonder you won against the Blood Spirits."

Hohiro's smile grew broad. "That had nothing to do with our machinery and everything to do with our warrior spirit."

"Of course."

"I assume you wish to capitulate?" Hohiro responded, unclenching tired fists from joysticks and easing tired muscles against the synth-leather of the 'Mech's command couch; he felt as drained as though real combat just occurred. Didn't matter than the train-

ing computers had simulated the death and destruction in graphic overlays. He shook his head (couldn't wait to remove the heavy neurohelmet), marveling at ComStar's cutting edge technology despite his own realm's rapid advances in recovering lostech over the last few decades. The system of sensors placed all across a machine's exterior, linked to each unit's battle computer, then fed into a mammoth linked processor system surrounding the entire proving grounds, allowed pilots to engage in combat as though it *were* combat, but without any of the downsides of a true live-fire exercises...pure genius.

"I liked you better in your *Daishi*," Andrew finally responded.

"*Hai*. I'm sure you did. But that doesn't change the fact of your defeat."

"Your company of *Genyosha* are no longer welcome here."

Hohiro couldn't help the laughter that rang out at the almost petulant tone, especially knowing the joke behind it. "I'll inform them that their vacations are being cut short."

"Vacations!" Andrew practically sputtered.

"Capitulate?"

"*Hai*!" Andrew growled finally.

Hohiro's laughter died out under an even more pleased grin; Andrew's accent *was* improving.



Walking amongst the bustle of the staging field, Hohiro accompanied Andrew Redburn back towards the command pavilion and the duties his exercise had allowed him to ignore for a few brief hours. Though twenty years junior to Andrew, the patches sewed onto Hohiro's cooling vest told anyone present he not only commanded Colonel Redburn, but the entire Star League Defense Force as well.

Not that I've done much more than exercises! The thought rangled, and a frown creased his brow.

"C-bill for your thoughts?" Andrew said.

"A whole c-bill?"

"Lyran traders keep pushing up inflation costs."

Hohiro chuckled. Despite the enmity between their states of origin, their mutual respect and dedication to the success of the Star League slowly overcame age-old barriers. Redburn's was a friendship Hohiro valued. Especially on a world where he too often still got looks of suspicion, even after years of working to wash away such perceptions.

Still, "You know my thoughts."

The older man snorted. Brushed hands back through gray-streaked hair ringed with sweat when a Maxim hover transport whined by at ten meters, kicking up dust and preventing speech for long seconds.

"Of course I do. You tell me every five minutes."

"That's not true."

"I know. I know. But just because you can say something, doesn't mean you should. You can't keep beating yourself up about this."

"I can't?" he asked, cocking an eyebrow and trying to catch Redburn's gaze as they made their way around a Manticore tank. Hohiro suddenly squinted at the bright sunlight slicing through a breach in the day's low cloud cover; he noticed Andrew avoided looking at him directly.

"What good does it do? You're not the First Lord. You're a general. You don't make policy. Course you might be the First Lord someday." Andrew spit to the side, as though such words were a curse.

Thinking about numerous conversations with his father during Theodore's tenure as First Lord, perhaps it *was* a curse. "No, Andrew, I do not wish that. Would not wish it on anyone. But Månsdotter hasn't done...his time has been..." He trailed off, unable to articulate, and possibly on the verge of treason.

The first path of treason lies in unbiased denouncements of your rulers. The words of Subhash Indrahara, then leader of the Combine's Internal Security Force, spoken to a much younger Hohiro. As though the old spymaster had risen from the grave, whispering warnings.

"Lackluster, I believe, is the word you're looking for."

Another hovertank—the shield and broadsword insignia indicating ComStar’s Twelfth Army—blocked sight with swirling dust and overrode any speech with its engines revving high as it passed by, preparing for its own field exercise; one of the reasons both men felt free to speak so candidly: even lip readers would find it difficult to discern their conversation.

Of a sudden, a small figured darted through the billowing dust, running up to Andrew. “I passed the test! I passed the test!”

Andrew’s face lit with pure joy, as he stopped and knelt down to look the twelve-year-old in the eyes. “I knew you would.”

“I wish you could’ve seen it. I passed!”

Andrew laughed loudly, teeth large. “I’ll review the simulator feeds, Kenny.”

“Kenneth!” The boy said indignantly, still bouncing in his own miniature MechWarrior togs. The cooling vest. The snug shorts and heavy, steel-toed combat boots.

Andrew nodded gravely. “Right. Kenneth. I wasn’t there because I didn’t want my presence to affect your test, or the instructor’s review. This was *your* day and no one else. I’m so proud of you, son.”

The child beamed as though the First Lord himself just knighted him.

“Now off with you,” Andrew said, roughing the child’s thick head of dark? hair. “You need to send a HPG message to your mother or she’ll never forgive me.”

Nodding gravely, Kenneth stood a moment more, then gave in and wrapped arms around Andrew’s neck, before dashing off through the hustle and bustle of the fields.

Hohiro smiled, knowing the pride coursing through Andrew at that moment. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks.”

“He’s young.”

“From the time he was five he’s been begging to follow in my footsteps. Misha thought he would grow out of it.”

“I see that didn’t happen.”

"Nope. In fact, this is her idea."

"The fosterling? Very old-school," Hohiro nodded in approval.

"Yup. She thought to throw him in way over his head. Instead of a MechWarrior academy at eighteen, or even a training battalion at sixteen, she sent him here to foster at ten. You know, sink or swim."

"I see he swam."

Andrew finally regained his feet, his answer a smile of pride.

"I must admit, when I first saw him...he is young." Hohiro cleared his throat uncomfortably at broaching such a topic. Tried to modify it slightly. "I mean your other four are grown. And are not warriors, *so ka?*"

"Couldn't care less about the military," he responded, waving a hand casually. "But Kenny—Kenneth," he smiled again, "was a late...surprise. And has continued to be a surprise. But where were we," Andrew continued, as they moved on. "I believe we were discussing...ineffectualism."

Andrew chuckled at his attempted wit, but Hohiro's mood swung back to the painful topic, cutting off any return smile. "*Hai*. Exactly. In three years not once did he avail himself of the services of the Defense Force. How often might we have been deployed to stop the fighting, or stabilize a region?"

"I'm as frustrated as you are, Hohiro. But would you rather another reign such as Sun-Tzu? And the loss of so many worlds to the Clans still must sit heavy on Månsdotter's shoulders. How easy it could've been to manipulate the situation, sending us to war with Clan Wolf, or even the Ghost Bears in an attempt to reclaim his worlds? I'm sorry, but between lackluster and greed, I'll take lackluster any day of the week."

Hohiro spit out the dirt of the wind whipped by a VTOL lifting off near by, a mini dust devil pelting skin with small dirt clods. "I know. I know. Still."

Andrew stopped walking, causing Hohiro to stop in turn and twist in his direction as well. "What?"

"What?! Hohiro, we've had this conversation I don't know how many times. And of late, every time we have it, you've got something else on your mind. Cough it up?"

Hohiro glanced down, shame staining cheeks at how transparent he'd become.

"Don't worry old friend," Andrew consoled, stepping a little closer, "not many know you as I."

Hohiro nodded thankfully at the comment, despite the spark of shame still guttering. Tonguing his cheek, he contemplated excusing himself, but despite his non-Combine heritage, Andrew could be every bit as dogged as the staunchest traditionalist Kuritan warrior; he knew Andrew wouldn't let it go. "My time is wasted here. There are...issues...at home. My time would be better spent dealing with problems at my father's side. Instead, I'm here...and will soon be off to another Star League conference, with all its pomp and circumstance...and ineffectualism." He tried for a smile and light tone as he returned to Andrew's own joke, but it fell flat.

Andrew gazed at Hohiro knowingly before responding. "We don't often have a choice where we'll go, or how we'll serve. You and I gave that up long ago."

Hohiro smiled grimly, thankful for Andrew's circumspect response; the other man knew Hohiro would not divulge anything more. No House noble liked to air their dirty laundry, but in the closed society of the Combine, such airing simply didn't happen. Period.

Especially when it came to the plague of the Black Dragons.

Like a viral infection, no matter how much medication was used to eradicate them, they always rose again in a new form. Desperate to inflict their vision of what the Combine should be on House Kurita.

And that his good friend Shin Yodama had been tapped to return to his underworld roots in the *yakuza* to try and ferret out their reach, when all Hohiro could do was play warrior and sit in on councils while the First Lord did nothing...Fingers clamped into hard-edged fists, desperate to smash. To do!

A hand gripped his shoulder companionably. "Hohiro. Our time will come. Your time will come. We won't be sidelined like this forever."

He breathed deeply, scents a mishmash of nature and man-made. "But when?"

Andrew's gaze looked far away, as though reviewing a lifetime of service. "All too soon, Hohiro. When it comes, it's always all too

soon. And we just might look back at playing warriors on Tukayyid these last few years as though maybe, just maybe, they weren't so bad after all."

And Hohiro felt the truth of his words. He did.

But they were a soft echo against the drowning force of his frustrations.