

Tears of Blood

Chapter Five

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Training Outpost 7
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"With what forces will you defend the Star of ProtoMechs?" The voice reverberated through the primary command center of Outpost 7—a strong voice, a warrior's voice.

Caden hated such thoughts when applied to a Star Adder, but could not deny what stood before him. Facing the holographic table from which the miniature Adder warrior rose in the air, he hesitated a moment. Glanced around.

Unlike almost any other Clan, the Blood Spirits had a tradition of defending with everything they had when it came to their home world of York. This tradition was frowned upon by the other Clans, but they looked the other way, too preoccupied with their own ambitions. As such, his normal course of action should've been to defend with his entire Trinary. But the Adders were not here to take land, or significant resources. All they wanted was a Star of ProtoMechs.

Caden stared through the three-dimensional construct of the Star Adder commander and saw the luminescent face of Star Commander Jewel, who'd just arrived. Her eyes seemed to blaze at him like PPC fire. A new thought blossomed.

If she wants to prove her worth, then let her.

"Star Adder," he began, no names or title for this *surat*, "I will defend a Star of ProtoMechs...with a Star. Four `Mechs and a Point of ProtoMechs." Dead silence fell across the room and the Adder quirked his eyebrows. Several heartbeats passed and though he did not gaze in her direction, Caden felt confident she'd unleashed twin particle blasts in his direction.

He reveled in the warmth of her hatred.

The Adder warrior waited a few moments longer, then a smile slowly spread across his swarthy, thick face. "My warriors look forward to bidding against such a force, Blood Spirit." The look on his face said two could play at the no-name game. "Bargained well and done."

"Aff," Caden responded and signaled for the holotable to be turned off; the warrior blinked out of existence satisfactorily. He turned to look at the stunned faces around him. Caden smiled within and looked to Jewel. Their eyes met like the transfer of electrical current through myomer. His inner smile wavered, died. Her impassive face held nothing. Not the anger he expected, or the hatred he wanted—simply nothing he could hang a name upon. It made him feel uneasy.

He looked away and focused on the room at large. So be it. If she does not care about her Star, then I will be happy to place the Adder bondcord around her wrist myself.

"We have exactly three hours until the Trial. I bid a Star and it will be my own." Caden may not care if the entire Star of ProtoMechs were taken out from under him, but he absolutely cared about participating in a real Trial, in wiping a few malignancies from the universe.

He paused for a moment, considered the options. Shar would hate it, but her testing at the beginning of the year had been lacking. He turned to her, noticed the look on her face. She already knew and had resigned herself to it. Resigned! He clenched his teeth for a moment, as another wave of realization hit him. Her attitude was his fault. Nothing to do about it now. "Shar, you will watch this battle from here."

He shifted his gaze back to the impenetrable façade of Jewel. "You will prepare your finest Point." Caden felt he had kept the sarcasm from his voice.

"Aff," she said in her usual soft spoken voice. Without another word, she departed.

Glancing around the room at the confusion and anger, he once more felt the lack of direction he'd allowed to creep into his command.

Starting here, no more. By the Founder, no more.



The metal-clawed foot of the *Blood Kite* furrowed the hard-packed dirt, as the titan lumbered forward at almost fifty kilometers an

hour. The swaying motion almost felt relaxing, as the five-point harness held him in place like a lover's embrace.

The `Mechs of his Star fanned out around him: Tilla in her *Griffin IIC* and Bonni in her *Incubus* to his right; Daneel in his *Rifleman IIC* and the Point of five ProtoMechs—two *Rocs*, a *Hydra* and twin *Minotaurs* (Jewel made *sure* he knew what they were; he'd promptly forgotten pilot names)—to his left.

York's yellow-white sun shone brightly as it neared the Strathclyde mountains. Night pitched upon this southern tip of the Boques continent like a tossed thermal blanket, as the colossal hand of the volcanic peak clove the light in two. At times Caden had felt like he could actually see the moment the rays of light had been cut, could see the severed ends travel their final distance, warming him before the cold of night leached it from his body.

"Looks like a night fight, Star Captain." Daneel always did like to state the obvious.

"Aff, Daneel. Aff."

Glancing down at his secondary monitor, his radar tagged the Adder `Mechs as they passed under the kilometer mark, skimming its internal technical readout and assigning designations. A *Blood Asp*, *Stormcrow*, *Hellion*, *Pouncer*, and *Fire Moth*. A quick tally of capabilities and tonnage ran through his head instinctively.

Depending upon what the ProtoMechs do, not too bad. A moment passed and he downgraded his assessment an entire level. Of course the ProtoMechs would fare poorly. In the end, it simply did not matter. Getting rid of the *stravag* ProtoMechs, while burying several Adders in metal and burning away his own malaise would result in a good day.

Aff. A very good day.

"They have not declared *zellbrigen*?" Jewel's disembodied voice filled his neurohelmet and for a moment he pictured her curled in her fetal position, unnaturally merged with her machine. He shivered slightly and banished the thought with difficulty.

"I surprised them by accepting their batchall and declaring a set force. However, I am sure even an Adder warrior is aware the rules are suspended on York. We fight with everything at our disposal. We smear this filth from our world."

"Aff!" came nine, hot replies.

Time compressed in silence as the two opposing forces rushed towards each other across the barren landscape with the inexorable force of colliding continents. Almost simultaneously, four streams of cobalt energy crisscrossed the intervening space—a skein of death to burn, scour and destroy. Moments latter, a phalanx of long-range missiles leapt into the air—over-large candle flames in the growing darkness.

The fray had been joined.



Caden laughed out loud, caring not that his mic broadcast it to his Star mates. Endless patrols and training could not compare to real combat. His mind shied away from the last series of such *real* combats he'd participated in. Not now.

Plasma exploded from vented chambers, lifting the *Blood Kite* into the air in a short ballistic arc that saved it from a blistering fusillade of small lasers from the *Fire Moth*, as it rushed past so quickly it almost blurred in the night.

However, the attackers were working in concert more effectively than he had anticipated. He rose straight into a wall of short-range missiles from the *Pouncer*. Explosions detonated across the *Kite*'s torso and arms, raining armor shards to the hard-packed dirt below. Though over a ton of armor had been scoured away, Caden's abilities could not be so easily overcome. He brought the eighty-five ton machine down with enviable aplomb.

With fluid grace for such an ungainly beast, he turned, thrust the `Mech's right arm forward and launched a brace of fifteen missiles. Considerably leading the fast moving *Pouncer*, the missiles pummeled the ground in front of the `Mech, sending up clouds of dirt and rocks that caused the *Pouncer* pilot to swerve and slow.

Caden lined up all three particle projector cannons on the left, rear side of the machine, and caressed the trigger. One passed just behind, turning a long furrow of earth into glass; the other two found their mark with unerring accuracy, spearing the *Pouncer* like an energy lance carried on the back of a charging knight from ancient Terra. The force of the blow swept past inadequate armor to savage internal structure, weapons and critical systems. The `Mech flew forward, its fluid agility turned to gross stumbling as it slammed into the earth with bone-crushing force.

"Now that is ecstasy!" he laughed once more. The *stravag* Proto pilots could have their obscene coupling. He would take a `Mech victory any day.

Caden quickly glanced at his secondary monitor to re-orient himself and saw with a start that Tilla's *Griffen IIC* had just fallen. With Daneel's *Rifleman* hanging on by its fingertips, and only a single Adder `Mech put down, the battle progressed poorly.

Still, he would see another two rapid Adders put down before this battle finished. Though the *Hellion* and *Fire Moth* presented tempting targets, a greater prize loomed. Already switched to infrared on his primary screen, the *Blood Asp* stood out as a pillar of raging energy in the cool night; another volley of cerulean death stabbed towards Daneel. Surprisingly, both missed wide and the glowing pillar spiked up a full magnitude.

Hot, are we? Time to see how much heat an Adder can take before he is cooked.

Pushing the throttle full forward, he began arrowing in on the *Blood Asp*. "Bonni," he spoke, opening up her direct commline. "Try and keep the *Stormcrow* occupied. I have a *Blood Asp* to deal with." Only after her affirmative did he realize he had asked her to try. In place of an order to achieve a directive, he had asked her to do it if possible. Another reminder of how far he had fallen.

He did not give the ProtoMechs another thought as he moved through darkness towards the waiting *Blood Asp*. Twisting the right-hand joystick, the targeting reticule slewed across the screen, centered, blinked gold and the hum of target lock sang in his ears: thirty long-range missiles flew downrange, accompanied by the strobe of twin cobalt beams, which lit the night.

The PPCs slagged off armor in rivulets from the *Blood Asp*'s centerline, while the missiles rained down around legs, blasting earth and armor with equal relish. The Adder continued to ignore him, targeting another PPC at the *Rifleman*.

This time the Adder's bolt of light struck through a rent previously made in the right torso armor, finishing off the internal structure. The *Rifleman* stumbled back a step. Then, with a shower of sparks, the entire left side of the `Mech shore away. Though Caden could almost feel the whine of the gyro at this distance, Daneel could not compensate for the loss of such weight and the *Rifleman* pitched to the right, crashing hard to the ground.

Caden lined up his own weapons and let loose another twin brace of long-range missiles, with a helping of particle cannon.

"Pay attention to me, *stravag!*" he yelled.

With the *Rifleman* unmoving and apparently down for the count, the *Asp* appeared more than happy to oblige the invitation and turned to face him.

A glance at his secondary monitor showed the *Fire Moth* circling around behind for a stab at his back, but Caden felt confident of his armor for several passes. Good as her word, the *Incubus* actually had bated the *Stormcrow* out of position; the bright red-orange of heavy large lasers smeared the black canvas of night with uselessness, unable to connect with the agile `Mech.

Good girl. For a moment he wondered where the *Hellion* might be (once again ignoring the ProtoMechs) and swung into full battle with the Adder commander.

In the blackness, strobed by a rainbow of fiery energies, minutes seemed like hours and the world fell away as the two combatants went toe to toe. Each a consummate warrior looking to land the killing stroke.

Somewhere in the midst of the duel, as the hated tang of blood crept into his mouth from a bitten tongue, a terrible reality wrenched into his consciousness: he would lose this contest. Though he had managed a feat not seen in long years, defeating three opponents in his first Trial of Position, this warrior would defeat him. He would lose.

Again.

A blackness within to match that without began to swell. *Not again.*

As the *Blood Asp* moved to his left, where most of the *Kite's* armor had been scraped away, Caden could only hobble, the critical to his left hip making his rate of turn slower than that of the *Asp*. The two turning ratios drew farther apart and twin barrels swung onto his centerline...

...and a gaggle of children swam across his vision, weapons blazing as they fell onto the *Blood Asp* like avenging ghosts.

Stunned, Caden momentarily lost control of the *Kite*, and it stumbled ponderously to its right knee, throwing him violently against

his restraining harness, which changed from a lover's embrace into the jealous claws of a mistress.

The ProtoMechs.

He could not believe it. As though in a stupor, Caden glanced at his secondary monitor and fully registered it for the first time in long minutes. Bonni had led the *Stormcrow* pilot completely away from the primary battle site (he would reward her somehow for this). Shockingly, however, though it appeared the *Hydra* had been taken from the fight, the rest of the Point had taken down the *Hellion* and now turned their energies on the *Blood Asp*.

Saving him.

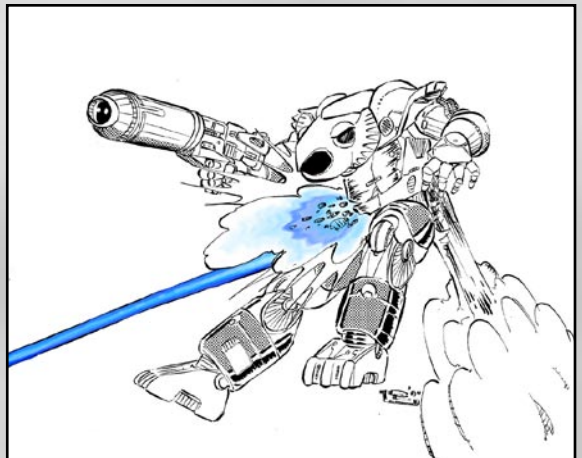
The thought rang like the hammer of an ultra autocannon into the side of his head. Though he doubted the ProtoMechs would've been able to pull down the *Asp* in prime condition, the giant rents and tears his own weapons dealt to the machine left an opening the ProtoMechs worked with surgical precision.

Dual heavy large lasers from the *Asp* pierced a *Minotaur*, tearing away most of the left torso and spinning it to the ground, where secondary ammo explosions sent it tumbling end over end. The remaining twin *Rocs* and *Minotaur*, however, pressed forward with a fury, moving with an agility few 'Mechs could match, causing most of the Adder's shots to miss their mark.

Harried, falling back and firing almost frantically, the Adder warrior landed a strike against a *Roc* in midflight, which took the brunt of an azure stream, knocking it from the sky, and bouncing with horrendous force. Caden watched as the ProtoMech (the image of a child sprang to mind again) slowly levered its arms beneath it and heaved to its feet once more.

The spell of his despair flashed away in the burning heat of admiration. Such determination!

Regardless of the abomination of these half-'Mechs, Caden



recognized honor and valor when he saw it. Though he still felt the echoes of shame within—to be saved by ProtoMechs!—another Adder needed the embrace of the grave.

Swinging his `Mech back to its feet, he lined up another shot, numb to the boiling his lungs were about to take, and unleashed every weapon at his disposal.

He swooned with the heat and felt himself disconnect from his own body as the battle quickly wound down with a victory.

In a day where resolutions had been made to change, perhaps perceptions could change as well.

Perhaps.