

Tears of Blood

Chapter Seven
~Final~

By Randall N. Bills

Near Training Outpost 7
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They had all expected it.

Yet when expectations stretch across months, if not years, the anticipation builds until oftentimes that pregnant expectancy eclipses the event itself. Until the day in and day out waiting builds to a crescendo that pales the actual event. A brutally anti-climatic ending to a suspense laden epoch.

This, however, turned out to not be the case.

The Blood Spirits were expecting the return of the Star Adders. More importantly, they wondered when the blighted Adders would lay aside the rules of *zellbrigen*; the Spirits, after all, did it themselves when defending York. The Adders had in the past also. Yet this was different. Before, they always maintained some tenuous ties with the Clan's rituals of battle. Before the clashes and raids since the Absorption War, they maintained an echo of honorable fighting. Not any more.

Hatred sheathed in retribution stripped both sides of honor.



York bled.

In torn earth, scorched ground, and still nova-hot glass furrows, the soil of York cried out against the battle waging across its surface.

"They are trying to flank us," Tilla said, her *Griffin IIC* pounding along in meter-eating strides; an almost one hundred kilometer an hour blur of glinting metal, stabbing out with searing orange-red beams at the raiders.

"I see it," Caden responded. "You have to hold it, *quiaff?*"

"Aff." No other reply needed.

Caden wrenched forward as a cobalt skein of death pummeled into the center torso of his *Blood Kite*. Gyros whined as he immediately mashed the reverse button and pushed the throttle forward to swing a ponderous right leg back, preventing a fall. Swinging up his weapon's pods, he retaliated with sun-bright beams and a hail of metal darts that swarmed downrange.

No alarms sounded, but he knew it to be close. Too many strikes on his torso armor. A quick glance at his secondary monitor showed the hole about to be pounded through his force's right flank. He opened a comm channel.

"Armor Point Alpha. Re-deploy to shore up our right flank; do not allow them to swarm past Tilla."

"Aff, Star Captain." He didn't need to look at the secondary monitor to see a pair of Shammash vehicles immediately change their locations, racing at breakneck speed to shore up their right flank.

His threat icon blinked with urgency. Caden swung his targeting reticule into line without thought, another flurry of missiles and argent beams splitting the sky and slashing with deadly skill into enemy armor, hissing and spitting globs of armor to further mar the already thrashed landscape. Heat swept up and around, baking, boiling moisture off his tongue.

The Star Adders dropped in hot and furious. With a feint of their DropShips towards the capital on the other side of the Strathclyde mountains, they drew off most of the defending aerospace fighters. Instead, a small contingent burned towards his position, hot-dropping almost on top of their heads. Though he tried several times to come up with a reason for a raid on such an isolated peninsula of York—he entertained, then discarded the idea of simple retribution for their loss over the Trial of Possession for the ProtoMechs—Caden quickly found himself much too busy to work out motives.

Survival became paramount.

Another twin stream of energy—these from a new direction—sliced the air, missing him by scant centimeters. Still too concerned with the sudden appearance of a new 'Mech, he growled into his mike.

"Kolata, I want that *Blood Asp* down. Now."

"Aff, Star Captain."

He turned his attention away from the other machine—not even he could take on two assault 'Mechs at once. His identification sequencer alternated several times as it tried to find an appropriate outline for the approaching design within its memory banks. However, the 'Mech would not fit into any known category and finally defaulted to the standard outline of an unknown assault 'Mech.

Though his machine failed to tag the design, Caden knew it had to be one of the new generation of upgrades starting to sweep through the Clans. The back-canted legs, weapon pods arms, forward thrusting cockpit and over the shoulder gun could only be one thing: a *Marauder IIC*.

As though naming the design invoked its power, a jeweler's box of colors cascaded towards him: rubies, ambers and jades. Beams and darts that continued to pummel his *Blood Kite*, this time sparking the alarms of interior breach.

Trying to throw off the pilot's aim for a follow-up salvo, he stomped down on both pedals, launching his ride into the air, moving at an oblique angle. He feathered the left jet to slim up his profile by moving him off center.

Tearing a new wound into the planet's flesh, the claw-like feet of Caden's *Kite* savaged the ground as the machine hammered back to terra firma. Already leaning forward with throttle stopped at maximum, the machine lumbered ahead at best possible speed, while Caden torso twisted to bring his own weapons to bear. He licked encrusted salt residue from his lips and let fly.

The fighting became a swirling maelstrom of energy and explosive warheads—a curtain of smoke and constantly churning air opening and closing like a stage, exposing the fierce fighting to an unseen audience in strobe flashes of sensory overload.

As the seconds tipped to minutes and the *Kite's* armor sloughed off in ever increasing sluices, Caden became painfully aware once again he might be losing. Though he won the last Trial the Adders staged, the victory came at the intervention of the ProtoMechs under Jewel. To be losing once again stung him deep and hard.

For a moment, the confusion of the battlefield swirled the two opponents apart, the curtains of their personal combat sliding down between them. He was left gasping in his overheating machine, the ragged breaths tearing and clawing at his throat, while sweat burned and blurred vision and warning sirens blared at the

multiple internal strikes, including loss of almost a third of his engine shielding protection. He blinked rapidly and suddenly found himself looking at Kolata in the distance.

Time seemed to slow as his eyelids snapped like shutters, bringing successive and separate images to his brain as though it had hours between one blast of light and the next.

Kolata's *Warhammer IIC* (one of the few upgraded designs the Spirits had managed to obtain) blazed away at absurdly short ranges with the *Adder Blood Asp*. Beyond them, in danger of being struck by the wildly splayed weapon discharges, a mega-monorail freighter passed; he imagined he could see the whites of their eyes through the streamlined windows staring out at the metal giants deciding the fate of their lives. Behind Kolata, a small force of standard infantry and a Point of battle armor (yet another new design) tried to assault the 'Mech's weaker back armor. In between, Jewel and her new *Chrysoar* ProtoMech hunkered down, a protective spirit-animal to ward off evil Adders from the *Warhammer's* weak quarter.

Blink-shutter. Weapons blaze; personnel weapons lightly scar armor; a huge welt of energy from the battle armor slices cleanly through the ProtoMech's shoulder, slams into the 'Mech's leg.

Blink-shutter. Jewel responds in a flurry of micro lasers, chops into the battle armor and infantry; bloodless, cauterized torso and limbs separate from already dead troops.

Blink-shutter. A Shammash, billowing dust and detritus, joining its fusillade to the death racking the Adder infantry.

Blink-shutter. The infantry scatter, most dead and destroyed; Jewel's attention turn on the *Blood Asp*.

Blink-shutter. A ProtoMech Point, vehicle Point and the *Warhammer IIC* array against the *Blood Asp*, beams overexpose in his retina film, whiting out.

With a shuddering breath pulled between blood-stained lips, time rushes back in, flows smoothly once more like the retched coppery filth sliding down his throat. Yet the momentary epiphany remains.

The burning understanding. We stand together. A single warrior did not matter. Would never matter. Only by combining his desires and efforts with that of the Clan did he matter. Only in defending

the Clan did he gain glory. Not for himself, but for the greater good of the Clan. Understanding blossomed, strong and pure.

If he died and the Adders were vanquished, he would still have victory.

Caden had fought so hard to raise his own star to greater heights, to gain his Bloodname, but always for himself, never for the Clan. Never again.

The battlefield curtain of smoke fell away to reveal the *Marauder* ludicrously close. Having already cast aside *zellbrigen* for this fight, he didn't hesitate for a moment for what would surely be his death. With what looked to be the containment of the *Blood Asp* in hand, the only major threat to pushing this force off the world stood before him: the *Marauder*.

The 'Mech needed to be removed from battle. Right now.

Caden stomped down on his pedals, sending his 'Mech into a ballistic arc. Tendons crackling, teeth bared and grinding and smeared in red, a growl barking from deep within, he caught the enemy pilot totally off guard with an unexpected tactic from a Clansman: Death from Above.

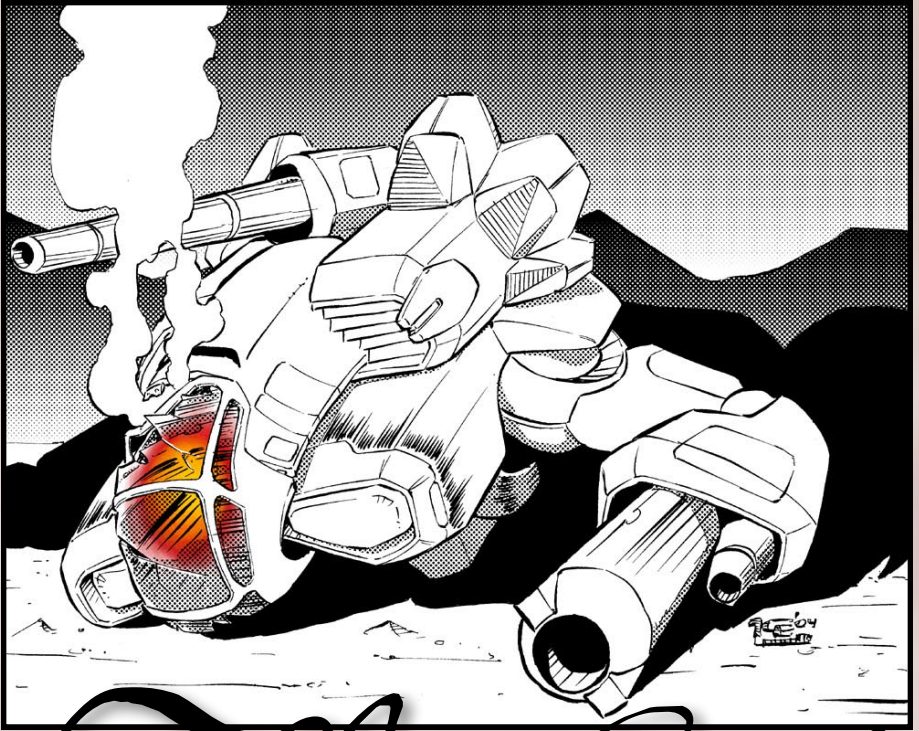
Though his mind still tried to figure out why the Adders had come—though it knew with absolute certainty they would come again regardless of defeat—he didn't care. Such would be for others to determine.

If he survived this day, so be it. If he gained a Bloodname, so be it. It would all be for the Clan.

And if the Adders came again, so be it. The Spirits would work together to push Adders off this world. He had seen it today, knew it for truth. If their blood stained the land crimson, they would stand together.

With a roaring of thunder, Caden's *Kite* came plummeting out of the sky, a meteor of limbs and myomer and metal and clawed feet, unerringly punching through the cockpit, killing the Adder pilot instantly. Thrown forward again with the violence of such inertia, blackness pulled Caden down into infinity.

So be it. He had won.



The End

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