

Tears of Blood

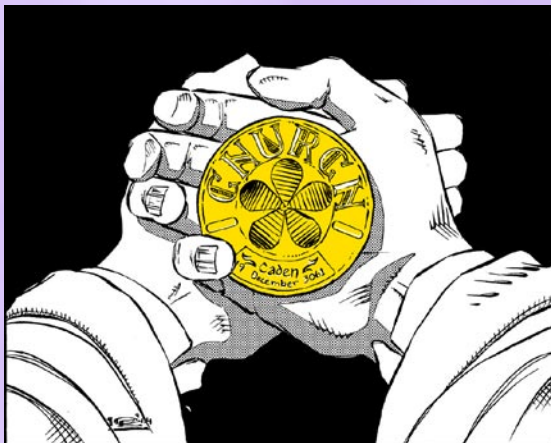
Chapter Two

By Randall N. Bills

***Blood Spirit Hall
New Tara, York
Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space
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A crowd of anonymous, red wraiths shuffled forward in the dim, erratic light while a keening wail filled the air. Caden moved with them, lost in a trance to the sacredness of the moment.

As the first of the shapes penetrated into the circle of torch light, the wraiths transformed into humans, clothed in plain, loose-fitting blood-red jumpsuits, the pant legs tucked into calf-high red boots. Over this garment a large red cloak completely encased the torso, opening up at the waist to fall to the cobbled floor in back. Voluminous sleeves flowed down arms and a deep cowl enfolded the head, where a blood red, glass mask without features or openings covered the face from brow to chin.



Caden moved as one with the flow of humanity as they pushed forward on the stone path; thirty-six individuals became distinct as the wailing continued to crescendo to an earsplitting moan that conjured images of fallen heroes and banshees screeching for lost gods.

Like Caden (he tried to keep this excitement within from making it shake), each held a small wick floating in a red-hued glass dish of oil. As they shuffled past the source of the light—a small brazier—each lit theirs and split off, heading in different directions. Though the blackness left Caden with the impression they were outside—the feeble light cast by the hand-held wicks was quickly swallowed—the echoing sound of scuffing feet on slate was ample proof to his ears they were in a room—if a room with titanic dimensions.

A moment's silence gripped the darkness before a voice shattered it, "Flame."

Light blossomed in earnest around the chamber as thirty-five torches caught flame and a large conflagration at the room's center ignited. Still in perfect synch with the others, Caden moved to his assigned place, and the chamber revealed itself—a natural cavern, with thirty-two mammoth columns—each ten meters in diameter—running in two rows, twenty meters apart, down the middle of the cavern. Though easily distinguished as man-made, the columns were still rough hewn, as if the makers of this chamber wished to preserve the primalness of its essence. Thirty-two wrought iron sconces imbedded in the columns held torches that cast fitful light. A cobbled path two meters wide ran between the columns from the entrance of the chamber, then split around the central blaze and merged once more, ending at a raised trapezoidal platform that filled the other end of the walkway.

Caden noticed each of the chamber's occupants had already found their assigned spots. Thirty warriors split and lined each row of columns; two warriors stood at the end of the path where it abutted up against the platform; and one warrior towered on top of the platform itself, his arms outstretched—a mammoth likeness of the Blood Spirit ensign carved into the chamber wall behind the platform forming a perfect encircling halo. Caden stood at the front of the path, with a warrior to his side and one slightly behind.

No words were spoken as the wailing music continued its dirge, reminding those present of why they were here—a warrior had died. Not just any warrior. A Bloodname warrior of that Clan which strove above all others to remain true to the Founder's pure vision.

As the last notes echoed, Caden immediately recognized the deep, commanding voice that rose in the ringing.

"Warriors...Blood Spirit...Trothkin. You have gathered to honor not one who has passed but one who is about to pass. For though her death denied us a warrior, it allows us to glorify in the destiny which the Founder gave us."

Caden's voice joined in the response, "Seyla."

"Though a warrior dies, his Bloodname, his legacy, lives on and the mantle of warriorship is passed onto the next generation. Never is it let down nor trodden under foot. No, such is the sacred duty of our call. We feel it sing to us through our genes, which has crafted us...made us...forged us.

"Seyla."

"As the Star League fell and the Great Father saved us all, so shall we save this Bloodname, which has fallen. You thirty-two have been chosen. You have been honored above all others with the right to demand a Bloodname. To demand it through the right of martial superiority. Prove that right by besting those who stand before you and I, Oathmaster Bayle Campbell, cannot deny you."

As he said these last words, he moved his hands with practiced ease and stripped off the faceplate of his ceremonial outfit, displaying a rugged, bearded face, with deep sunken eyes that gleamed with fanaticism.

The warrior on the left at the base of the platform fluidly stripped off his face plate as he stepped forward, showing a smooth-faced man in his early thirties, with intelligent blue eyes and a shock of red hair. "I saKhan Troy Boques, cannot deny you."

The warrior on the right at the base of the platform mirrored the first, revealing a face of exquisite beauty framed by long, blond locks. "I, Khan Karianna Schmitt, cannot deny you."

At the front of the path, a trailing, diminutive warrior stepped between Caden and his companion and languidly removed her mask showing the face of a beautiful woman with short, black-cropped hair. "I, Church House Leader Sariah Church, cannot deny you."

With that, Bayle Campbell and in a booming voice shouted, "Who demands the right of a Bloodname?"

Caden immediately moved ahead at a brisk stride, confident of his right to move down this sacred path first; his companion moved with equal determination. Passing around the blaze, at the base of the column he stopped. At a signal from Khan Schmitt, Caden's companion took a single step closer and pulled off her mask.

"I am Joqlynn, a MechWarrior of House Church and I single-handedly saved the Scarlet Guards during the Absorption War on Arcadia, defeating no less than seven Star Adders in single combat. I have always marked high in my early scoring and I have never lost a 'Mech. By these deeds, I have been deemed worthy of this honor and stand before you today to demand my Bloodname."

"Seyla," the word was whispered by the throng, almost lost to the hiss of flame.

At a signal from saKhan Boques, Caden immediately moved forward as well and practically tore off his mask, revealing a young face with short black hair, two-tone brown-green eyes and a thick, black goatee—a look incongruous with his apparent age. “I am Caden, a MechWarrior of House Church and for the first time in half a century, I bested three warriors in my Trial of Position at the Spirit Legacy Training Facility. By this single act have I been deemed worthy of this honor and stand before you today to demand my Bloodname.”

“Seyla.”

Bayle looked down impassively for a moment, his sunken eyes gleaming as though he were weighing their worthiness. He suddenly thrust forth both hands and demanded, “Present the tokens.”

Caden and Joqlynn moved up the stairs but halted before stepping onto the top—that was only for the Oathmaster. Bowing their heads, they raised their hands and presented palm-sized silver coins, as if making an offering to the gods.

Caden knew full well what the coin looked like, having studied it several times before he had finally donned his ceremonial garb and moved to the chamber. Tradition dictated he not view the coin until it was presented to the Oathmaster, but Caden was too impatience to wait. On one side was the emblem of the Blood Spirit logo; the reverse held the word “Church,” in relief on the surface, while his name and the date were etched below.

Holding the coins up, Bayle turned and walked around a podium that had been hidden by his body until now. Raised on the podium was a large funnel with slots on opposite sides and what appeared to be a removable section at the base. He stood behind the cone and faced the warriors.

“A warrior who would hold a Bloodname must overcome; must conquer; must always be ready to defend his Clan no matter the circumstances. Whether you fight in your ‘Mech or are forced to improvise, you cannot allow the fickleness of fate to overcome you. As in life, so shall it be in this Trial. These coins will chase each other, the hunter and the hunted. The coin which lands on top is the ‘hunter’ and may chose to fight augmented or unaugmented. The coin that falls to the bottom is the ‘hunted’ and may chose where he will fight. In this way, both warriors are forced to overcome.” He placed the coins in each slot and then bowed his head for a moment before pressing a concealed button, which automatically released the coins. “It has begun.”

"Seyla."

The coins dropped and, try as he might, Caden could not tell which coin was which as they spun in opposite directions with ever increasing speed. Spiraling towards the center, the gathered warriors held their collective breath and the dance with gravity ended as the coins clanked into the bottom.

Reverently reaching forward, the Oathmaster swung out the bottom portion of the cone and reach for the top coin. Pulling it out so that all could see, he moved it up to eye level and firmly read the name, "Joqlynn. You are the hunter, how do you choose?"

For an instant, out of the corner of his eye, Caden noticed her quell as those eyes pounded into her. Then, swelling her chest as though the coins had already assured her of victory (or perhaps to overcome her momentary hesitancy), she spoke boldly. "I will fight augmented. I was not one of those he bested and he will not do so now."

Reaching into the bottom of the cone, the Oathmaster pulled out the second coin and raised it to eye level before reading the name aloud, "Caden." Turning towards him, , "You are the hunted, where will you fight?"

Determined to defeat his opponent beginning now, Caden raised his head and stared boldly into the Bayle's cadaverous eyes. Though the force of the Oathmaster's will was undeniable, Caden refused to back down and even canted his head slightly as if to say "You cannot intimidate me!"

Seconds stretched and a slight rustling of clothing showed how disturbed most of the occupants were by this unusual act. Finally, with a faint nod that Caden believed only he could see, Bayle released him. The nod was one of respect, but he knew he'd earned the scrutiny of the powerful Oathmaster. The notoriety this would bring, and the fear he knew to have blossomed in Joqlynn, were more than enough isorla for the possible consequences of this act.

Of a sudden he spoke. "There is only one place appropriate to seize my Bloodname, New Tara Frith."

With a firm nod, Bayle acknowledged their words. "Then so let it be written, so let it be done."

"Seyla."