

Tears of Blood

Chapter Three

By Randall N. Bills

**New Tara Fríth
Near New Tara, York
Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space
19 December 3061**

For a moment Caden actually felt bad. After all, the speckled cockatrice had only been trying to get out of his way. Now, watching the leavings of the smeared bird slough off the anti-stick covering of the *Blood Kite*'s cockpit, Caden felt one last twinge of conscience over the death of an endangered species before putting it behind him. Anyway, what had the bird been doing in an area that wasn't its natural habitat? Perhaps it deserved its fate, quiaff? Trying to test itself beyond its abilities?



Crimson fire rent the sky, searing a red-hot furrow that would've left after-images if he'd not been protected by the cockpit's polarization. The extended-range laser's sun-bright beam set foliage smoldering on all sides, but slipped past the *Blood Kite* by centimeters.

Sloppy. She's getting desperate. Caden knew he had her.

He stomped down onto the foot pedals. Oblivious to the intricacies of his 'Mech's functions, Caden only knew his own musculature action resulted in the miracle of eighty-five tons of myomer and metal lofting into the air in a semi-controlled ballistic arc.

It never failed to elicit a scream of power.

Following the trail of burning foliage back to its source, he thumbed twin volleys of long-range missiles. He'd not targeted on the specific 'Mech, unable to see Joqlynn's *Stooping Hawk C* in the thick foliage. However, like the cockatrice, he hoped the spread of metal rain would flush Joqlynn into the open.

The missiles cascaded down in an orgy of destruction, shattering trees, pulverizing roots and gouging the earth in a swath of devastation. Feathering the jump jets with a quick one-two tap on his foot pedals, the ponderous *Blood Kite* swung slightly to the right to better face Joqlynn's direction as it reached the apex of its jump and began to plummet to the obscured forest floor.

At the last possible second, Caden felt more than saw metal movement within the swirling smoke and debris; twin cerulean beams of man-made lightning shot forth towards Joqlynn's 'Mech. Caden couldn't tell if he'd scored on the *Stooping Hawk* before his vision vanished in a tangle of leaves and trunks; the *Blood Kite* blasted its own path through the trees to the ground—the jarring impact, regardless of the over-thrust of the jump jets to dump velocity, caused him to bite his tongue.

"*Savashri!*" He hated when that occurred. He desperately wanted to spit out the copper-tang—the neurohelmet made that impossible—and he shuddered slightly as he swallowed his own blood.

Reaching his right hand forward, he cycled through several screens on his secondary monitor until he brought up MAGScan. Though almost five hundred meters distant, in the forest, the other 'Mech stood out of the greenery like a blazing sun, naked for any eye to see. And the hunter's eye had locked on its target. Caden smiled, suddenly unaware of the trickle of blood that smeared his lips.

With his left hand, he wrenched the throttle full forward and the behemoth of walking metal lurched into a run, the whine of its gyro loud in the confines of the cockpit, even through the muffling effects of Caden's neurohelmet. He used the joysticks to manipulate the twin arms of the *Blood Kite*, smashing aside trees to ease his passage.

She'd made a fatal mistake. He outweighed her by thirty tons but she'd thought her superior mobility would allow her to be victorious, especially since she mounted an extravagant targeting computer. However, she'd apparently not believed the scoring of his Trial of Position. He simply outclassed her. She'd held him off for over an hour, but he'd slowly whittled away her armor, along with her will to fight and win.

He began to slow as he realized the *Stooping Hawk* remained stationary. A new trick? He thumbed the screen to radar and scanned the area, quickly checking it against a topographical map and back to MAGScan. Some terrain feature he could not see? The jumping

and firing had heated up the cockpit to a nice sauna temperature and the stench of his own body's sweat filled his nostrils, while sweat slicked his hair and caused his cooling vest to stick to his chest and underarms.

He clenched the joysticks tightly. Trick or no trick, this ends now!

The *Blood Kite* lurched forward once more and shortly crashed into a small clearing his missiles had further widened. Weapons raised, he almost let loose another volley before he could fully take in the scene. The giant hole torn straight through the middle of the *Stooping Hawk* gave ample evidence of the 'Mech's demise.

His crimson lips quirked. One down, four to go.



**Jacob's Star, Mammoth-class DropShip
New Tara DropPort, York
Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space
20 December 3061**

"Come now, Caden. Surely you can keep up with an aging warrior?" Star Captain Heath's laughter echoed in the confines of maintenance shaft C.

Looking up, Caden's legs almost quivered at the sight of another seventy meters of ladder towering over his head. He didn't need to look down to see the hundred meters he'd already traversed. One of three such shafts running uninterrupted stem to stern, they connected to dozens of perpendicular shafts, providing access to all areas of the ship. Generally only used by technician castemen when the DropShip anchored to a JumpShip—allowing crewmen to simply float down the entire length of the vessel—the shaft now served as a perfect torture device. Caden gritted his teeth and began to move again; he could not believe this ancient *surat* kept ahead of him.

"If you would face me in honorable combat, instead of fleeing like an Adder, I would show you what I would do to an aging warrior." He tried to pour all of the aches and anger of the climb into his words. Laughter from above simply ignited his rage further.

"You would goad me into combat? Please, Caden." Heath's voice carried tones of disparage and sarcasm he'd not thought possible

from a human voice. "I know the warrior you are. I know the warrior you will become. However, as so many of the Clans, including our own, have learned in the last decades, youth is not everything. I am no black widow by any means, but I have experiences of my own. We Spirits have learned to set aside some of our precious traditions when defending our last bastion against other Clans. In the end victory is victory, quiaff?"

"Neg," Caden responded, trying to keep the strain of the climb from his voice; even his knuckles began to ache. "Would you throw away your honor?"

"What have I thrown away? Have I laid in ambush for you? Have I ganged up to remove you? I see no one else here." His laughter once more echoed down the shaft and set Caden's nerves on fire. If he ever caught this *surat*...

"You flee?"

"I choose the terrain I will fight on. I thought it would be at the bottom of the *Jacob's Star*, but I changed my mind. I will fight at the top. That is my right as hunted, quiaff?"

"Neg." Caden thought for a moment, changed his mind; managed to grunt through gritted teeth at the admission. "Aff."

"That is the spirit. You see, you cannot totally discount experience. You may be young, but I have spent the better part of two straight decades running almost every morning. I believe I have a stamina you cannot match, but your agility and fists would likely make short work of me. Once we reach the top, we should be on much better ground. Terrain of my choosing."

"You can climb the lengths of three *Mammoths*. I will still defeat you."

"Oh, I would not have you think any other way. It would not be Clan-like, after all, if you did not. Glass always half-full, quiaff?" Again, that laughter!

Caden tried to ignore the almost jovial quality in Heath's voice as he drew upon unknown reserves and sped up. How in the world did such an un-Clanlike warrior get a chance at a Bloodname? Had to have come through a Grand Melee. No other answer.

A sound intruded, felt more than heard. Caden looked up to see Heath's maniacal smile a meter wide behind the red beard he wore, plummeting towards him. Without thought and only through re-

flexes genetically honed across a hundred generations, Caden thrust backwards and threw himself off the ladder and into an access tunnel leading off the main shaft, as Heath's booted heels passed where his head had been a nanosecond before.

"*Savashri*" floated up from the suddenly angry Heath. The slap and streaking sound of fast moving flesh on metal told of his hands attempting to grab the ladder to arrest his fall.

Only taking a single breath to calm his jangled nerves, Caden launched himself back out and onto the ladder. He caught on to the sides of it as he fell downwards as well, subject to the inexorable pull of gravity. Stopping three rungs short of Heath, he scrambled downwards as Heath desperately attempted to continue moving down towards another access tunnel.

Furious at what almost occurred, Caden let go of the ladder (how does he like *this* chosen terrain?) and slammed into the top of Heath. The explosive exhalation told of a solid hit to the top of his chest and head, as Caden grappled for the ladder with his left hand and threw an elbow downward with the right. An answering undercut, badly thrown and without strength, glanced off of his jaw; he hardly noticed.

"*Surat!*" Caden yelled. Now almost even with each other, Caden swung around to the opposite side of the ladder. Both warriors fought desperately to hold on while raining blows through the bars. However, the outcome could've been called the moment Caden caught his slippery foe. The older man simply could not match strength or ability. He could not take the brute damage Caden could and a final pile-driver of a fist knocked his opponent unconscious; only Caden's reflexes managed to catch the warrior before he fell.

Hugging the ladder and Heath, Caden calmed his breath and tried to release the swirls of rage that engulfed him. But his anger was not for Heath. No, his rage centered upon himself. He'd been lulled by mere exhaustion and words into underestimating his foe. He may have been one step closer to his Bloodname, but only providence had provided a way. By sheer dumb luck he'd emerged the winner and Caden did not believe in fate or luck, only himself.

His rage burned for a long time before he made the call to evacuate Heath's body.



***Near Blood Spirit Hall
New Tara, York
Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space
23 December 3061***

Caden's right forearm scissored downward as his fist flowed into a flat blade, blocking the incoming thrust of Tia's right fist. Caden immediately took a half step back, brought up his right leg and jabbed it forward in a quick blow that slid just over Tia's blocking leg and under her over-stretched arm to slam into her solar plexus as he finished the hop backwards. Her explosive exhalation matched the shocked look on her face as he landed the superb blow, and sent her careening away.

For a moment the feel of the hard-packed dirt on his bare feet intruded and he almost luxuriated in a good clean fight. Piloting a 'Mech, Caden experienced sensations no other human could possibly understand. Yet he appreciated the simplicity of his own body's muscles moving beneath taut skin: reflexes, mind and willpower focused on defeating an opponent. He'd specifically chosen unaugmented with his last adversary due to a perceived superiority and had almost paid the price. Now, being the hunted, he'd simply chosen a spot right outside the entryway to the Blood Spirit Hall, where a Circle of Equals had been scraped in the dirt and the fight begun.

With only the slightest pause, he skipped forward, his feet and hands a blur of movement as he rained a series of feints and blows, all blocked by a desperate Tia. Still, he had to admire her speed and reflexes. She flashed up to her feet, her short, raven hair and too-white skin shining in the yellow-white morning sunlight. He blocked a particularly savage round-house; Caden wondered if she might wish to couple this evening.

He pressed forward, a twist kick and hop pushing her back, followed by several right and left jabs that kept her off her guard. The silent sentinels ringing the circle could've been statues. Only the sounds of slapping flesh, dual pairs of moving feet scrambling for purchase, and the fluttering of leaves in the light wind filled his ears.

Another stream of jabs and blocks flashed between the two. Tia attempted to disengage, to take a breather, but Caden would not let her. So close now. He could see the look in her eyes. The knowledge of impending defeat looming large and writ in stone. Only two more steps and the Bloodname would be his. Only two

more steps and the first task given him by his House Leader would be accomplished. Only two more—

His thoughts were savagely interrupted by a flying kick. He'd seen the look on her face. The look of fear a rabbit wears when caught in the open, no warren near and the hawk's claws closing in for the kill. He'd pressed the attack, striving to land the finishing blow and had over-stretched. Whether her rabbit-eyes had been real or not, she'd managed to move from a defensive crouch into one of the most breathtaking flying kicks he'd ever seen.

Caden managed to wrench aside his head enough to ease a blow that easily would've sent him into oblivion. The kick still exploded stars in front of his eyes and the ringing of the Founder's own bell set to within his skull. Though he tried to use all the agility at his disposal, he might as well have been a 'Mech with a destroyed gyro—he flopped down sideways into the dirt. Tasting blood and spitting out the vileness, he struggled to move, knowing he'd made a mistake he would not overcome.

Like a sphinx raptor, Tia savaged him with four quick kicks before he could even maneuver into a crouch, sending waves of agony through his body. Though he clawed at consciousness, it began to slip away like water through his fingers. He could feel her roughly grab his collar and begin to laboriously drag his larger frame towards the edge of the circle.

He held no power within him to stop it. He screamed and raged at his muscles but the blows knocked his synapses completely out of whack. His body refused to accept any command.

His rage hissed out into coldness. In his fog, he realized his own impatience, his own arrogance had denied him his Bloodname and hence foiled Sariah's scheme. What's more, she'd specifically sponsored him—the youngest warrior ever to receive such honor within the Spirits and perhaps within the Clans as a whole. Though he could not even conceive of the fear of death, in that brief moment before darkness engulfed him, he began to fear Sariah's punishments. Death would likely be welcome.

Then oblivion reached languid arms out to take him away from his shame. He couldn't help but think of the cockatrice: he'd reached beyond his abilities.