

Tears of Blood

Chapter four

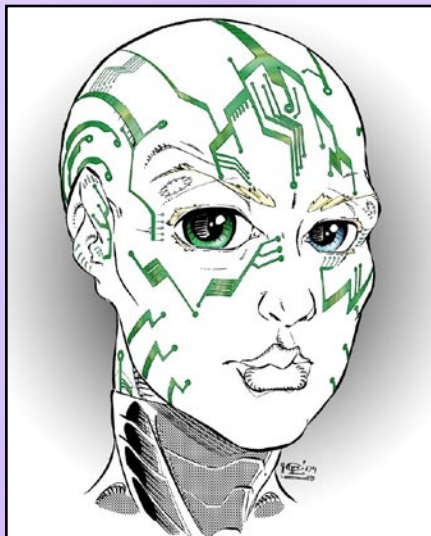
By Randall N. Bills

Training Outpost 7
Boques, York
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The air stank of happiness, good cheer and the aromas of a magnificent feast prepared by the lower castemen.

It made Caden sick.

Stamping through the desolate, rock-strewn field toward the command building of Training Outpost 7, Caden hitched his shoulders at the cooler than usual wind for this time of year and tried to ignore the Homecoming festivities breaking out around him.



Should've worn the jump suit.
Winter already coming? Not possible.

Glancing toward the ocean less than a kilometer away, past the steep cliffs of Aber, he could see the waters of the Lochlon starting to turn the gray-white of cold, dead flesh. The size of the white-caps also told of the shifting of the moon and changing seasons. He stopped and looked back over his shoulder at the Strathclyde mountain range, its primary volcanic cone thrusting up a mind-numbing fifteen kilometers, renting the very atmosphere with its arrogance. The snow line had moved down without him even noticing.

The range was a giant fence separating the life he'd lost beyond it in New Tara.

He shook his head and stomped on. *Nature moves on and I am stuck here. Stuck beyond that stravag-impenetrable fence. My own bid for the atmosphere failed and I'm left to flounder.*

His boots pounded harder.

"Star Captain." Star Commander Jewel's words came naked, stripped of any emotion by the rising wind. But then that was her usual delivery.

For a moment he considering playing deaf, but thought better of it. The last time had been...unpleasant. Caden turned. Braced himself.

"Yes, Star Commander?" Never a name. Not from him.

"You have promised to train with my Star, *quiaff*" Those eyes—one green, one blue—were amazingly large in her oversized cranium. Particularly effective with her surgically shaved head. Her eyebrows and eyelashes were so thin and light, they appeared shaved as well. He always thought of her naked, regardless of the full-piece, skin-tight ribbed body suit she wore day or night.

It should've helped. Never did.

"Aff, Star Commander. I apologize. However, I just returned from patrol." Did he hide the frustration. Patrol? HA! Next he would be cutting down herds of Toliks with his large lasers, just to escape the boredom. "I can't right now."

She quirked an invisible eyebrow. He tried not to grimace and failed. *Stravag*! If he stayed here much longer his language would be worse than any labor castemen. He had just handed her the moral high ground.

"You have been commanded to train with my Star, Captain." He couldn't imagine her short, waif-like body emitting any noise beyond that soft voice. Yet she had a force behind those words he lacked.

Caden tried another tack. "It is Homecoming day. Should we not join the celebrations?" He cared nothing about the festivities, but he grasped at straws.

"The celebrations will continue to dawn, *quiaff*?" She continued without a pause; he had already lost. "We are prepared."

She had a force he could not put his finger on, one he could not resist when cornered. For a moment he tried to blame it on her Enhanced Imagery circuitry, which glowed—even in this light—with a soft, algae-green luminescence across her face and scalp. But, as usual, he could not lie even to himself.

His jealousy felt like an infected wound: burning, raw, and angry.

Caden collapsed. "Aye, Star Commander. There will be plenty of fusionnaires left for us all." He could put down a score of pints right now. "Lead the way."

She nodded and turned to lead; her giant skull reminded him of a bald Tolik's head. He grinned for a moment, then wondered when he had become so petty. He ignored the pinching at his side; that doctor knew nothing. No way could he have an ulcer.

Caden cast a longing look toward the main command post, then followed Jewel around the corner to the left. He walked lighter than before, considering the wake of her soft footfalls as they continued past the twin primary barracks, the hand-to-hand training yard, and even the primary `Mech repair facility. Caden once again felt the cool air, like a lovers cold fingers across his thighs and shoulders under warm covers, and wished for the single-suit left in the *Blood Kite*.

Finally, at the extreme edge of the entire compound, almost to the edge of the cliff and well away from any other structure, they approached the secondary repair facility. The cold, damp air gained an edge, causing him to grit his teeth. Used when larger, more prestigious units posted here, the facility had fallen into extreme neglect over the last decade. When Jewel's Star arrived with orders for him to begin extensive training exercises with them two months ago, he'd assigned them to the dilapidated structure. Out of sight, out of mind.

Now, his mind reeled at the improvements he noticed. The area immediately around the building had been completely cleared of the tanglebrush which thrived in this region and could swallow a building whole in a few years if given the chance. The structure he'd almost considered condemning out of spite when first assigned here after his failed Trial of Bloodright, now showed signs of numerous patches and shorings.

Moving through a small door to the left of the primary, he stopped dead at the interior. Pleasant warmth flooded his body, unlocking clenched muscles.

How in the world did they secure this material? He gazed around a moment, not sure he wanted to know.

Where before had been a darkened, neglected interior, now a fully active, well-lit room bustled before him. He could almost pluck at the sense of purpose that vibrated within. Like a man waking to a forgotten, lost sense, Caden felt other muscles—mental

muscles—beginning to warm a degree. Muscles not used in long, long months.

The `Mech repair facility's ceiling lofted almost sixteen meters above their heads, allowing for almost any `Mech to walk within. Numerous catwalks ran around the interior walls at three meter heights. The once cluttered ground had been scrapped clean and power cords of various colors and sizes ran crisscross. The cries of greetings and calls for equipment; the harsh whisper of arc-welders wedding armor to internal structure joists; the thrum of fusion plants in test cycles vibrating up through boot soles; the whine of servos as exoskeletons moved around heavy equipment: a cacophony of exquisite music to his ears.

Neither he nor his unit could be named slouches. Yet this frenzied, dedicated pace had been missing for long, long months from Training Base 7. He could not understand how he'd missed this activity under his own nose.

Then again, he had been missing a lot of late.

After such a lift to his spirit, Caden's mood darkened once more as he remembered the actual occupants of the various repair bays. Like children attempting to dress up in adult clothing, the twenty-five ProtoMechs of Jewel's command failed miserably to fill the shoes of their superior cousins—each stood less than half the height of a `Mech. He swallowed to remove the bad taste from his mouth.

Jewel turned toward him and quirked those invisible eyebrows.

You will not get any comments from me, regardless of how impressive this place is. These are only ProtoMechs and you only command a wanna-be-a-`Mech Star.

The sounds swirled around them, battering at the heavy silence between them.

Jewel turned away and began moving toward the left bank of ProtoMechs. Caden thought the one they were approaching might be a *Hydra*, but they all looked the same to him: stunted, badly formed children that should've been terminated before decanting.

As they came to a stop in front of the ProtoMech, a metal claw from the gantry above moved down and latched onto the chestplate with a clang. The popping of metal and sighing of settling myomer made him realize the ProtoMech had just returned from

some exercise. A whirring of gears and locks echoed out of the ProtoMech's centerline.

Bad indigestion? Caden quirked a smile.

The entire plate suddenly pulled away, revealing the large, thrusting bolt of the locking mechanism and the piloting chamber beyond. For a moment Caden could think of nothing more than an iron-womb and the fetal position. He involuntarily shivered at the comparison and the idea of such claustrophobic confines.

He could not imagine a life outside of piloting a `Mech, but the gaping wound-hole (he couldn't think of it any other way) with its lack of visible controls reminded him too much of how entwined a ProtoMech pilot became with his machine. Of how one lived inside the other. He felt an upsurge of revulsion at such a loss of control.

I pilot my machine! Not the other way around!

A lithe, thin figure began to extricate herself from the padded interior, unfolding like a flower under the morning sun. Numerous wires fell away from contact points on her body without any visible command and she leaned forward slightly, her strange, smallish neurohelmet still trailing a half dozen wires, and opened her eyes.

Caden had coupled with numerous women in his life. He knew not all of them had taken away the same experience, but he felt confident most had been serviced and serviced well. Yet the brightness of her eyes, the blazing gleam that accompanied her slight panting, told of an ecstasy he'd never given. An ecstasy he'd never be able to give. A rapture he himself would never know either in bed or at the helm of his own `Mech

The disgust reached a new level.

She pulled the helmet off of her head and stowed it up above his line of sight. Then she stepped lightly out onto the missile launcher grasped in the *Hydra's* (he felt sure, now) left hand and then onto the gantry, before quickly climbing to the ground. She saluted both Jewel and Caden smartly.

"Welcome back, Point Commander," Jewel said. "Success?"

"Aff, Star Commander. The exercise could not have been more successful."

What exercise? He hid his confusion as Jewel dismissed the warrior and turned back to him. He should have known about such an exercise, but he would not ask.

Jewel's smile felt a little too knowing and he tried to hide the flush to his face. "Alexia is my XO. Her Point just returned from a three week foray into the Strathclyde Mountains."

"A success?" he said.

Savashri. Why had he not been told about it? Caden thought he managed to keep the anger from his voice. Then the memory of a forgotten request form buried under a multi-colored mountain of pulp on his desk percolated to the surface.

"Aff. We are testing the extremes to which a ProtoMech-pilot can be taken." The way in which she managed to make "ProtoMech" and "pilot" sound like a single word made his skin crawl.

Caden painted interest on his face, as Jewel prattled on about the success of this test and that, gazing at the beehive around him, hearing about the extremes her pilots were surviving with flying colors.

My Kite's large laser would show you extremes. For a moment he felt like smiling. Yet, his belly began to ache once more. No ulcer, *stravag*!

As Jewel's soft words continued to fall like snow flakes against the uncaring heat of his anger, shame once more crept over him. His demeaning thoughts kept rising like *surat* Burrocks, who would not die but lived on in the *stravag* Adders!

For the first time in long weeks, standing among warriors moving with such purpose, he could no longer ignore himself. Could no longer evade the anger and jealousy that ate at him like an Eden viral taint.

Caden's fingers surreptitiously dug into his palms, as the reality he no longer could ignore unfolded before him.

He had bid for the stars...and lost.

The pain still felt like the blade had drawn blood moments before. Caden had been given the chance to be the youngest Bloodnamed warrior in the history of the Clans and his impatience had cost him everything. Now, he sat, forgotten at the tail end of nowhere. More importantly, he had begun to even forget about his own honor;

begun to set himself above the Clan; allowed his performance and that of his unit to fall, due to self disgust.

Caden pushed fingers deeper into his palms and drew blood. Such actions were for Steel Vipers or Jade Falcons. Not a Blood Spirit!

Looking around him with new eyes, he felt renewed self disgust. To be shown his own faults by half-warriors—how could he accept these abominations? More, another revelation that he did not want to face blossomed. That Jewel's commanding presence came from her knowledge of her place within the Clan. A sense of her own worth. A sense he had forgotten.

Focusing back on Jewel, he realized she had stopped speaking. What were her last words? "I think we will show that ProtoMechs have a place among our Touman?" He couldn't recall.

Not a hint of emotion marked her pert features, but the shadow of condemnation for his lack of attention rode her two-tone eyes like charged PPCs. *I do this because my Khan has ordered it!* He grasped onto the words as though they would keep him from the edge of a cliff.

It helped. Helped enough, perhaps, for him to get out of his malaise. Though glancing back to the darkened hole in the ProtoMech, he knew it would not be enough.

Not yet.

The bang of the door slamming open rang out, slicing through talk and heavy work. All eyes turned toward the newcomer

Caden recognized the almost frantic features of his second in command. He registered shock as Daneel raced to him—the man never *raced* for anything. Almost sliding to a stop, he saluted quickly and blurted.

"There is a raid underway, Commander. I have been trying to locate you. A Star Adder force has declared a Trial of Possession for a Star of ProtoMechs."

"Why does this concern me?"

The look of earnest confusion of Daneel's face almost looked comical.

"Because we are the ones contacted. They are making landfall in four hours in our proximity. We're the target of this Trial."

"Watch your language," Caden managed to get out as shock swept him. A trial? Here? A real trial. Against the cursed Star Adders. *This is what this command needs. What I need.*

Caden immediately waved his XO forward and began to follow. He stopped for a moment and turned to Jewel. "Time to prove whether you have value to the Spirits, Star Commander." *I doubt it.*

He turned and strode away, feeling a long-lost purpose, missing the dozens of smiles that swept the room.

Caden was not the only one looking to prove himself. Not by a long shot.