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BattleCorps Security Team

Tears of Blood

Part 1

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Blood Spirit Hall
New Tara, York
Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space
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The crisp scent of coming snow hung in the air.

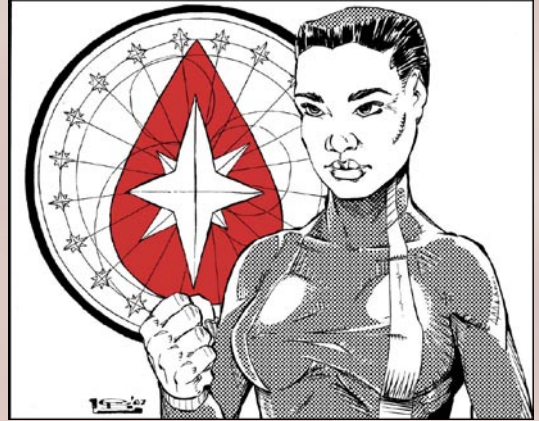
Caden halted momentarily from his purposeful stride across Spirit Square, leaving him standing in the shadow of the mammoth Blood Spirit Hall. With fall in full swing, his black boots crunched on dried leaves long fallen from their precarious grip on life at the end of a twig.

Devoid of nature's adornments and without the bustle of people that would occur once the sun crested, the square appeared almost ethereal, lacking any semblance of life. He peered at the carved friezes and jutting gargoyles of the Hall; a giant cathedral overlooking an accursed and forgotten graveyard.

Angrily he pushed such dark thoughts away and moved on toward the doors that were fully open—even this early in the morning—braced on either side by striated columns of granite that shot up to support an awning twenty meters above his head. Some claimed the Blood Spirit Hall on Strana Mechty was even larger, but he could not bring himself to believe it. This building, so magnificent, imbued with the honor, dignity and righteousness of Clan Blood Spirit - he could not imagine a more fantastic structure.

Passing through marble doors sheathed in gold leaf, half a meter thick and over eight meters wide - yet the slightest push would set them in motion - he entered the Chamber of Supplicants. He knew that this building had been patterned after the architecture of one of ancient Terra's most impressive structures, but at the moment, he could not bring it to mind. Though Caden regularly visited the Hall, he could not help the tightening of his chest, a pride that filled him to bursting every time he beheld this place.

The floor of the large, circular chamber immediately drew the eye. Inlaid with a gigantic mosaic that covered its entire surface,



it depicted the Spirits' great battle known as Operation Klondike on the world of Arcadia. The central figure of the piece was Khan Colleen Schmitt herself, striding among the lost and depraved citizens of the fallen Star League in exile like an avatar, half again larger than any 'Mech. Clothed in the mythic armor of her Scottish past and holding a flaming claymore, her head was haloed in a brilliant light made up of the intertwined logos of the original twenty Clans created by the Founder. Only a quick aversion of Caden's eyes allowed him to avoid gazing at the logo of the Not-Named Clan. After his first impassioned outburst over its existence, he had come to understand the significance of that symbol for his Clan and why it had not been erased along with everything else. Still, he could not bring himself to look at it.

Lifting his head, he moved around the edge of the chamber. The mosaic had been designed to withstand the tread of countless feet, but he had never seen a single person intrude upon its magnificence.

The rest of the chamber was equally daunting, with off-white fluted columns spaced every four meters around the entire length of the wall and rising up twenty meters to a vaulted ceiling made entirely of plasteel, which flooded the interior with light. Etched into the plasteel were constellations as viewed by someone standing in the highlands of ancient Scotland on sacred Terra; even in broad daylight they were easy to make out. Caden grudgingly gave respect to the obviously masterful talents of the labor castemen who had created such a work.

The walls drew his attention as he walked toward the double doors set opposite the entrance, his boots striking the floor with sharp staccato sounds that echoed in the empty chamber. Between each column, malachite pedestals mounted into the wall formed a series of rising and falling steps in a geometric pattern that flowed around the chamber. On each pedestal, in a preserving case, rested a trophy from a past Bloodnamed warrior: a laser pistol at lower right; a studded, black leather glove at middle right; an ancient neurohelmet with a cracked face plate at upper left; what appeared to be the pelt of an unusual marsupial at middle left - the list went on with well over five hundred such prizes. Each was a memento from a warrior who had left his or her indelible mark on Clan Blood Spirit. Once more Caden's chest filled with pride and his pace quickened.

Exiting the Chamber of Supplicants, he strode down a long marble hallway, with numerous doors stretching down either side that

seemed unadorned when compared to the opulence of the chamber behind. Coming to another hallway running perpendicular to the one he had just traversed, he turned left and continued on down the spartan corridor.

As his destination came into view he found himself slowing. The realization of where he was and what he was about to do rushed over him. He came to a dead stop and stood in the deserted hallway as the dying echoes of his footfalls fell into the distance. Shaking himself like a dog shedding water, Caden moved forward with deliberation and reached out to strike the door smartly, a warrior's knock without timidity. A moment of silence passed. Before he could stop himself, his ever-present impatience got the better of him and he struck the door a second time.

"Enter," said a muffled voice.

Suddenly regretting his rash desire to get this interview over with, he cautiously opened the door and moved into the room. Drawing himself up ramrod straight, he formed his left hand into a wedge, raised it parallel to the floor and thumped it into the center of his chest. "Star Captain Caden reporting as requested." His too-loud voice seemed to shake the room in an attempt to intimidate its only other occupant. He winced inwardly at his own gaffe but kept his eyes pinned high on the room's back wall.

A softer, woman's voice answered as if to mock his baying. "You do not have to yell, Caden. I know Blood Spirit Hall is large enough to make a person feel the need to shout. Still... I would have thought in my humble office, you would not feel it necessary."

Caden flinched inwardly once more at the implied rebuke, choosing to ignore the smile he could hear in her words. The seconds stretched into a minute as he tried vainly to keep his impatience under control. He could not understand why she had brought him here, if all she was going to do was look at him. Did she wish to couple? Why did she simply not ask him? It would be done quickly and he could return to the Ninety-first. As another minute of the tomblike silence dragged by, he lost the fight with himself and his eyes briefly flicked toward the woman who had summoned him.

Sitting behind a large granite desk - one meter by three - the diminutive figure seemed lost in her chair. Black, short-cropped hair framed a beautiful, finely featured face, from which coal-black, slanted eyes gazed back at him. An almost transparent skein of wrinkles spread out from the corners of those eyes, though no gray showed in her hair. Her small, slender body was sheathed

in a blood-red body suit, unadorned except for the liquid-like red stripe that began at her neck and ran down the suit's left side - a uniform that matched his own except for the red and black half cape he wore.

Caden's first impression was of a small woman in a garment that fit her badly and sitting behind a desk she could not possibly occupy, much less fill. However, as his gaze locked with hers, he felt his knees turn to water at the force behind those eyes. Bottomless ebony, they flayed his soul and turned him inside out for her minute inspection. As he tore his gaze away, even though he knew intellectually that mere seconds had passed, he felt as if her gaze had held him for an hour or more as she meticulously ransacked his entire being. He berated himself for his lack of patience; he knew that he had failed some test.

"So, you are every bit as impetuous as they say, eh?" she said slowly, her high sweet voice almost a balm after the beating her eyes had given him.

"Aff. I apologize for my nature, House Leader, but I am who I have been bred to be." He tried to say it forcefully but was infuriated with himself when he detected a slight hitch in his voice. It did not help that he could tell the smile was back in hers.

"Ah, an apology, but one barbed with an inability to make a rejoinder. I doubt you meant it so, but I congratulate you on such delicate word use. I wonder if that comes naturally? If so, could it be molded into a hook for catching prey? Large prey, eh?"

He slowly shook his head. "I apologize, House Leader, but I do not understand what you are saying."

The slap of her hand striking the desk was like a gunshot in the enclosed space. His head whipped around to look at the House Leader before he realized what he was doing. An angry scowl marred her almost perfect features.

"Do not apologize," she said. "The first was forgivable, as it was artfully, if unintentionally, done. The second simply displays weakness, meekness that I will not see in one of my House, quiaff."

"Aff," Caden managed to croak out.

With his reply her face was instantly transformed back into the beautiful facade he had seen before. He wondered for a moment if he had been mistaken about her anger. Then he realized - ashamed at how slowly it came to him - that his House leader was possibly even more dangerous than he had imagined. This woman, so pe-

tite that she looked as if Caden could crush her in an instant, was arguably the third most powerful person in the entire Blood Spirit Clan. Her looks aside, she could only have gotten where she was through competence, devotion and ruthlessness. Especially ruthlessness. He simply had not thought along such lines...until now.

"I ap..." He caught himself mid-word and nervously cleared his throat as he shifted his gaze elsewhere, seeking the words she wanted to hear. "I understand, House Leader."

"Better."

Upon hearing her move, he looked to find that she had come out from behind the desk. With a grace that only supreme physical fitness combined with absolute knowledge of one's power can bring, she slid around the desk and perched on its edge.

"I imagine you would like to know why I summoned you here, quiaff?"

"Aff, House Leader."

"You know, you could call me Sariah."

"Uh, no, House Leader, I could not."

A gentle, warm chuckle briefly filled the room. "Yes, perhaps you could not at that. What do you know of your Bloodheritage?"

Caden could not keep the incredulous look from washing over his features. He answered harshly. "House Leader, how can you ask that question? I have passed my Trial of Position and become a warrior. That would not have been possible without my complete knowledge of the history of my Bloodright. I can name every warrior who has held our sacred Church Bloodname, when they fell in service to our Clan and when each Trial of Bloodright was subsequently held so that additional worthy warriors could have the right to hold the great Bloodname of Church. Much to my anguish, I can even tell you the two dates of Reaving, when our House has fallen from grace. I do not see..."

"Enough," she said, cutting him off in mid-tirade. "I did not mean to besmirch your knowledge or your honor. I know full well the efficiency of our indoctrination. I need not hear ancient history. I wanted to know what you know of current House Church events."

Thrown off guard, Caden took a few moments to regain his composure. After a deep breath, he began again. "House Leader, I can

name all twenty-three current holders of our Bloodname, including when they won the right to hold it and..."

"Enough," she said again. The slight edge to her voice sent a message to Caden; answer my question in the manner in which I want or you are through.

"What are the current events of House Church?"

He paused for a moment before answering, his mind racing quicker than a PPC discharge. He shifted position in an effort to stall for time, but one look toward her told him he had to deliver now or this audience was over. With sudden insight, he understood what she might be after. A burning point of hope sparked at the possibilities.

"House Leader, I believe that Star Captain Josef Church was en route to Strana Mechty as part of a relief force for our garrison in the Warrior's Quarter of Katyusha City, quiaff?"

"Aff. Though I hoped you would respond sooner, I can see the flame that has been ignited within you even now. And to answer the question you will not voice, yes, Star Captain Church was lost when his JumpShip was attacked by the Bandit Caste."

"No!" Though he was genuinely shocked at this turn of events and was saddened to learn of a fellow House member's death, Caden had to look away. Otherwise, he knew what the House Leader would see if she gazed into his eyes.

"Look at me."

Unable to deny an outright command, he slowly brought his head up and looked directly at his House Leader. A slow smile spread across her face, though her eyes remained as cold as the depths of space. "Ah, I knew you were the one. I can see the loss on your face; you are not a monster to so quickly forget a fallen comrade. But there is something else, too..."

Moving closer, her short stature was even more exaggerated next to his height. Young as he was at only seventeen, he was afraid he would cast a shadow across her before she even came into arms' reach. Step by step, she closed with him until only a hands' breadth separated them, forcing Caden to tilt his head down to continue looking at her. She had not yet broken eye contact and he was not about to break it first.

"Yes," she almost whispered. "I see the hunger in your eyes. Even with so little information you see the possibilities. I have looked at

your codex and I see those same possibilities. Your gene-parents were superb and their talents have bred true in you. Testing out so young and in such a spectacular fashion..." Her voice trailed off again as another cold smile lit her lips.

Caden could not help the pride that filled him at the thought of his accomplishments. "Yes, House Leader. No one has defeated three opponents in their Trial of Position in more than four decades at the Training Facility." Suddenly realizing that he did not wish to sound boastful in front of this woman, he continued. "Assuming my rank of Star Captain and taking my giftake of a Blood Kite is more than enough reward for my success."

"Humbleness does not become you, Caden. You mouth the words, but they are not reflected in your face. As the saying goes, the eyes are the windows to the soul and your soul is scorching your corneas with its need."

"You are correct. I believe I do understand the implications. I cannot help but ponder the significance of my summons, though. After all, I would have found out about the Star Captain's death through the usual channels. There was no need for you to personally inform me, quiaff?"

"Neg," Sariah said. "There was every need to speak with you personally. You know full well that I will announce a Trial of Bloodright in the coming weeks, quiaff?"

"Aff."

"What is more, I will nominate you myself."

Caden froze for a moment, unable to believe what he had just heard. Though the spark of ambition blossomed quickly within him, he could hardly conceive that it would flame true. Only recently he had won his Trial of Position and already he was to be nominated for a Bloodname? And the Church House Leader herself was nominating him?! The prestige of it blinded him for a moment as specters of the glory to come spiraled through his inner vision.

"You will succeed, quiaff," she said. There was no mistaking her tone. Either he would succeed or he had better die trying.

Rocked by emotions, he answered savagely, "Aff, my House Leader, aff. I will not fail you."

In a voice as cold as an arctic wind she answered, "I know you will not, my familiar. I know there is no possibility of failure in you. And with your victory will begin the rise of the Church Bloodname once more.

"And the destruction of Clan Star Adder."