

Tears of Blood

Chapter Six

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BATTLECORPS



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Near Training Outpost 7
Boques, York
Kerensky Cluster, Clan Space
1 November 3062

The frigid air bludgeoned dull, numb fingers into Caden's nose and down his throat, making it impossible to breathe for a moment, freezing his nostrils together from one haggard breath to the next.

Jogging from his *Blood Kite*, whose pings and creaks of heated metal cooling in the subzero weather echoed loudly behind him, he cursed himself for not taking the time to put on the warm-weather gear, instead of the jumpsuit he'd thrown on.

Moving towards the already erected bivouac and its main tent, he glanced right and immediately ceased his rapid movement upon seeing Star Commander Jewel sauntering towards the tent from the direction of her mini-'Mech.

He sighed heavily. *ProtoMech*. He'd made a promise and regardless of what others thought, he intended to keep it. For a moment Caden looked at her ProtoMech, expecting to see the *Roc*, but instead found himself looking at a machine he did not recognize.

Not her *Roc*? Though the body of the machine vaguely reminded him of the *Roc*, the wing flanges on the shoulders were missing and a distinctly boar visage totally replaced the sweptback, wicked beak. Something percolated in the back of his mind, but the cold kept it deep and numb.

Caden shrugged, sped up just a hair as he neared the entrance, regardless of how it may have looked to her. She glanced in his direction and those two-tone eyes almost glowed in the pre-dawn light.

The suit self-heated. Had to be.

He swept into the tent without another glance, knowing Jewel only a handful of steps behind. Blessed heat washed over him, a tumult to ease the rigid pain that had seeped into knuckles and knees. A moment more and he actually began to feel his lips again.

Before him, a tent roughly five meters on a side, bustled with activity as various collapsible desks were erected. The small portable holotable eased into the center of the room by two techs, butting up against the central tent-pole. Three technicians worked to link the holotable to the portable communications array and sat-link. Though the raid by the Star Adders had been months in the past, every patrol, every field exercise (such as this one) held an extra edge. Everyone moved to a new level of work and efficiency, the hint of waiting at the precipice.

The Adders may have been beaten, but the tears of blood spilt on both sides would not be going away anytime soon. They would be back and everyone knew it.

Cold eddies swept past his ankles, pimpling his legs as Jewel moved into the tent. For a moment he contemplated ignoring her, then remembered his promise. "Commander."

Blue/green bolts jolted him with their power. He may have made strides in the months since Jewel and her ProtoMech pilots had saved the Trial of Possession, but he still could not match her sheer power of personality. A power, he'd come to realize, that came from her firm knowledge of her place in the Clan. A knowledge he'd lost.

A knowledge he looked to regain.

Though it still galled that the help he might find to regain that wisdom would come from these upstart warriors, Caden felt he owed them. They had proven their worth to the Clan.

More than he.

He swallowed, said the first thing to come to his mind. "You are not piloting your *Roc, quineg*."

"*Neg*, Star captain. As I informed you three weeks ago, we are currently testing a brand new ProtoMech, the first built uniquely on York soil."

Like armor bursting under the energies of a particle cannon, the thought he'd been unable to pull up moments before ruptured into consciousness: forms forwarded from the York ProtoMech facility.

Savashri. For every two steps forward in acknowledging these upstarts (ProtoMech pilots!), it seemed his mind automatically took a step back, whether he willed it or not. Not a blink or a change in her facial expression.

She is ice. That is why the cold does not affect her. She brings it with her wherever she goes.

“That is correct. I apologize for my momentary lapse.” There, I said it. Directly to her face. That made three times in as many months. He stretched tired muscles, vest sliding smoothly across skin, as though he’d just finished a marathon. He was making progress.

“There is no need to apologize, Star Captain. You are a busy man. However, I would be pleased to show you the design, if you wish.”

He almost bit off his tongue. Tried to move forward and this is where it got him. Back into the damnable cold. He thought of declining, the need to organize for the continuing field activity. The lie froze before utterance, as though he had already walked back outside.

No. I swore an oath, if only to myself.

He steeled himself to respond. “Aff, I would like to see how our scientist caste has surpassed the fallen Jaguars.”

Without a word, Jewel turned and flowed back outside, hardly jostling the tent-flap. Try as he might, Caden could not help the small, petulant way he jabbed the flap aside, letting in as much cold as possible. Shame flowered immediately for such a petty act.

As the numb, cold fingers once more bruised his nose and mouth, walking with blind, painful insistence up and down the length of his body, Caden wondered if the training he received at the Spirit Legacy Facility had been slightly faulty.

The heavy footfalls of an approaching ‘Mech caused him to glance up to see Daneel maneuvering his *Rifleman IIC* into a position for shutdown. He shifted his glance back to Jewel’s slender frame, as she wended her way through several support vehicles and a Shammash and chuckled dryly. A year before, such thoughts would have been tantamount to heresy.

Now, however, a year removed from that person, a year into his exile and an understanding of the knife edge of bitterness separating a glorified warrior and a worthless castoff, he knew such blind acceptance and devotion was the stupidity of youth.

You had to question. You had to think. Of course the Clan is all, but it did not mean you could not question your place in it. Or

question how you moved from Alpha point to Beta. More importantly, you could question how the training facility could produce some of the finest warriors in Clanspace and yet could not teach you how to deal with radical changes to your perceptions.

They neared the new ProtoMech, and Caden set aside such musings.

"This is the newest addition to the Touman," Jewel said, as they both came to a stop at its base. Caden almost expected her to make such an announcement with a flourish of her arms, then thought better—not in her nature. He glanced up and once more felt struck by its resemblance to a boar—if one standing upright—four meters tall and encased in aligned crystal steel. He also immediately noticed the weapon's ports at both wrists and hips.

"Well armed."

"Aff, star commander. Quad lasers. It also has ample armor and can attain speeds of almost one hundred kilometers an hour."

Despite himself, he raised an appreciative eyebrow. It did indeed seem as though the ProtoMech would be a fine addition to the Spirit Touman.

"Would you like to interface?"

His jaw dropped open, quickly snapped shut. In his wildest dreams, he had not imagined such a question. More, from what he had gleaned over the last several months, ProtoMech pilots held their machines even more dear than MechWarriors, and that was saying something. She slowly brought those two-tone eyes to bear.

Looking at her, he wondered momentarily if such a stare was reserved for him, or did all, including her own command, receive such a reception. At the moment, though, he did not care; he simply wanted to be away from it.

But to actually plug into the machine. Had he come that far? Could he stomach it? He tried one last ditch defense.

"Is that not dangerous for a none-pilot, *quiaff?* I have no enhanced imaging." Nor would he. Ever.

"Aff, Star Captain, but only if full interface integration is achieved—not something which is possible without EI. That is only needed for full operation. This will be a stage one interface—what we use

to determine whether a person has the potential to even try and become a Pilot, EI or not." He could actually hear the capitalization in her voice; there's only one *pilot*.

Though he knew her visage would not change one iota, the look behind it, watching his denial as he turned and beat a retreat...he could stomach that even less.

Time to take the next step.

"Um, what about a suit?" Ah, there might be one last way out. "Do you not need a suit to interface." He hoped she had not heard his stumble over that last word.

Without hesitation she moved her hands up to the collar of her suit, undid the locking tab and with the ease of shucking off a bathrobe, opened up a small slit that ran from the tab, down the side of her body and to the upper thigh. Almost from one moment to the next, she stood fully clothed and then stark naked, the shapeless mass of material held in her outstretched hands.

For the second time in too short an order, he tried not to gape, stunned. Her nakedness meant nothing—her finely sculpted body, traced with luminescent enhanced imaging tattoos, would do well in bed he had no doubt, but he preferred his women larger—but to stand such in this cold; not even her nipples showed the temperature!

Savashri! He almost shivered just thinking about it.

"How can that suit possibly fit me?"

"One size fits all." The line should have been delivered with a smile, instead of her usual deadpan.

With no way out, he forged ahead. Taking a deep breath, he pulled off his own clothing (much more clumsily than the preternaturally elegant Jewel), took the material of the one-piece suit, and stopped when he felt metal mesh.

Caden actually forgot about the cold momentarily as he drew the material close, pulled the material through his hands. Though a combination of ribbing and a mesh-like texture, there could be no doubt that it felt like metal. Not completely, but enough to raise his eyebrows; he glanced up at Jewel, hefted the suit.

"A Clan copper composite mesh woven with biosynthetic fiber ribbings. The scientists tell us it creates a more synergetic interface between our enhanced imaging implants and the ProtoMech

than anything the other Clans have yet achieved. The suit is extruded as a single piece and can fit one of my size, or even an Elemental.” Caden could not help but stare. “At least that is what they tell us.”

Staring at Jewel, at her alabaster skin and lips which barely moved to form words, a face that hardly transformed with any facial expressions, she reminded him of a statue.

Or perhaps that simply is her way. She is joking with you at the moment, and you have not the wits to know it.

Caden straightened slightly at the idea, unsure of where it might have come from and abruptly, horribly, became aware of the cold that pressed down upon him. He quickly began to slide the suit onto his body, and slowed as a sensation of warmth immediately began to suffuse those regions already covered.

Ha. I knew it was heat. Warmed. After several seconds, though, he realized the sensation felt different, not like the electric warmed clothing he had worn before. No, instead, the suit seemed to be amplifying and reflecting back his own ambient body heat. Though the sensation felt wonderful after the cold, the realization of how closely tied Jewel must be to her ProtoMech intruded again, forcibly, upon his awareness.

And I am going to do this? His next shiver had nothing to do with the cold.

A new thought surfaced, as he finished tugging on the suit (she was right, fit like wearing nothing at all). Perhaps this exterior is required, part and parcel of what it is to become a ProtoMech pilot. He tried to ransack his memories of the other ProtoMech pilots under his command and cursed himself a fool. He could not remember even one of them.

Regardless, he felt simultaneously at ease—as though he might have found some common ground with Jewel, something to strip away her mechanical-like façade—and yet on edge, knowing what had to be coming. How close he was to...

Interface.

As Caden finished, Jewel moved the two paces to the leg of the ProtoMech, where she depressed several buttons on an almost unseen, micro-keypad and the front, center torso section of the ProtoMech slowly folded open at an angle, its bottom still attached. Remembering the entire torso-plate removal from his last

up-close encounter with a ProtoMech, he gave her a questioned look, just as a small rung ladder descended from the side of the canted breastplate.

“You saw how Alexia situated herself, *quiaff?*”

He swallowed in a suddenly dry throat, rummaged for the memory, hoping his own perceptions had not skewed it and nodded. Something he simply would not ask, regardless of the consequences.

Without a glance in her direction, he ascended the ladder. At the top, he hefted himself into the slim crevice left by the canted breast work. Shimming down into the hole, he immediately had to fold himself into an uncomfortable fetal ball to fit into the padded cusp. He glanced up where he remembered Alexia storing the neurohelmet and almost wrenched out his arm socket reaching for it.

They must prefer to have the breastplate completely removed; this was torturous.

Somehow, through determination not to fail more than anything else, he managed to pull down the evil contraption—its skein of dangling wires reminding him of a spider web—and maneuvered it onto his head.

He started violently, sending a jolt all the way down his spine, accompanied by a dull ache, as the machine seemed to come alive around him.

Whether due to the neurohelmet’s connection with a willing head, or some move by Jewel, the torso plate moved shut with a clang, encapsulating him. Never in his life had he felt claustrophobic, but at that moment, he wondered if he would not try and chew his way out. He grunted in surprise as he realized the ball of padding where he sat was actually dozens of plates, which began to adjust to his body dimensions and the contours of his current position. Though the claustrophobia threatened to explode like a fusion reactor run wild, he kept it at bay with the thought of failure. Then the phobia began to recede, as the plates relieved pressure from various areas of his body, hoisting his chest and arms at their most natural angles. The entire effect left him feeling almost as weightless as a mid-point turnover of a DropShip in transit.

Caden smiled despite everything and suddenly the world expanded—the universe ballooned and tapped into recesses of his mind he had not known existed. His dulled existence became pain-

fully transparent, as though he suddenly stood a step back from his body, beyond a transparent pane of the next reality. Connected to his own body, but only in the most tangential way, barely aware of the blood pulsing at his throat, his breath huffing in the close confines.

Instead, he felt a giant. Standing meters taller. Felt stronger, more capable. Felt his solid, bone-crushing legs, arms that could rend metal, massive chest and ferocious head: felt the interior and exterior of his new body like he had never perceived his frail flesh of blood and tissue.

His breath quickened and his pulse sped as endorphins began to flood his pulmonary system, all beneath notice. His physical body swam in the warmth of low-tide ecstasy, while his mind reached frantically for more. For more—suddenly a shadow of pain arced, a knife's edge balance, waiting for the coming fall—of something.

An epiphany spiked his breathing harder, unleashing a further flood of pleasure/pain; his eyes dilated harshly and the tips of his extremities began to tingle. He could sense another veil of existence behind him. And another behind that. Levels of integration. Of interface. Levels of ecstasy and pain. Of understanding and perceptions.

Levels of godhood!

A pit opened up within, twisting the walls of multiple realities around him, warping them into new angles, refractions of himself that cast back shadows, exploding pain within and without.

His body stood rock solid, ready to rend armor, to tear enemies. To become the ultimate warrior.

No.

His body shook in a fit of pain, seizures and musculature spasms that threatened to tear ligaments, snap bones like twigs wrenched from spring trees by adolescent sibkin.

Caden struggled, losing his reality. Not caring. Not knowing. Only wanting more. Wanting what felt just beyond one of his own pain-reflections, the shadows that hide a larger awareness. He had to reach, to claw, to hammer. The need!

His multiple perceptions plumped outward momentarily. Then all imploded with awesome reverberations of pain, wracking his physiology with a need he no longer had, an awareness he no longer understood, an echo of pain he would never feel.



Cold.

Cold meant a body. A body of flesh; metal ignored cold.

Something constricted and memories pummeled with their immediacy. Caden felt the confines of the ProtoMech's interior, the comforting embrace turning to a collapsing sphere that would crush the life from him.

He thrashed wildly, whipping his head side to side. The bands eased slightly, but did not let go. As he reached a fevered pitch, soft words caressed his ears in strange cadences—the echoing effect of the speed of his spasms. He slowed slightly, tried to latch onto the words.

Other memories filtered down, as though his subconsciousness had become super-saturated, causing memory granules to fall... up. To burst into his conscious mind. He knew that voice, but the timbre. That did not match.

The disharmonic of his memories and the immediacy of the words stilled him completely. He latched onto his current surroundings. His own body and self awareness.

Caden.

Slowly, like moss growing across a rock, Caden peeled back eyelids that felt gummed shut with a week's worth of filth and crud. To his utter shock he realized he had been crying uncontrollably. He tried to recall the last time he had shed such tears and could not. Another memory surfaced, a painful one.

The loss at the Trial of Bloodright. His fall from glory. Not even then had his pain forced moisture from his eyes. So what, then?

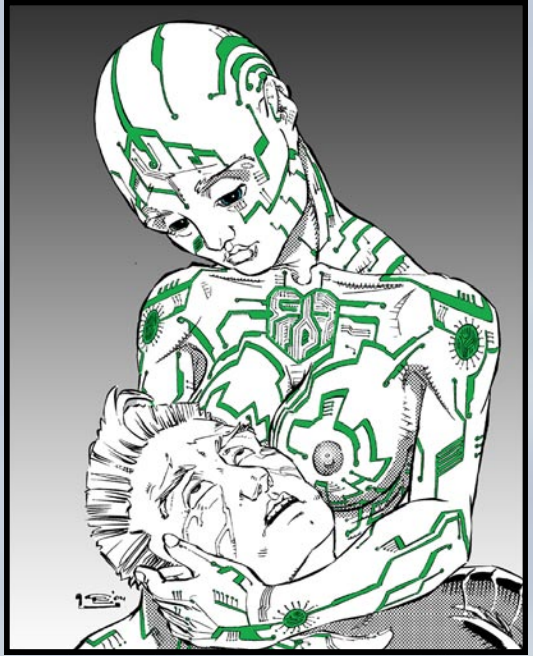
Perceptions swam into focus and he found his eyes staring at an alabaster caste of a shoulder. He blinked slowly, could actually see the blood pump through the veins in his eyes. The shoulder was still there.

He startled in wonderment as the shoulder moved and a head floated into view. A hairless head, with two-tone eyes and green luminescent markings crawling across her skull like algae gone wild on an outdoor marble statue. But this statue moved. And talked.

Jewel.

The word fell up from his super-saturated awareness. But it did not make sense. The words held a tone of...care. A timbre of feeling, completely at odds with his own memory of their cold distance. A note of understanding.

His malaise suddenly lost cohesion and dropped away in a splash. He jerked awake, really awake. He was cold, realized the suit had been stripped from his upper body and he lay in Jewel's arms; could not believe the warmth of her bare skin. Her breast felt like the barrel of a recently fired particle cannon, almost too hot to touch.



Caden tried to sit up and the world swooned around him. Though slender, Jewel's rock solid arms lent him support, then dropped away. He blinked several times to clear away the last of the dizziness, tongued the inside of his mouth, which felt like several species of small furry animals had gathered together and died. Looked up.

Déjà vu swept him, leaving an echo within—the idea he had been looking down on this body with his own awareness. The instant whiplash, as his consciousness snapped back from the ProtoMech to his body once more, set his head spinning and he wretched dryly, his breath sending out huge blooms of white into the bitterly cold dawn.

Hands, which had always looked so cold, held his head with a tenderness he could not understand.

Eyes met eyes and for the first time, Jewel seemed to lower an inner shield, a blast door guarding a place that only a handful of people would ever know. He saw the depths within. The character. The woman. The warrior. Saw the magnitudes of perceptions marching away into the distance, levels of awareness and understanding he only glimpsed briefly. Shells within shells within

shells, which called him with their pleasure...and pain. Levels which would allow him to fully become one with his ProtoMech, becoming a metal warrior as a MechWarrior would never know.

Interface.

He shook uncontrollably at the awful awareness that swirled around and through him. At the true understanding of what a ProtoMech pilot gained...and sacrificed. Of what the Clans created in their drive to perfect another ultimate warrior.

The horror (and not so secret longing) clenched his features in iron grips, brought a slow, sad smile to Jewel's lips. Her features suddenly melted into warmth, a look that out-warmed the feeble winter sun.

"And now you know."

"Aff," he said breathlessly. Reverently. "I almost died."

"Aff," she responded and withdrew instantly, throwing up the barriers he had known for so long. "And for that I request *surkairede*."

He shook his head in confusion; conscious of doing so softly, lest he bring on the dizziness once more. "Forgiveness. I do not understand."

"I simply ask. It is my shame."

"What shame?"

"Star Captain, please—"

"Star Commander," he cut her off, trying to infuse his voice with a strength he did not have. "Tell me."

She hung her head, refused to meet his eyes. "It is my shame. I pushed you well beyond first level. Never has one without enhanced imaging, one so totally unprepared, been pushed so far."

He began to understand. "So far and survived?"

"Aff," she whispered. She glanced up, the warmth replaced by pleading in her two-tone eyes. "You would likely be a Pilot without equal."

Caden shifted slightly, felt the cold ground through numbed butt cheeks. He remembered the absolute ecstasy of knowledge and perception. And the pain. He remembered the loss of self.

More than anything, the loss of self.

He shivered again, the cold from without and within converging.

“Why?”

“Why?”

“Aff, Jewel, why?”

She looked up, startled as her name fell from his lips. She finally responded. “I felt you needed to understand. The ProtoMech program will move forward. But if some in power, if some on the Clan council do not truly understand what we are, we will be used and forgotten. What we are...it cannot be forgotten. Some must fully grasp what we sacrifice. We do not want additional grace or praise; we only want understanding.”

“But I am not in power.”

She raised her chin and stared at him with eyes once more as hard as 'Mech armor. He actually preferred them to those awful, pleading eyes. “You will be.” The firmness in her tone brooked no rejection of her statement.

He contemplated what she had just done to him. Almost killed him to make a point. Almost driven him mad so he would know.

“You will achieve your Bloodname, Caden. Regardless of your fall, you cannot be anything but what you are. And a warrior without equal...you decanted for it.”

Caden slowly clawed himself into a standing position.

Sirens began to blare across the compound. He glanced over his shoulder as warriors spilled out of the various tents towards their 'Mechs and vehicles.

So, the time had come.

Caden breathed deeply, felt his strength returning rapidly. Looked at Jewel as he stripped the suit off himself and handed it over. “You will be needing this, I think.”

“Aff, Star Captain.” Had he seen a twinkle in her eyes, or just imagined it? She had used his first name in return. Were they back to square one or had something deeper occurred?

“How about we throw some dead snakes off York once more, and then I might worry about a Bloodname?” To his utter shock, such words did not hurt at all.

“Aff, Star Captain.” Now he was sure—there had been something in her eyes.