MEEE WARRIOR 5



A MECHWARRIOR 5: CLANS ORIGINS STORY HIDDENDESTINY RANDALL N. BILLS

HIDDEN DESTINY

RED STONE CITY DROPPORT BONE-NORMAN TRELLSHIRE, LYRAN COMMONWEALTH 14 JUNE 3046

The sun crested the craggy badlands in the distance, its friendly yellow light bursting from rocky chains and cascading down twisted slopes in a bright flood of rejoicing that the night had been banished once more.

Precentor Vincent Dupont stood tall in his white uniform, ignoring his small potbelly that he never quite managed to vanquish. He breathed in the fresh but alien scents with a chest-expanding effort—the wafts from the deep deserts already bringing rising heat and grit—and then let it out explosively, chuckling.

Reading too much ancient literature again? He could almost hear his Chandra's voice chiding, despite the more than four hundred and fifty light years that separated him from their home on Terra.

I've traveled to over a hundred star systems, and yet that Terran-like light... Visions of pale blue eyes twinkling as she worked her garden sparked. Beauty within beauty.

A *thump* undulated through the ground, nearly vibrating his teeth, as the 75-ton *Black Knight* trod heavily across the DropPort tarmac and began walking up the ramp of the towering ball of metal that was a *Union*-class DropShip. The thirteen-point-five-meter-tall 'Mech strode inside the cargo door as though it was a human stepping inside a large, mobile building.

Statistics of the DropShip surged forward: *Introduced in 2708. Eighty-one-point-five meters in diameter and standing seventy-eight meters tall. Massing 3,600 tons, Fuel...burn-days...safe thrust.* The numbers ran as a subroutine in the back of his mind; the result of a lifetime of study and dedication. After all, the *Knox* was one of *his* ships. In fact, he should already be at the nadir jump point of the Bone-Norman system, as all three vessels of this Explorer Corps expedition were under his command. Especially as the *Golden Hind*, a *Buccaneer*-class DropShip, had already lifted off and begun its multi-day burn toward their JumpShip several hours ago. But he always preferred to be the last man off soil of a launching point for any expedition.

"The peace of Blake be with you," a soft voice interrupted.

Vincent clenched his teeth, absently running fingers through his still thick, shoulder-length white hair as he turned. He took a moment to calm his nerves as he looked past the interloper to the herculean rock jutting out of the ground beyond the tarmac, with Red Stone City desperately clinging to its side as though the outcropping would protect it from the ravages of the harsh deserts beyond, or the predations of pirates from the Periphery.

After all, the Bone-Norman system sat at the edge of the Inner Sphere, the border at which the powers of the Archon of the Lyran Commonwealth could still claim fealty and offer protection. Mostly. Beyond lay chaos, danger, and death. What's more, despite his crew including some of the finest ComStar technicians available and triple the standard repair parts, they'd be traveling through dozens of uninhabited systems for what could be years. If their Kearny-Fuchida hyperspace drive failed, they'd be stranded forever, facing starvation and eventual death.

And yet, it's where we're going?! To find...what's out there! That excitement ameliorated harsher thoughts as his eyes found hers; such blackness within the diminutive woman standing in front of him in a similar, crisp, white uniform.

"Precentor Bradford," he said, his tone as it should be. Calm, respectful.

"Are you ready to find Primus Sims' visions of our destruction?" she asked.

"I'm surprised you didn't leave on the *Hind*," she continued, inflection still as flat as the planed tarmac.

Her dirty-brown, short-cropped hair waved in the growing strength of the wind, while her small mouth and dark, beady eyes remained thin and stretched. *I bet she's never smiled.* Pale blues sparkled. *Or seen beauty.*

"This is the first time we've directly served together, commander," he finally said. "But I'm always the last man of my command off soil."

She canted her head, as though inspecting something strange and unusual, though her cold, freckled face revealed nothing. "The Blessed Blake embraced liturgy for ComStar. I am pleased to see you embrace that further in every aspect of your life."

He couldn't respond for a moment, taken aback at her misreading of the situation, much less the lecturing tone. *Just tradition, lass. Just tradition.* But though he nearly said that out loud, he managed to keep his usual grousing behind sealed lips. *You've never been pleased at anything in your life.*

He'd never met one of her kind that had.

"After you, Precentor," he finally said, sweeping his hands towards the waiting DropShip. She inclined her head slightly, as though taking her due, and walked past with steady strides. There were no markings on her uniform that set her apart from himself in any way, beyond the fact that while he commanded the ships, she held mission command authority.

But he knew the look. The smooth, danger-filled walk. The head always moving, to catch every angle. And that fanaticism, buried—almost—behind calculating, black eyes. Decades in the service, and he knew the look of a ROM agent by now. The internal and external security force of his Order that had made entire Great Houses dance to their tune.

And I'm heading out into the unknown, with one perched on my shoulders. Blake's Blood, Chandra, what have I gotten myself into?

He finally followed, last man off soil, as always.

X235-A2			
UNKNOWN SYSTEM			
DEEP PERIPHERY			
30 NOVEMBER 3046			

Precentor Arabella Bradford watched the holovid tank at the center of the *Merchant*-class JumpShip command

bridge. Despite the recent emergence back into real-time from the 27.9 light-year space-folding jump, the blinking lights across consoles demanding procedural attention were ignored.

Instead, the bridge's entire crew—both the circle of technicians spread around her horizontally, and those inverted above her head at mirrored stations—gaped at the holodisplay spinning in all its glory in their midst.

"Blake's Blood," Precentor Dupont breathed into the silence of the deck bridge. "That would explain why the calculations took so long to finalize for our jump."

She wasn't a scientist, though such things were intriguing. But even she couldn't tear her gaze away to see if the reverence in the man's voice was for the use of that sacred name, or what hung in the air in front of them. He wasn't a bad commander. The recent months let her know he was extremely capable. But he lacked appropriate...decorum. Dedication. *I'll speak with him again later.*

In the meantime, they all feasted on the visual before them.

A miniscule sense of blackness surrounded by an accretion disk of intensely bright light, spiraling at different speeds, filled the holovid. The twin stars of this system trailed long tails of light that spun off their coronas, spiraling into that disc. Despite the fact that this was only a holographic representation of what existed over a dozen AU below their position in real-space, it was bright enough to hurt the eyes, causing them to squint. Almost as though even the display couldn't craft a visualization of reality that wouldn't damage human vision.

The computer spat out spatial coordinates, distances, masses, and velocities. She took them in, but could barely keep up with the details. She cocked her head. *Fascinating*.

"Sir, were the calculations correct?" the ship's XO asked.

Arabella frowned as she looked at the woman. *A* shaking voice is unbecoming for someone in command.

"Jaxon," Precentor Dupont said. "Jaxon," he said again, voice filled with Command.

The overweight man shook his head before responding. "Sorry, sir." She watched him impassively as his fingers flew across the keyboard. "Yeah. No gravity stresses outside of parameters. Our distance is safe. But probably two weeks to recharge, if we're lucky."

She narrowed her eyes as the man's eyes stole back to the holovid. It was like nothing they'd ever seen before, true. But duty was duty. *Another one to watch*.

"Hot damn!" Precentor Dupont yelled, slapping his hand on the command chair that floated in the microgravity. The sounds echoing and bouncing and mingling with humming monitors and exhaled breathes from a dozen bodies.

Will I ever become used to such exuberance? But the tension eased from the bridge in postures loosed,

vanishing frowns, and unclenched fists. Not many men could do that with two words. He could be of much use...

"Now that's a sight I'd never thought I'd see," Vincent continued, excitement liming every word. "A micro black hole. Well, no planetary run here, people. But we've got two weeks to suck up every bit of data we can on this astronomical event. That's why we're here!"

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9 APRIL 3047	9 APRIL 3047				

Vincent fumed as the ROM agent continued the negotiations.

"We're grateful for any information you have concerning other denizens of the Deep Periphery," Precentor Bradford said. She faced partially away from Vincent her shoulder-length hair veiling her face—across the table from this strange woman wearing bright, unusual looking clothing, and bearing a sigil on her breast (uniform?) of an old, tall-ship silhouette against a red/ orange sea and setting sun. He didn't recognize it at all.

"ComStar is well aware of the Hanseatic League," Arabella continued, "and the powerful mercantile empire your ruling council has carved out of these barren stars. You are to be commended."

Some of ComStar knew about this league. He stretched his neck, feeling the tension all the way to his toes, looking away from the rather ramshackle table, fingers unconsciously scratching several days' growth on his chin. Finding a more ramshackle room half-filled with traders from a dozen worlds; in a ramshackle building that was an overgrown shed-become-inn-becometrading-house; in the middle of a large, hard-beaten gravel flat region perhaps a kilometer on its side that operated as a central cargo station and clearing house for trading between various systems in this sector of the Deep Periphery. Just enough room to allow two DropShips at a time. They'd been warned off trying to bring more than one. To keep the peace, they said. Ha!

"And we be most aware of the Adepts of the ComStar," the local replied, head inclining as though in respect.

Despite the thick accent and odd phrasing, they readily understood one another. *Because we've been* dealing *with them?!* A thirty-world empire half a thousand light-years out where there should be nothing but hardscrabble serfs and degenerate tyrants lording over a few broken down BattleMechs, and he'd been told *nothing* of it!

What am I the commander of, if they keep this from me? He'd always struggled with the pervasive secrecy of ComStar, generally finding it got in the way of progress. But he put up with it because they let him explore the stars. But this? This was crazy. It's our mission to find what's out here. And come to find out, other teams already knew whole swaths of this Coreward sector of the Deep Periphery! He ignored pale blue tsking eyes as he ground his teeth in frustration. The other woman delicately set a computer storage cube upon the table. "This be our current understanding of systems," she continued, pulling his attention back to the table; her grey eyes were flat and determined. "For nearly one hundred light years from this point."

Vincent's eyebrows nearly climbed up to his graying hairline. If that were true—*if*—it would be invaluable knowledge to add to their database. *Provided we don't already have it*. He closed his eyes, noting the bitterness. He refused to accept that in his command. *Including myself*. If true, it would mean they could turn in a whole new direction, however. He opened his eyes. *Perhaps where previous crews have* not *already explored*.

"I have access to considerable funds. A gift can be arranged for your august ruling council," Precentor Bradford responded, the cool confidence in her voice easily the match of this expert trader.

The woman raised a hand and waggled her fingers in a strange pattern. "We care not for your ComStar weights. It be no value here amongst our systems."

"We have long-term trade agreements with other Periphery entities, we could—"

The woman waggled her fingers once more. "Ours be better."

Precentor Bradford slowly canted her head.

Those were never going to work and you knew it. You placed them first to let her believe she had the better bargaining power. What are you going to give her that she cannot resist?

"I have a Star League-era *Sentinel* BattleMech. It will be yours," she said softly.

For the first time in the hours-long meeting, Vincent watched emotion flicker in the woman's eyes. *And the hook is set. She's good. But Arabella's better.*

It took him a moment to realize he'd thought of her by her first name.



Ten minutes later, they strode across the gravel towards the *Knox*, ignoring the curious stares from the gaggle of people surging through the trading area. Precentor Bradford cradled the cube in the crook of her arm. *All ramshackle*.

"I assume you want me to switch out the *Sentinel*'s advanced weaponry for lower-tech substitutes?" he said. "I got a good look at their 'Mech guard. They won't know the difference. Their *lostech* is not as bad as some, but bad."

"Already done."

Ha! Just like the trick Primus Mori pulled against the entire Draconis Combine before the War of 3039. I guess if works well, keep using it. He vacillated between respect that she'd come into this negotiation so well prepared, and anger that she'd given orders to his crewman without informing him. How could she sound as though she's spent her usual ten minutes lecturing on geopolitics and subterfuge in just two words! "You could've told me about the Hanseatic League," he continued, pushing away such thoughts. "Have we traveled anywhere we didn't know already?"

"We've tagged numerous systems not in any ComStar databank, Precentor," she responded. "Our mission is still very much a success. And will continue to be one."

He gritted his teeth, trying to keep his voice level. Realizing in all the long months of their voyage so far, he'd never once heard a deviance in her pitch. *Stupid, inhuman ROM.*

"And why wasn't I told?" he asked one last time as they neared the ramp of their DropShip and he swung his fist in the air to let the crew known to start preparations for lift-off.

She gave him one of her extra inscrutable looks and marched onto the ramp first, as he waited to be the last off soil. *Right. Need to know. Always...need...to...know.*

X558-B3 UNKNOWN SYSTEM DEEP PERIPHERY 27 OCTOBER 3047

"Death unto you. You are denied my domain!"

The words were screamed at Arabella above the sounds of weapons fire as the nearly frothing little man fell back, his guards trying to protect the dictator. She calmly backed away, ignoring the wet, cold mist settling everywhere, a pistol she kept secreted away now in hand as the negotiations collapsed into anarchy.

Something large moved in the heavy jungle that covered whole swaths of this planet, before a huge tree shuddered and fell, revealing a lumbering BattleMech. It was covered in moss and vines, gaping holes where armor plating had long ago been torn away, and one of the arms hung limp, myomer muscle showing through more holes.

Arabella was an expert in a wide field of studies, including every known BattleMech design ever fielded. And the horrible, dilapidated state of the beast caused long seconds to pass, in which time it raised its right arm and directed a particle projector blast against their DropShip three hundred meters behind them. The azure beam lashed out, leaving after-images momentarily burned onto retinas, but swept wide of the mark.

Small-arms weapons fire continued between the crewmen she'd adopted as guards, and the disheveled members of the tyrant's "court." She snorted at the ridiculousness. Another world they'd found—not even here long enough to discover what they called this system—populated by a few thousand souls, lorded over by a trumped-up king with access to a single, ancient BattleMech that gave him unassailable power.

Gladiator. As the smell of ozone wafted through the clearing and the bright flash of pistol laser fire lit the

heavy undergrowth around their position, she finally dug up the reference. One of the very first BattleMechs ever built. Five hundred years ago. *How long have these people been out here?*

"Precentor Bradford," Precentor Dupont's voice spoke in her ear-comm. "Um...do you wish us to return fire? I'm fearful of civilian casualties."

She was far enough away the odds of small-arms fire striking here were now minimal. And if that 'Mech managed to actually hit their position, she'd resign her commission. Still, if there were real trouble, the man should be willing to make sacrifices. They may be scientists, but they are still ComStar. I will need to increase my efforts to strengthen his...dedication.

A large explosion behind caused her guards to jump, but she looked over her shoulder without breaking stride. The *Gladiator* had attempted to fire its PPC once more, but obviously the capacitors had finally failed after such terrible decades (centuries?) of maintenance, and the entire gun and most of the arm had blown off, the 'Mech listing and already falling to slam through the heavy trees toward the verdant ground.

"As you can see, Precentor, there is no need. We should prepare for liftoff." She could see her "guards" eye her with incredulity that she'd never ducked nor broken stride. She eased her pistol back into its hidden holster. I'll need to continue my work with them as well.

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1 MAY 3048

"-The Primus promulgated the Blessed Blake's mandate of retaining balance within the Inner Sphere and attempting to keep high technologies from the hands of the Great Houses that would only use it for more death and war. The audacity of the Dragon, combined with the Primus' foresight in gifting Theodore Kurita BattleMechs, kept the Federated Commonwealth from crushing House Kurita during the War of 3039."

After close to two years of Arabella's droning instructions—as though endless lecturing would increase his crew's dedication; although it had for some, who now followed her around like sheep—he'd learned the trick of seeming attentive while completely ignoring her words.

Vincent watched the holodisplay, absently scratching his full beard. The stupid thing was annoying, but somehow he'd found himself trapped in a self-imposed contest. If she's going to grow her stupid hair into a giant braid, I'll match her. At least in this. He tried ignoring that last thought. It grew harder and harder.

"But mark my words," she droned, "there will need to be future re-balancing. House Davion and Steiner simply grow too powerful, and must be kept in check."

He nodded absently, grunting as though in agreement. He'd tried having a conversation once, bringing up that reading between the lines of the Order's records seemed to imply it was Toyama, Blake's successor, that had radicalized ComStar and forged them on a path of "keeping the Inner Sphere in line." But before he'd finished his first sentence, the dark gleam in her eye let him know he'd walked too close to a line that could be very dangerous for any ComStar personnel. He'd paid for that for months as he'd eased her most of the way off his back. But he knew she'd never forget or forgive his apparent lapse of faith.

"Precentor." A voice broke across the comm, blessedly silencing Arabella. "We're approaching the commander's bunk." Vincent stared avidly at the display—a video feed of a camera mounted on the lead marine commanding the expedition on the derelict JumpShip they'd discovered upon entering this system.

"Proceed, Adept Vess," Vincent responded. As they approached, he could just see the outline, long-faded, on the hatch, of a star system, with nine planets. A long whistle, from Jaxon, echoed on the bridge. "Terran Hegemony. My head. Half a thousand years old. I had no idea they'd sent any explorations out this far."

"Precentor," Technician Jula broke in on another line. "We believe the KF drive blew a helium seal, which is likely what stranded them."

"Confirmed, Adept," he responded.

They watched as the door opened to the commander's billet, and they found what they expected after so many others. A desiccated, frozen human body, with a hole drilled through the forehead. The crew had killed themselves in place of starving, as there was no planet in this system that could support any type of life.

He shuddered. This exploration — despite the haranguing of Arabella — had been the highlight of his career. But he couldn't help thinking of a familiar pair of pale blue eyes. I hope this isn't my end. I have to get back to my Chandra...

X104-C6				
UNNAMED SYSTEM				
DEEP PERIPHERY				
27 SEPTEMBER 3048				

"Blake's Blood!" Precentor Dupont said, voice almost lost in the proximity alert klaxon's blaring the length of the JumpShip.

Bile rose in the back of his throat, and the fear on the bridge slicked his skin. Less than half an hour since they'd arrived into this unnamed system, and a wing of aerospace fighters were streaking toward them. In their two years of explorations, they'd only once before run into an aerospace fighter, a craft venting air and fuel as it barely clawed its way into the upper atmosphere in a vain attempt to stop their insertion trajectory. But *ten* fighters, already at the jump point?

He tapped the console again, bringing up a close-up of one of the fighters. Gleaming, with strange, unknown markings. More crazy—the computer tried to tag the design, and kept flipping between a *Stingray* and *Spad*. But the strange craft wasn't either.

"Precentor," a trembling voice broke his concentration. He glanced at Jaxon. "We've got a JumpShip our sensors didn't initially pick up."

"What?! Show me."

The deep-range scan brought up a fair display, despite the distance involved. As he watched, a DropShip slowly disengaged, and begin a high-speed burn toward them.

The two flights of aerospace fighters unleashed a fusillade of laser fire in a tight formation that flashed mere meters in front of the bridge of the JumpShip, then they flashed past. He watched them effortlessly flip end-over and begin a burn to slow down and begin another pass.

"You have to deploy our fighters," Arabella said, voice cold and utterly controlled, as it always was.

"Are you insane?" he said. He closed his eyes momentarily, knowing he'd pay for that.

"What?" Somehow her face seemed even colder.

Vincent stabbed his fingers at the holodisplay as the computer also failed to tag the JumpShip. "Those are fighters we cannot designate. And that's a JumpShip we do *not* know."

For once, she didn't seem to catch his meaning. The bile rose further, and the full import of the moment crashed around him, the klaxon still bellowing its warning of danger into their ears. "We are the guardian of Star League technology. And yet even we have lost so many advances as the centuries of warfare have ground the universe down. But here, *thirteen hundred light-years* from the edge of the Inner Sphere, we suddenly find a star vessel that appears brand new, that we've never seen before?!"

She slowly cocked her head. *She got it.* He glanced back at those strange markings, and the evidence of high technology where there should be none. A superstitious premonition danced across his skin until the hair on his arms was standing upright. *Could it be?* He shook his head at such silliness, cleared his throat to keep it firm.

"All hands. Prepare to be boarded."

UNNAMED DROPSHIP DEEP PERIPHERY 29 SEPTEMBER 3048

Blood streamed out of Arabella's mouth, down her chin and splattered across her naked breasts and stomach as she swam back up out of haze of interrogation drugs and spit out a tooth. The copper tang reminded her of training from years ago, while the lacerations and bruises across her skin screamed for attention. She ignored it all, standing up straighter to alleviate aching muscles, holding tight to the strips of nylon that bound her arms above her head in the small cell. "Is that all you can summon?" She was trying to get them to talk. To dig out their secrets. She remembered voices in the depths of the drugs, but nothing since. A vibration through her feet let her know they were under thrust. On a DropShip, then? Likely heading to the planet with their captives?

The monster in front of her nodded, as though in respect. He (it?) was the only person she'd seen since the shocking boarding, with giant armored infantry tearing their way through the hatch. She'd spent a lifetime mastering any fear, and dedicating herself to the cause of ComStar power. But as those mechanical beasts entered the bridge, the first wash of fear in long years weakened her resolve. And now this...creature. Certainly man-shaped, but...*easily 2.3 meters and probably 175 kg. You could make four of me out of it. Is it even human?*

Another woman entered, shaven head, single-suit, only that strange dagger-star insignia on the collar. The beast nodded to the newcomer, obviously ready to use Arabella's body as a punching bag again if directed.

"The Khan wishes to know how you resisted the drugs so well." The eyes and tone demanded instant obedience. The high technology evident in the ship; the strange ranks and images—the leaping cat she saw on bulkheads as she managed to sneak looks from behind her blindfold; it all spoke of power.

Immense power.

What have we discovered? Visions come to life?

Won't talk. Not yet. Power only respects power. But then...we'll see.

The woman cocked her head, almost as a mirror of Arabella's own mannerism. "No. I can see you are not broken yet." That same respectful nod, as though it was worthy to stand up to such pain.

My ROM masters never respected me for my strength. They only demanded it.

Arabella gritted her teeth as the shadow of the beast fell across her once more.

UNNAMED DROPSHIP		
DEEP PERIPHERY		
30 SEPTEMBER 3048		

It shouldn't take this long. Is the numbness spreading faster? Please work faster.

Vincent floated. In horror, he remembered endless truths and secrets of ComStar and the Great Houses spilling from his lips. He'd talked for hours after they had beaten and then drugged him. He could still smell the vomit caked in his beard as he floated further away.

I'm sorry, my Chandra. I betrayed my oaths. Others think I take them lightly. But you know, my Chandra. You know. I've held out some of the most important details. But they'll have it from me. I have to have something to hold onto. Something that remains mine. His hands started to buck against the cords he'd tied with sheets as the weight of the DropShip bunk on his neck continued to press down, and primal survival instincts demanded flight or fight. But this one last thing he could accomplish. He was sure Arabella would already have killed herself. This one last thing he could match her in.

Pale blue eyes greeted him in the oncoming blackness...

SMOKE JAGUAR COMMAND MOUNT SZABO, JAGUAR PRIME HUNTRESS, KERENSKY CLUSTER 3 OCTOBER 3048

Khan Leo Showers finished watching the interrogation recordings as his saKhan stood beside him. "This is all of it? There have been no more deaths?" he said, deep voice filling the office.

The annoyance on saKhan Weaver's face spoke of a Trial of Grievance for allowing such an invaluable resource to be wasted. "None. And I believe there may even be some good candidates for bondsmen. One in particular is surprisingly...pliant, yet resilient and dedicated. Perhaps the heart of a Smoke Jaguar is there."

He nodded, leaving such things to her capable hands. "And your thoughts?"

"This is...unexpected," she said after a long pause staring at the blank screen.

The understatement of the century. He heaved out of the chair, mane of black hair rustling with the speed, and then stood in the center of his small office buried in the depths of Mt. Szabo.

"This...it is more precious than the finest *giftake* any warrior has seized from a battlefield," he said, light-green eyes burning as he looked beyond his saKhan to new vistas he could now see. "This ComStar vessel. This *Outbound Light*...our best understanding of the Inner Sphere since the traitorous Dragoons fell silent. It will shift the balance of power. We have here the means of defeating the *stravag* Wardens in the Grand Council, and finally marching to war. The Great Father left a collapsed Star League and entrusted us with the Hidden Hope. Which will become *our* destiny.

"The Clans shall return to the Inner Sphere, and with our feet on their necks, raise the flag of the Star League once more!"

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BATTLETECH

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THE INVASION BEGINS









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