

Growing Up

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Lances of brilliant, gem-colored energy flashed across the field, creating infrequent strobing patterns against the night—a deadly light show, set to the erratic tune of electric hums and cracks of ionized air.

Louder roars accompanied the trails of phosphorescent tracers that followed these beams, raking armor and chewing up soft earth with devastating flashes of golden sunfire and the sparks of cascading metal.

Their thunderous reports nearly masked the thumping strides of the BattleMechs that continued to unleash such devastation upon one another. All three engines of war—two BJ-1 *Blackjacks* chasing a lone CN9-AL *Centurion*—lurched along, pouring withering fire into each other at less than a hundred meters' distance.

Well, maybe not so withering.

Though the autocannon rounds consisted of “dum-dums” and tracers that could scarcely scratch a paint job, and the laser fire was even less effective in their de-powered mode, the effects of each hit was studiously magnified by the BattleMechs' onboard computers. The techs would have a lot less repair work to worry about after all was said and done.

But to MechWarrior Trent Hasseldorf, the concerns of Major Kirkpatrick's technicians was the farthest thing from his mind. Wincing as a swarm of medium laser and autocannon fire tore into the chest and flank of his borrowed *Centurion*, he struggled against the violent lurch that the computers threw into his stride, mimicking the effect of losing over a full ton of armor in half a second. Jerking against the five-point harness that bit painfully into his left shoulder, and fighting the controls to keep the 'Mech upright, he succeeded.

But just barely. It took a wild swing from the *Centurion's* weaponless left arm to keep the machine on its feet. Even then, the fifty-ton biped wobbled for a step or two in a half-crouch.

A taste of blood accompanied the lance of pain as he accidentally bit his cheek. Sucking back a curse, the stench of sweat, grease, and ozone—all lingering remains from a hundred and more past

battles—assailed him anew, triggering his gag reflex again. And the nagging feeling that the generations of warriors who had sat in this cockpit before him could somehow see his flailing incompetence, and were barely able to contain their laughter.

At least one warrior from the here and now joined them, snickering over the open comm line and echoing in Trent's helmet speakers.

"Didn't they teach you *anything* at the Nagelring?" taunted his opponent in the *Blackjack*. His face lit up one of Trent's secondary monitors, sneering visibly even through the bulk and narrow viewport of his black-painted neurohelmet. Snarling back at the image, but keeping his eyes focused on the heads-up displays, Trent fought back the urge to reply, even as his own thoughts betrayed him.

He's right. Closing with this brat wasn't the smartest thing I've ever done...

The irony of the moment was not lost on Trent, even as a second paired burst of autocannon fire from the other *Blackjack's* Whirlwind-Ls chipped away at his right arm: Here he was, one "daddy's boy" facing another like some kind of rite of passage. The prize: an open lance command slot in Kirkpatrick's Bandit Killers, some two-bit merc outfit that nobody had ever even heard of before.

Nobody, that is, but whichever agents in the LCAF had time to dig through the real dregs on Galatea.

And one Trent Hasseldorf—the down-on-his-luck MechWarrior whose background might have earned him a cockpit seat, but not necessarily a command.

Damon Kirkpatrick, the CO's son—and a cocky little worm to boot, from Trent's instant assessment—had, of course, sniffed out the noble birth in a heartbeat. It had been his idea to put the "Elsie blueblood" to the test when a lance command slot opened up. Trent was sure of it.

That Major James Kirkpatrick had agreed told Trent two things: First, he wasn't the kind who gave a lance command to just anybody—even his own son—without a challenge. And second, perhaps more importantly, he wasn't sure about the "Elsie blueblood" either.

And so here they were, trading simulated volleys in a very real contest of tactics and skill, one that had winnowed a pair of short-

handed lances—three BattleMechs per side—to three machines stumbling about with simulated damage.

I need some distance! Trent finally decided as he slammed the *Centurion* into reverse. The second *Blackjack* immediately pressed forward, but a flash of heavy laser fire from Trent's right arm Angst-L tore deep into the forty-five ton 'Mech's left leg, followed by two missiles from his torso-racked ten-flight, unleashed as a desperate afterthought. The *Blackjack* staggered as its leg froze in place, then stumbled clumsily to one side, its quartet of medium lasers streaking brilliant but useless beams of scarlet light into the night sky.

Leg destruction! About time!

"Not bad, Ace!" Damon's scornful voice erupted from the speakers again. "But you got the wrong guy!"

Once again, Trent fought back the urge to respond. Could not allow it. Could not let this brat bait him. Not again. But once more, his mind spoke up.

This is my last chance. Put up or shut up time!

"*Verdammt!*" he cursed aloud. "I didn't come this far to let some *arschloch* like you ruin everything!"

"Sticks and stones, Blueblood!" Damon taunted, punctuating his remark with another burst of autocannon fire across the *Centurion's* torso. On Trent's BDA monitor, indicators flashed and alarms buzzed. The cockpit temperature spiked along with it, flushing his cheeks with more than his impotent rage.

Armor breach, three heat sinks ruptured! Damnit! Damnit! Damnit!

Continuing his backward march, Trent tried to focus on Damon's silhouette through the haze of heat and building rage, triggering lasers and missiles without waiting for the crosshairs to flash gold. A wave of waste heat from the *Centurion's* engine promptly enveloped him, surging up from the floor below in a blast of searing air. The scalding wave drove the wind from his lungs and replaced all his thoughts with the horrible memories of another fire—a *real* fire—that had transformed a far more familiar cockpit into an oven not very long ago...

"...*Scheiße!* Those aren't fireworks! Damn it, form up!"

Alrakis was supposed to be a cushy, high-profile job, Father said. Trent remembered the old man's words well, said with that same mix of condescension and righteousness he used whenever he considered the topic beneath him. "Take the assignment, my boy. It'll be a fine feather in your cap, even if you don't get that 'trigger time' you're always going on about."

Trent remembered how stupid he thought the old man was, talking like he wasn't ready for combat. What was all that training for, then? What was the point of the exercises? The drills? Why put him in a 'Mech if he wasn't ready? Why send him to the front, even the "tamed" front?

Then the shooting started.

Missiles and autocannon fire roared across the grounds at the height of what should have been a real spectacular celebration. Half of the Twenty-third Arcturan Guard was out there, Trent remembered, with local guides promising them a party "like you've never seen." Someone still had to man the tandem patrols alongside the Alrakan militia, though, and Trent was the unlucky one whose hulking eighty-ton monster made the perfect target when the local militia turncoats turned their guns his way.

Trent remembered his throat going dry as the first shells slammed against his *Zeus's* armor, rocking the 'Mech back with ten times the force of any simulator pod he'd ever climbed into in the Nagelring.

Unprepared, his hands slipped at the controls. His stomach did somersaults as an otherwise pristine assault 'Mech—a veteran of countless missions over the centuries—slammed to the ground from little more than a proverbial "tap on the shoulder."

His helmet crashed back against the seat. Stars swam before his eyes. A control panel blew out, showering his arm with sparks and shrapnel that—while ultimately harmless—only added to the searing pain that ran along his spine, and grappled his skull.

Over the comms, his men panicked right along with him. Someone shouted the warning of incoming fire.

"*Infernos!*"

Trent felt, rather than saw, the impacts. Several loud pops, followed by a whoosh, and suddenly, his cockpit went from a

comfortable warmth to a blazing sauna. Shock made him cry out as frenzied hands reached for the controls to bring the 'Mech back to its feet, hands that did not seem to belong to him any more.

In Trent's memories, the scene played itself out like an unforgettable nightmare, the flames cooking away paint, making his armor glow, his temperature spike, even as he tried to return fire through sensors overloaded by burning gel. Fighting inside a burning cockpit.

Then came the explosions that slammed him forward so hard, he felt the restraints give. The rush of flame-seared air as his canopy blew away of its own accord, and the brutal jolt of ejection. He saw his father's *Zeus* fall away from him, as though he were the disembodied spirit of the dying machine.

Then the final, heart-crushing blast that rippled across the field below and pushed his seat higher...

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...The nightmare memory of failure played out in less than a heartbeat, followed by the admonitions of a father light years distant, disappointed by a son's failure to uphold the family honor, grieving the loss of a family BattleMech, scolding Trent for circumstances no one could predict or control. Then came the counterstrike, the son's rebellion, the resignation, the running away...

A career in ruins over pride, stupid pride.

Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! Trent thought, the taste of blood bitter in his mouth as he sucked in another lungful of sweaty cockpit stench and glared at the shadowy outline of Damon's *Blackjack*—now a shimmering shadow on the hill before him, barely illuminated by Galatea Minor's moonlight. Hot air dried out Trent's eyes to the point where they stung, even as sweat ran down his face and arms.

One spoiled rotten kid versus another, his mind ranted on. *But he wasn't born with the silver spoon! He didn't tell his father off and quit his career in a moment of spite!*

"Awww, come back, Hasseldorf!" Damon's voice snapped off its own shot. "I thought you *wanted* to be a merc? Now that the chips are down, you run?"

Trent blinked. That last one hit hard, and there were his thoughts again, turning on him like always.

See the difference now? He doesn't run away...!

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"...What did you say?"

The look on the elder Hasseldorf's face was incredulous, something that rolled mirth, outrage, and infinite sadness all up in one. For a moment, Trent felt the urge to shrink back—feeling like a teenager again, fearing that inevitable blow. But Father hadn't struck his children in ages, and there were witnesses—family—who hung on his every action now. Trent felt their presence—Mother and Heinrich, both standing in the doorway of the grand library that also served as Father's office in Castle Hasseldorf, like spectators at a magrail wreck.

No, there would be no strike. Not now. Trent had finally landed his own blow against the old man, finally showed the spine everyone said he lacked—said in whispers they thought he never heard.

"You heard me, Father," he said. "I resign my commission. You all but branded me a coward and a failure as far as my commanders were concerned. It would be years before I'd see combat again—!"

"For your own good!"

"I'm not a child any more, Father! What good is my service if I cannot serve?"

Daniel Hasseldorf, Baron von Stuttgart of Kaumberg, glowered for just a moment, spearing Trent with malachite eyes. "And where would you go, then, eh?" he challenged. "Where would you go that would let you see this combat you so crave, with no 'Mech to your name?"

"I am certain there will be *someone*," Trent said, letting the implication hang in the air as his father stood behind his mahogany desk, fingers dancing irritably on its polished surface.

"No son of mine will be a money soldier!"

"You can do nothing about it, Father! Killson's already taken my resignation. Honorable discharge—" he had to scoff "—with exemplary service!"

The older man's voice dipped low, eyes narrowed as his gray-bearded face twisted in contempt. "You're throwing everything away, boy," he growled, "if you go through with this, it will cost you more than a career."

Trent flinched, and somewhere behind him, he heard his brother gasp. It always had to come down to *that*, didn't it?

But his course was set, and he had no choice but to follow it through.

"What good is an inheritance I cannot prove myself able to protect, Father?" he said evenly. "Disown me if you like, but I must do this...!"

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...Alarms wailed as low-power laser and autocannon fire once again raked Trent's *Centurion*, only a dozen meters shy of the copse of native pines he sought for cover. The cockpit lurched and bounced with each hit, the computer sensors recording hits severe enough to throw off the gyros. Meanwhile, the simulated effects of eight off-lined heat sinks poured very real heat into the cockpit, choking off Trent's air, flash-drying sheets of sweat into a flaky crust on his cheeks.

He had lost his lock on the *Blackjack*.

"What's *wrong* with you?" Damon shouted, his voice carrying a slight hint of confusion as Trent continued to fall back under the assault.

So, it comes down to this? Trent's thoughts mocked him once more. *The would-be Baron Hasseldorf, would-be soldier, would-be mercenary officer, bested again, just one 'Mech shy of the brass ring? All to prove what, exactly?*

"No," Trent muttered to the voice. "I must do this..."

He twisted the *Centurion's* torso hard to the left, tracking Damon's lateral movement even as the 'Mech spat back a too-high burst of

autocannon shells, firing now in an almost constant stream. The tactic suddenly made sense to Trent: Damon was confused, trying to circle him rather than lunge for the kill—like a predator, smelling imminent victory, yet still wary of the prey.

Suspecting a trap? Trent almost had to laugh.

His crosshairs finally drifted over the *Blackjack's* heart, and flashed gold at last.

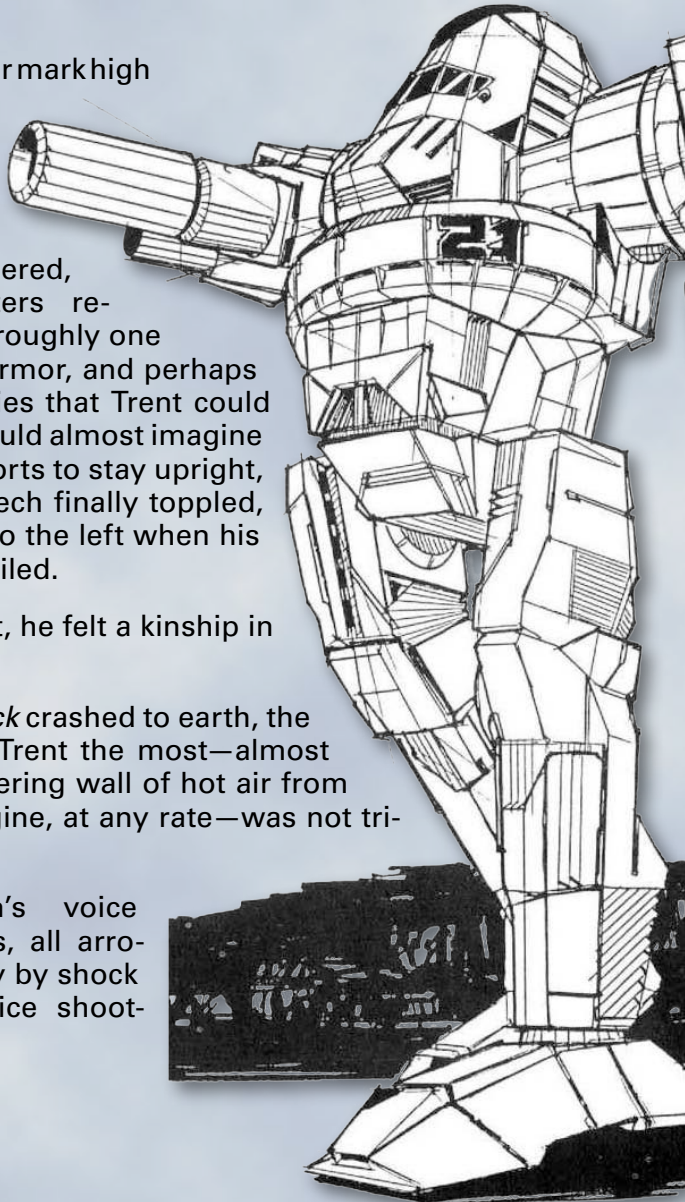
Trent sucked in a breath and thumbed the triggers. A flight of missiles corkscrewed their way toward Damon's 'Mech, following the phantom trails of his large and medium laser bolts.

All three found their mark high on the *Blackjack's* torso, tearing into armor battered by more than half an hour of combat. The *Blackjack* staggered, its battle computers recording the loss of roughly one and a half tons of armor, and perhaps some internal injuries that Trent could only guess at. He could almost imagine Damon's frantic efforts to stay upright, his panic as the 'Mech finally toppled, crashing back and to the left when his efforts ultimately failed.

And for a moment, he felt a kinship in that thought.

When the *Blackjack* crashed to earth, the feeling that struck Trent the most—almost as hard as the blistering wall of hot air from his overworked engine, at any rate—was not triumph, but pity.

"Damn!" Damon's voice croaked in his ears, all arrogance drained away by shock or concussion. "Nice shooting, Elsie."



Trent waited as his lasers cycled and his missile rack reloaded. Despite the raging inferno that made him dizzy, threatened to send him into the blackness of unconsciousness, he waited. His crosshairs remained focused on the fallen machine, but the *Blackjack* did not rise.

Could not rise...

"Thank you," he finally gasped. "Are you okay in there?"

"Gyro's shot, Ace," grumbled back the voice, filled with defeat, but still clutching onto a semblance of dignity.

Would I have taken defeat so gracefully? Trent wondered.

"Guess I should congratulate our new lieutenant, huh?" Damon added.

A massive breath escaped Trent, echoing inside the cramped cockpit as relief finally came to him all at once, reminding him only of his helmet-sore shoulders and the rapidly drying sweat he tasted now on his cracked lips. Still, his mind nagged him.

Victory, yes, but what did I prove?

"Congratulations to both of you," came a new voice, firm and commanding, fatherly—to at least one of the warriors, if not both. After the initial interviews, Trent wondered if he missed that quality in Colonel Kirkpatrick's tone before, or if it were there all along.

"Mister Hasseldorf," the elder Kirkpatrick said, "you're still rough around the edges, but I think you just *might* just make a damned fine officer in my battalion. And, Damon, if you shut your mouth once in a while, you could possibly learn something from this exercise as well."

"Thank you, sir," two voices rang out over the tactical channel as one.

"Okay, boys. Disengage those governors, get back to the barn, and get yourselves cleaned up. Time for debriefing."

Trent let out a heavy sigh as he reached for the switch that would clear away all the simulated damage and restore his *Centurion's* cooling system to tolerable levels again. Closing his eyes for just a moment, his mind drifted one last time to a distant world, and a distant family.

"I've proven I can get here, Father," he whispered finally, so low that his voice did not even echo within the strange cockpit. "On my own. No family favors. No strings attached. All on my own..."

"I've proven that today, I am finally growing up..."