

**Battletech – Like Fine Wine**

By L.D. Murphy

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Klemens leaned over the driver's seat and scanned the dashboard. With the flick of a switch, the Slipper ZX-series hoverwagon's sunroof slid open. A torrent of warm winds rushed after it, whipping through the cabin. Ignoring the chauffeur's ornery grunt, the teenager pulled his head up through the sunroof to better take in the serene countryside. The rolling golden hills glistened in the brilliant sun and the valleys between them bristled with vibrantly blossoming indigo vine shrubs. Visby was just as beautiful as he remembered, but something felt off.

His imagination used to run wild envisioning the adventures one could have in these untapped hinterlands, but it now seemed quaint at best. Perhaps it was to be expected however? After all, how could he ever hope to see the Hanseatic League the same way ever again after spending over a year with his father abroad in the Inner Sphere. Growing up, Bremen IV's Freie Hansteadt seemed like the center of the universe, but touring grandiose mega metropolises of the Successor States made it look like a backwater burg in comparison.

A soft tugging at his shirttails pulled him out of his reverie.

"Please come back inside, Herr Klemens! It is not safe out there! Think of what your father would say." A sniveling voice beseeched below.

With a sigh Klemens acquiesced, lowering himself down into the backseat alongside his overbearingly faithful servant Lenz. As the sunroof slipped shut overhead, Alban, a grim, rugged bodyguard riding shotgun, let out a derisive laugh.

"Isn't safe? From what?"

Lenz glared at the guard, "I would think a man as experienced as yourself kept up on local matters, especially with those savage clans probing our borders!"

"Yeah, and? We're nowhere near that." Alban snorted.

"Precisely. Which means the garrison has left but a paltry skeleton crew behind while they ship off anything they can to fend off those barbarians. So, with the Hanseatic Security Force away, the pirates are bound to be skulking about."

"Pirates? Here?" Alban guffawed, "Come off it, they've no reason to raid these parts. It's the sticks! What are they going to steal? The flowers?"

The teenager stared out the hoverwagon's window, trying his best to block out the ever-squabbling duo, but Alban's words stuck in his mind. Visby really was the sticks, wasn't it? His excitement surrounding what he previously hoped to be a grand return continued to ebb away as the hovercraft snaked around the edge of a large bornhardt. Around the bend his grandfather's vineyard came into view off in the distance.

It rested in a sunlit valley before a wide canyon. To its sides the rolling hills grew larger and steeper till they became sheer cliffs. Flanking the dirt road were innumerable rows of cerulean snapevines, the key ingredient behind his grandfather's Snapion Wine business, stretching out into the hillsides, interrupted by the occasional storehouse or lodging for the field hands.

The sight of a Harvester AgroMech clearing away a small field recaptured his interest. His grandfather taught him how to take that very same mech stomping through the valley over his last visit. His father was utterly furious with the both of them afterwards, but that did little to discourage him from yearning for another go in the cockpit. It might've been woefully pedestrian – or, rather, agrarian – compared to the mechs he spied on his Inner Sphere voyage, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

The hovercraft slowed to a halt as it reached the front of the manor. Eager to escape from the bickering, Klemens hopped out the moment the door opened.

Lenz called out after him, "Not to worry, Herr Klemens, Alban will protect you during your visit until–"

Klemens waved him off, "That will not be necessary. Alban's right, there is nothing to worry about out here and Father could use an extra hand back at the spaceport."

Lenz's face dropped, "Are...are you certain?"

Klemens nodded, "Quite."

A victorious smirk curled the corner of Alban's lip. In truth, he didn't mind the prospect of kicking back at the vineyard for a while babysitting the kid, but he wasn't the type to pass up an opportunity to get one over on Lenz either.

He shook the chauffeur's shoulder, "Right, you heard the boy. Off we go, on the double!"

The hovercraft's doors hissed shut before Lenz could protest. It whipped around in a tight circle and took off back down the hardpacked dirt road from which it came.

Klemens felt like a time traveler looking upon his grandfather's practically medieval manor. The building centered around an octagonal turret adorned with faux-stonework, arrow slit shaped windows, and a heavily faded family crest above the door. The four-story tower was topped with an arched lookout underneath a blue bell-shaped roof. Meanwhile, the western and eastern wings of the estate swooped back from the turret's sides. These wings were plain in comparison, their bare white walls solely garnished with latticework framed double windows.

A small iron dragon's head pierced with a downthrust miniature sword bit down on a loop knocker upon the hardy wooden door, but Klemens knew better than to bother with it. Instead, he walked around to the backside of the chevron-shaped abode. He shielded his eyes

from the bright midday sun as he rounded the corner and looked up at his grandfather's pride and joy.

The Scorpion BattleMech stood with its back to the estate, silently monitoring the canyon further south like a loyal watchdog. Klemens always suspected that his grandfather's guardian was something of an oddity and his interstellar travels only confirmed his suspicions. Its squat quadruped form was nothing at all like the tall humanoid BattleMechs he'd seen throughout his journeys. In fact, it now seemed more like a glorified tank that some madman grafted legs onto than a proper BattleMech.

Moreover, the mechs he witnessed throughout the Inner Sphere were neatly painted in loud striking colors and proudly wore bold insignias. They were glorious, yet imposing knights of their realms. On the other hand, while no mundane IndustrialMech, his grandfather's Scorpion hardly inspired such lofty notions. If the Scorpion could be summed up into a single word, it would be "hodgepodge." Not a lick of paint was left on the mech and each of its bare metal components down to the individual armor panels bore a dissimilar hue. Whether this was due to differing materials, degrees of wear from the elements, or both, he couldn't be sure.

Any emblems it once wore had long since eroded away – unless you counted its battle scars. Klemens wandered around the mech, picking out as many as he could. The sloped panel that rounded alongside the mech's left torso bore a deep pockmark, possibly from a deflected shell. The armor covering the right foreleg's shin was scorched black from some sort of gruesome burn. As he walked underneath, he saw more scrapes on the mech's underbelly than he could count as well as a cluster of rusting shrapnel lodged near a heatsink towards the rear.

He had ogled at the Scorpion whenever he visited his grandfather for as long as he could remember, but he had never once studied the mech this closely before, taking in each minute detail. He felt older, more mature, and proud of it. He wondered what he'd glean topside, but he had already learned his lesson trying to climb up one of the Scorpion's legs once before and had no desire to take a remedial course in a cast again. However, since his grandfather wasn't anywhere underneath the mech that could only mean one thing.

He walked out of the mech's shadow and shouted up, "Guess who's back, Opa Karl?"

After a pause a shadowed head poked out over the side of the mech.

"I know I'm supposed to say, 'My how big you've grown,' but you look so tiny from up here!" The hoarse voice cackled, "Let's fix that."

The head disappeared and, after a few moments, a rope ladder fell over the mech's flank. Klemens took hold of it and worked his way topside. As he clambered over the edge, he caught the familiar image of his grandfather hunched over, his hands buried deep inside an open panel. He looked the same as always, wearing his favorite hideously stained beige coveralls. His tanned, liver spotted bald head was almost as much of a mess of colors as the Scorpion itself.

"One second, almost got it. ...There!" Karl exclaimed as a large air intake vent to his side rattled open.

Karl reached over and clasped a firm hand on his grandson's shoulder. "See? I always said you were my lucky charm! You wouldn't believe what I've gone through to unjam that."

The teen squirmed slightly under his grandfather's grip. The years might have taken their toll on the man's deeply wrinkled face, but it hadn't yet managed to sap his strength.

"Why did you close it in the first place?" Klemens asked.

"Because those moneygrubbing doctors were trying to get me to pony up for a sauna. They said it'd help my poor blood circulation, but what they were trying to charge me was outrageous! That's when your Opa got thinking, as he does," A wily grin spread out from under Karl's bushy white mustache as he continued. "Why not sweat it out inside the Scorpion? Did it plenty of times back in my day, like when I was blindsided by that Mauler on Analsi in '39. Have I ever told you that story before?"

Klemens nodded patiently. Indeed, he had – many, many times.

"They had to peel me out of there after I somehow dragged the ol' gal back to base..."

Karl faltered for a moment as if lost in time before his eyes refocused on Klemens, "Anyway, I thought if I just killed the heat sinks, I'd make my own damn sauna. And it worked too! The only problem was that vent behind you refused to open back up when I was done."

"And *this* is exactly why Father calls you a crackpot, Opa." Klemens chided in a mock lecturing tone.

"Yeah? Well, what else is new? But enough about that, c'mere." Karl drew Klemens in a tight hug. "Let me get a good look at you."

Klemens looked down into his grandfather's kindly smiling face and wondered if there was any truth behind his war stories. It was hard to believe that this short, doting, and exceedingly eccentric geriatric was supposedly once a renowned MechWarrior. Sure, they were standing atop a battle-worn mech, but maybe he just bought it off a washed-up mercenary and made all those tall tales up? He wouldn't put it past his Opa, that was for sure.

"You've still got your Oma's eyes; I wish she could see you now too." Karl mused. "But I'm glad you're back safe and sound. I was worried you and your father would get caught in the crossfire of that blasted civil war. What's the news on that front anyhow?"

Klemens sighed. The Federated Commonwealth Civil War ended long ago, before he was born even – a fact he reminded his grandfather countless times in the past few years. He had since learned it was easier to just go along with it.

"Oh, they sorted it out."

His grandfather nodded, "That's a relief. I've been saying it for years, they shouldn't fight each other when they've got bigger things to worry about. Maybe I should've gone back to visit the old stomping grounds after all – not that your father would've brought me even if I asked. Speaking of which, did he manage to get his hands on those parts I wanted? The oxidizer turbopump might need to be replaced sooner than I expected."

"He did, but it was not cheap nor was he happy about it. He kept ranting about how you keep throwing away your fortunes on that 'useless rattletrap.' His words, not mine." Klemens quickly clarified. "You should expect to get an earful of it when he comes back from the

spaceport tonight. I heard him practicing his tirade several times on the long journey back home.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Karl rolled his eyes. “Anyway, it’s too early in the morning to talk about your stick in the mud father, what do you say we get some breakfast?”

Klemens cocked an eyebrow, “Breakfast? Opa, it’s lunchtime!”

“That so? That means it’s past my naptime.” Karl stifled a yawn. “Guess we need an extra syrupy serving of Kaiserschmarrn to keep your Opa running, don’t we?”

The boy’s face instantly lit up. Feasting upon his grandmother’s signature dish, an ancient family recipe consisting of shredded caramelized pancake bits powdered with sugar and mixed together with various fruits and jams, remained a perennial highlight of his visits. While she wasn’t around to make it herself anymore, the manor’s head chef had almost perfected his recreation of it.

The young man dashed back to the rope ladder and started scrambling down.

“Heel, boy! Heel!” Karl called after him. “Where do you think you’re going?”

Already a few steps down, Klemens froze and shot his grandfather a puzzled look, “To the dining room! Where else?”

“Forgive your Opa for being so old, but it takes me half an hour to get down that ladder these days so I’ve wizened up.” He tapped a finger against his noggin. “Why go down there for a meal, when you can have it brought up here instead?”

The teen was even more bewildered than before, “And how exactly does one get their meals served on top of a BattleMech?”

“By lowering that mech down to the ground. Frau Huette’s gotten pretty good at passing up plates.”

“You really are a nutcase, Opa.” Klemens chuckled.

Then a thought struck him, “Wait! Why didn’t you lower the Scorpion down for me then?”

“You weren’t carrying a steaming hot tray of Kaiserschmarrn were you?” Karl’s voice cracked into laughter.

The joke wasn’t that funny, but his Opa’s joy was irresistible and Klemens found himself laughing alongside him. He racked his mind for a witty retort of his own when the sound of an explosion in the distance silenced the pair at once.

Klemens peered over his shoulder, but the low-slung quad mech was too short to see over the manor. A series of screams erupted from the opposite end of the vineyard.

“Stay put Opa, I’ll find out what’s going on!” Klemens called out, rapidly descending down the ladder.

He hit the ground running, charged up the stairs onto the patio, and burst through the double backdoors. The large well-furnished parlor, usually abuzz with either guests or household

staff, was empty, but he could hear a commotion in the vestibule further ahead. He raced across the hardwood parquet floor into the adjoining room; there servants huddled together in two groups around each of the narrow windows flanking the front door. Rather than push them aside, Klemens grabbed the door's handle and swung it open.

Farmhands were fleeing in every direction from a burning building at the northernmost edge of the property in the shadow of the bornhardt. Thick black smoke plumed high into the sky. Klemens searched for a clue behind what could've caused such a scene, the answer revealed itself as it stepped around the building's silhouette. It was a BattleMech.

He leapt back inside, slammed the door shut, and locked the latch behind him. What good that would do to stop a towering BattleMech never crossed his mind, all he could think about was getting his grandfather to safety. He pushed past the panicked staff fleeing in all directions as he headed back into the parlor. He was halfway through plotting an escape via his grandfather's hovercar in a nearby carriage house when he stopped dead in his tracks.

Outside the tall paned windows, the Scorpion shifted its weight, rose slightly, and began walking. It quickly picked up speed as it rounded the eastern wing of the manor and disappeared out of sight.

Klemens stood there dumbfounded, struggling to process the rapidly devolving situation. Fleeing was out of the question now; he couldn't leave his grandfather behind. The only thing left to do was to call for help, but how? The vineyard was on a remote corner of an underdeveloped continent; there wasn't much in the way of infrastructure out here.

Then he recalled once curiously playing with the dozens of nobs, dials, and buttons on his grandfather's dusty radio setup up in the attic as a child. He whirled towards the nearest staircase. If he could reach the Slipper ZX's communicator maybe Alban would know how to call the local militia for help...*if there even was one.*

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Ember's eyes flickered with delight as an explosion ripped through the burning building.

"Can't take my eyes off you for a damn minute, can I?" Fang grumbled over the comms.

"I just lit this lil' shanty ablaze and BOOM!" She hollered. "Ya think they'll all do that?"

"Holy hell, I saw that from out here! You must've hit one of their fertilizer stores." Scampers chimed in.

"You're missing all the fun as usual, Scampers, ya lazy bastard." Slouch mocked.

Ember pulled her gaze away from the inferno to watch Fang's Wolf Trap and Slouch's Assassin toy with the helpless AgroMech. It clumsily swung the bladed combine attached to its left arm back and forth at the pair in vain.

"Olé!" Slouch cheered, dodging a swipe at the very last second.

The Harvester stumbled off-balance before the Assassin bowled it over with a well-placed kick, sending it crashing into the ground face first. The Wolf Trap's lasers sliced through the downed mech for good measure.

"That'll do it." Fang grunted. "What's the word, Scampers? Any busybodies looking into Ember's fraking smoke signals?"

"Ha! What do they say? 'Burn sale, get it while it's hot?'" Slouch ribbed.

"Nah, I didn't give that hovercar a chance to squeal for help. The coast is clear out here fellas." Scampers reported.

"Good. Dirk, get the APC up here and put the boys to work." Fang ordered.

"Already? C'mon, ain't we gonna at least have some more fun first, boss?" Ember pleaded.

"We secure the goods first, then and *only then* can you torch what remains, freak. Why can't you get that through your sick head?" Fang fumed. "Now stay alert for any wannabe heroes, Cap'n wants a clean job this time."

Ember cursed under her breath as she marched her Firestarter toward the estate. There was so much waiting for her special touch. The buildings, the crops, the fields, they all begged to dance in her precious flames.

Suddenly a gaggle of workers stumbled free of the smoldering structure beside her and ran screaming toward the manor. Ember's heart fluttered. Lighting anything ablaze was a treat, but nothing compared to people. Each reacted differently – many ran about wildly until their legs couldn't carry them any further, others uselessly tried putting out the flames by rolling in the dirt till they fell still, and some crumpled into a heap crying out in pain till their voices gave out. It was a show that never got old.

Ember licked her cracked lips as she pivoted her mech after the fleeing crowd. Savoring every moment, she slowed the Firestarter down to a crawl as it lumbered ever closer to them with each step. Somewhere in the haze she sensed voices on the comms calling out to her, but she paid them no mind. She wouldn't let them ruin this.

The group was practically right underneath her by now, she could step on them if she wasn't careful. Her sweaty palms gripped the fire control stick and leveled one of the mech's massive flamers on the fleshy canvases below. She placed her finger on the trigger just as a blinding light smashed through the cockpit.

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The Firestarter spewed a blazing arc of fire through the sky as the mech toppled over backwards. It hit the ground with a resounding thud.

"OPEN FIRE!" Fang shouted.

Fang and Slouch volleyed their mech's Long-Range Missiles at the Scorpion peering over a hillside further south, but it dropped out of sight before their payloads could make their mark.

"What?! What's happening?" Scampers squawked.

"That 'retired' mech we were supposed to swipe just blew Ember's goddamn head off!" Slouch shot back.

"Shit! This was supposed to be a quick smash n' grab. Nobody said nothing about a *real* fight!" Scampers spluttered, "Let's cut our losses and—"

"Shaddup and get over here now!" Fang cut in, "If we split tail between our legs with nothing to show 'sides a missing mech the cap'n will have our heads. We're bringing that Scorpion back in pieces if we have to."

"Watch out!" Slouch cried.

Fang caught glimpse of the Scorpion's autocannon peeking over the hill fixing on his position. He twisted his mech aside and lurched towards the cover of the bornhardt. A grievous blast slammed into the ground where the Wolf Trap once stood.

"MOVE!" Fang yelled.

Slouch snapped a shot at the Scorpion with his Assassin's arm-mounted laser as he rushed toward Fang, but he only managed to scorch the hillside.

"Can't get a bead on him!" Slouch griped.

"What are we supposed to do now?" Dirk yelped.

"I-I'm coming, w-where is he?" Scampers stuttered.

"One at a time, idiots!" Fang barked, "He's tucked himself between the hills, sending the coordinates now. Get behind him and light him up from above, Scampers. Dirk, you need to haul that APC over here and blast everything you've got into this hotshot. I'm making a break for that barn guns blazing. Slouch, once he's focused on me, charge straight for that hill and jump in behind him."

The Wolf Trap sped around the opposite side of the bornhardt. He squeezed off his lasers, the beams knifed through a nearby barn house's upper floor, blasting out the other side. That was bound to get this guy's attention.

Fang readied his Wolf Trap's autocannon as the opposite side of the hill came into view. Then he saw it, the Scorpion hung low to the ground lying in wait. Still running, Fang struggled to center his bobbing crosshair on the mech – it was such a narrow target. He steadied a bead on the Scorpion when the muzzle of its autocannon flashed.

He reeled as a blast rocked the Wolf Trap, but he managed to keep the mech charging toward the barn. He needed cover and he needed it now. He skimmed the damage report scrawling across the computer terminal. Just as he feared, the mech took a heavy blow to its right torso, but the armor held. A sigh of relief escaped his lips.



Slouch radioed in, “Jumping in, watch this!”

Fang opened his comms to order Slouch to stand down until Scampers was in position, but it was too late. The Assassin bounded over the northern hill, landing directly behind the Scorpion as it tried to line up another shot on the Wolf Trap. The Assassin’s rocket launchers surged into the Scorpion’s backside point blank, throwing it forward onto its knees as the detonations ripped through its rear armor.

Slouch whooped victoriously over the comms, “Ya didn’t see that coming, did—”

But he was cut short when the Scorpion returned the favor with a surprise of its own. Springing back to its feet, the Scorpion bucked its hindlegs into the Assassin, knocking it flat on its back.

Fang couldn’t believe his eyes as the Scorpion proceeded to stomp the Assassin into the ground underfoot. A target lock indicator chimed in his ear, but he held his fire. He didn’t trust either his Long-Range Missiles nor his aim enough to not accidentally catch Slouch in the crossfire. Instead, throttled the Wolf Trap forward to close the distance.

Scamper’s Dart crested the nearby hillside, “I’m here, lasers hot!”

The Dart skidded to a halt before the canyon’s sheer drop and peered down into the chaos below, “Get the hell outta there, Slouch!”

The Assassin wrenched its laser upwards and fired at the Scorpion. The beam bore into the quadruped’s underbelly superheating a hole into the ferro-fibrous armor plating underneath. Unphased, the Scorpion continued its assault. Another leg came smashing down, stamping the Assassin’s arm back into the dirt.

This was going to hell and fast. It’d only get worse if Fang didn’t act now.

Fang brought the Wolf Trap’s weapons to bear, “Fire everything you’ve got!”

Scampers hesitated, “But—”

“NOW DAMMIT, NOW!” Fang bellowed.

As his crosshairs locked onto his unexpectantly fearsome foe, Fang could’ve sworn he saw the Scorpion’s stance shift, as if it knew what was coming. He ignored the sinking pit of dread in his stomach and slammed the trigger, sending missiles and a slug downrange.

Jump jets attached to each of the Scorpion’s legs flared to life sending the mech up into the air. It narrowly avoided the Wolf Trap’s bombardment and only a single beam of the Dart’s laser array scathed across its side.

The Wolf Trap’s slug buried itself into the hillside kicking up chunks of dirt and vegetation into the sky, but its errant missiles tore into the crippled Assassin on the ground. Slouch’s scream pierced through the comms for a scant second before his voice was drowned out by a deafening explosion and the line went silent.

Meanwhile, the Scorpion leapt over the cliffside, barely clearing over the Dart’s head. It hit the top of the canyon with a thud and pressed forward without missing a beat, cutting off its prey’s escape.

“I’m cornered!” Scampers squealed.

The Dart twisted around to face its oppressor and released a flurry of lasers. One flared wide, but the other two seared into the Scorpion’s armored torso. The quad stood its ground and returned the gesture in kind, a barrage of missiles blazed out of the bulky cylindrical missile launcher above its imposing autocannon.

Fiery bursts rippled across the Dart as each missile struck home. The mech staggered backwards from the volley, toppling over the rim. Its limbs flailed, distorted, and snapped as it violently tumbled down the side of the cliff. It hit the canyon’s bottom with a sickening metallic crunch and laid motionless.

An image of Scamper’s broken body inside the Dart’s cockpit flashed in Fang’s mind. He pushed it aside as the Scorpion brazenly barreled down the cliff’s sloping hillside back towards his position. He gritted his teeth and let loose another tide of missiles. Half a dozen explosions rolled across the scurrying Scorpion, but it careened onwards undeterred. The Scorpion’s autocannon sent a hail of cluster submunitions in return, lacerating the Wolf Trap’s armor.

A siren blared in Fang’s cockpit and a computerized voice emotionlessly intoned, “Warning: Left torso armor compromised.”

Nothing but luck kept the Wolf Trap’s ammo bays from going up in a ferocious blaze right then and there. Fang knew his luck was rapidly running out...or was it?

A Heavy Hover APC zipped through the vineyard towards the Scorpion. Its machine guns and Short-Range Missile launchers wailed away into the Scorpion’s exposed left flank between its legs. The mech’s limbs shuddered, seemingly surprised by the sudden appearance of a new foe, and it skidded along the ground as it fought to maintain its balance.

“What took you so long?!” Fang snarled.

“I waited for an opening!” Dirk heaved as he wrestled to keep the APC under control and out of the Scorpion’s line of fire at the same time, “Get in here while I keep it busy!”

Fang debated firing from where he stood, but couldn’t risk repeating the same mistake he made with Slouch. He’d get into close quarters and tear that oversized metal bug apart limb from limb himself. It was personal now.

He spurred the Wolf Trap forward, watching the APC circle the Scorpion. The quadruped tried to bring its backup laser port around, but the APC darted ahead before it could line up a shot, narrowly gliding between the mech’s legs. The APC’s missiles and machine guns belted into the Scorpion’s scarred underside.

Fang might’ve been a hard ass, but even he nodded in approval at such a ballsy maneuver. Yet his swelling pride was cut down in an instant once the Scorpion dropped its entire body onto the APC underneath it, crushing it like a tin can.

The Wolf Trap tore wide tracks into the ground underfoot as it came to a screeching halt. Fang gaped in disbelief. How did this happen? They were supposed to raid the place and make off with a glorified lawn ornament, yet it somehow turned around and wiped out his entire lance – **alone**. Just who the hell was this guy?

The Scorpion's joints groaned as it lifted itself from the crumpled wreckage and readied its weapons upon the Wolf Trap once more. Fang's fist clenched the targeting control stick. He let out a howl of anger as he unleashed his mech's entire armament.

The next moments were a blur. There was an impact, he heard an explosion, felt a blast of air rushing past him, saw the ground rapidly approaching, felt the urge to scream, and then...nothing.

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"What am I doing wrong?" Klemens fretted over the radio's dials yet again, but no matter what he tried, he raised nothing but static.

He glanced out the window at his side as the two behemoths hurtled savage salvos at another. The Scorpion buckled from the onslaught, but the pirate's mech erupted into a tremendous ball of fire. Klemens shielded himself as the window shattered, hurling glass shards into the room.

The force of the blast knocked him off his chair. His ears were ringing and dozens of cuts across his arms stung, oozing blood, but he forced himself to his feet and returned to the window. As the haze lifted, he spotted half of the pirate mech's headless corpse lying in the dirt. A hundred or so meters further laid the collapsed Scorpion, billowing smoke.

A cascade of fears plagued him as he sprinted out of the house and toward the scene. He never ran harder before in his life. His lungs wanted to burst, but his growing terror pushed him onward till he reached the Scorpion.

The damage was substantially worse up close. The Scorpion was covered in pockmarks that left many armor plates cracked, mangled, or outright torn through. Three deep gashes sliced charred lines across the mech's body. The crumpled right foreleg's knee was completely torn open, revealing frayed myomer underneath. And this was only what Klemens could see from where he stood.

He gathered his breath and hollered at the top of his lungs, "OPA!"

But all he heard were the voices of field hands rallying somewhere in the distance behind him.

He found a foothold in a splintered armor plate on the mech's frontside and pulled himself up. The bottom dropped out of his stomach as he gazed into the cavernous smoking crater directly below the cockpit. He braced himself against the autocannon's barrel, still hot to the touch, as he sidled around the hole to get a closer look at the canopy.

Pressing his face against the smoked ferroglass, he peered inside fearing the worst. His grandfather sat within, head slumped to the side. Klemens sucked in sharply and fought back a wave of tears. Through shuddering breaths, he willed himself to look closer. Then he caught the gentle rise and fall of his grandfather's chest and a dribble of drool at the corner of his lip.

He wasn't dead. He was...sleeping.

One of the workers climbed atop the Scorpion behind Klemens and shouted, “What’s wrong?! Is he okay?”

Klemens let out a nervous laugh, “Yeah! It’s just...just past Opa’s naptime, that’s all.”