

The Immortal Warrior at the Battle of Vorhaven

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The three MechWarriors ran ahead of her, their silver neurohelmets flashing in the sunlight. They were fast, but she was determined.

They would not escape the Immortal Warrior.

The three tried to trick her with a dodge toward the woods on the right, then dashed left. In an instant they'd disappeared behind a sharp corner of the cliff-sided mountain. Clutching her weapon tightly, she slowed and flared wide around the turn, giving herself room in case they doubled back and tried to dash past her in the opposite direction.

She needn't have bothered. The three had used her caution to gain distance and were now well ahead of her. She felt her feet thudding against the grassy soil as she churned her legs to maximum speed, closing the gap.

Suddenly the three MechWarriors stopped, facing the cliff-sided mountain. She saw them pull to attention and salute something up on the cliff. She didn't know why her targets had forgotten the Immortal Warrior was closing on them and she didn't pause to see what they were looking at. They were in her sights and they were doomed.

Shrieking her best Immortal Warrior yell, she was upon them. She made a clean hit before they could respond. But, whirling and twisting, the MechWarriors danced away from her, laughing as they ran.

"I got you, Billy!" she screamed. "You're it!"

"Missed me, missed me!" Billy called back, not even slowing as he dodged around a knot of adults. The other two MechWarriors were already halfway to the food tent, the open vests of their Halloween costumes flapping about their arms.

"How goes the battle, Jessie?"

Jessie turned to face the mountain, and saw Grandpa on the porch.

"Billy cheated," she announced.

"I agree," Grandpa nodded judiciously. "You tagged him fair and square."

There didn't seem to be much to say to that. Billy and the cousins were now too far gone for her to ever catch them. Besides, her new uncle was on the porch with Grandpa.

Uncle David wasn't really a new uncle, of course; she'd seen pictures of him all her life. But he was a MechWarrior—a real one—and he'd been away since before she was born. She'd never really met him before the Halloween party two nights ago and this was the first chance she'd had to look at him closely.

He looked like Grandpa, she decided, only a little shorter and his hair was not grey. She wasn't sure, but she bet he didn't have a brown circle with no hair on top of his head either.

"You going to eat that cinnamon roll," Uncle David asked, "Or just run around with it?"

Jessie looked down at the roll, which a moment before had been a weapon, though she'd never decided which one. It was smooshed slightly, the melted sugar frosting sticking to her fingers.

"Grandma made it," she answered.

"I was hoping she did," Uncle David smiled. She liked his smile. "I was also hoping you'd want to give it to me."

Jessie considered for a moment.

"I already had two," she announced. "And Grandma's got more."

"I'll bet she does."

Making her decision, Jessie climbed onto the porch and surrendered the roll to Uncle David. His hands were not as big as Grandpa's.

"Thank you, Immortal Warrior," he intoned seriously.

She giggled as she scurried into the house, propelled by a friendly swat on the bottom.

* * *

Billy was hiding from her again.

Jessie circled through Grandpa and Grandma's house, keeping an eye out for signs of her brother. She avoided the rooms at the end of the west wing. Aunt Grace and the twins had taken those over. They'd moved in nearly a month ago, right after the Halloween party where'd she met her new uncle, because Aunt Grace said "things were getting bad in the city."

She didn't mind the twins so much; they were too quiet to be very interesting anyway. But Aunt Grace was always cross and saying how serious the situation was and worrying about Uncle David. Even her mother had stopped trying to cheer her up.

She set thoughts of her aunt aside and focused on finding Billy.

He wasn't in the fruit cellar and he wasn't in the pantry. He wasn't under the library table and he wasn't in the little attic room with his comic vidbooks. She knew he knew better than to go into the guest bedrooms or the formal living room.

He must be hiding outside.

Jessie stood by the dining room window, considering. Outside the sun was shining in a clear blue sky. No sign of the summer storms that sometimes blew down whole forests. It was a perfect day for being outside instead of in.

Her brother was a year and a half older than her, but he always hid in the same places. If Billy was hiding outside, he was either under the side porch, in the feed barn or up in the big lonely oak. That last was a favorite of his, because he could climb the rope holding the tire swing and she could not.

"Hey," her big sister Cassie called from the family room, "the video just went out!"

Jessie ignored her. Cassie watched too much video; all she ever wanted to do was watch kissy stories, anyway.

She looked toward the oak. Sure enough, the empty tire was swinging without a breeze. Billy was up the tree.

And a giant metal man walked over the hill.

Jessie blinked.

"BattleMechs!" yelled Aunt Grace from somewhere upstairs. "Not the Militia!"

Throughout the house, Jessie heard the grown ups shouting.

“We’re surrounded!”

“Where are the children?”

“Everybody, get to the cars!”

“No!” Grandpa’s voice cut across the others. “They’ll cut us down if we try to escape. Get into the storm shelter!”

“The children! Find the children!”

Whirling from the window, Jessie dodged around Cassie and ran up the stairs as fast as she could. She heard Aunt Grace call her name, but she didn’t break stride.

Once in her room, it took her only a moment to find what she needed and less than that to pull on her bandana and loop an ammo belt across one shoulder. One minute after the metal giant came over the hill, the Immortal Warrior dashed from the kitchen door.

She could hear her mother’s voice through the open windows of the house behind her, calling. She ran harder. No time to turn back now, there was a mission to accomplish.

The giant metal man, the BattleMech, was standing next to the big oak. It did not move. It just stood, watching the house while two other BattleMechs—one that looked just like it and another that looked different—fired their lasers again and again at Grandpa’s crops. The AgroMechs and tractors were all smoking masses of twisted metal dotted about the burning fields.

The BattleMech had to see her, but she hoped the Immortal Warrior’s armor would frighten it as she ran across the open ground. It did not fire. Or step on her when she ran in front of its toes. Her heart was pounding as she reached the base of the tree.

Looking up through the branches, she tried to find her brother. She knew Billy was up there, but she couldn’t see him.

“Billy?” she called, straining to catch sight of him. “Billy!”

After a moment her brother’s head appeared over the edge of the broad branch the tire swing was tied to. His eyes were red and puffy and he looked like he had been crying.

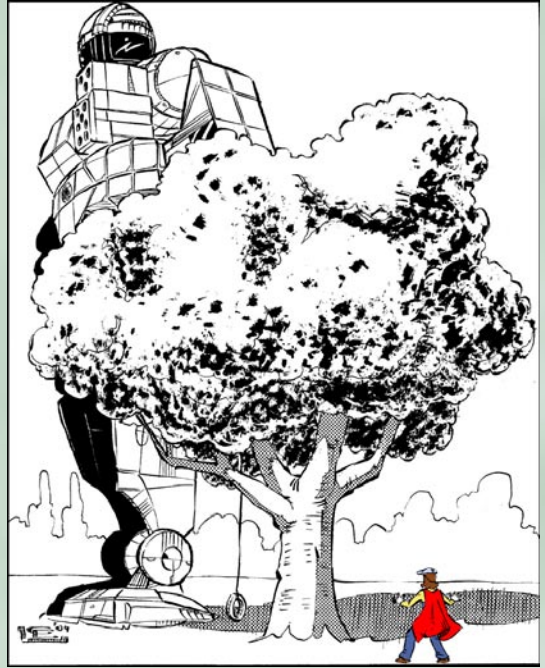
“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“I’m here to rescue you,” she answered.

"Jessie, get out of here," he said. "This isn't pretend."

Jessie glanced over at the BattleMech, though from under the canopy of the ironwood all she could see was its lower legs. It was so big, and the house so far away. For a moment she couldn't breathe, it took a shuddering gasp to pull air into her lungs. She felt her eyes sting as tears threatened.

Jessie shook herself. The Immortal Warrior would not be afraid.



She looked back up at her brother, still watching her from the branch above.

"Get down here right this second, soldier," Jessie ordered in her best Immortal Warrior voice. "We've got a mission to complete."

"You're crazy, Jessie," Billy said. "Get out of here."

"Not without you."

Billy pulled his head back out of sight and for a moment Jessie thought she was going to have to yell at him again. Then his leg appeared over the side, swinging back and forth until his foot snagged the rope holding the tire swing.

In less than a minute he was standing beside her.

"That's a *Quickdraw*," he said, pointing to the BattleMech near them. "It's fast. There's another and a *Lynx* over there. That's three. Number four's got to be somewhere."

Jessie was uninterested in what the BattleMechs were called or where they were. The Immortal Warrior was on a rescue mission, focused only on the objective.

"We've got to get back to the storm cellar," she said.

"We can't," Billy said. "They'll see us."

"They saw me come out here," Jessie said, proud her voice stayed steady. She settled her Immortal Warrior helmet more firmly on her head and started toward the house.

"Wait."

Billy caught up with her and took her hand. Above them, the *Quickdraw* stood immobile, but they both felt it had eyes watching their every move.

"Don't run," Billy said. "Maybe they won't ..."

At that moment the fourth BattleMech stalked around the corner of the farm house. Lower and wider than the *Quickdraw*, it looked to Jessie like a giant crab or bird. It swung toward them, fire flickering around little black tubes on its chest.

"Run!" Billy yelled as the ground between them and the 'Mech began to churn with machinegun fire.

Jessie spread her arms wide, shielding her big brother with her Immortal Warrior armor, and ran for the house. She shrieked her battle cry at the top of her lungs as flying clods of dirt spattered against her chest and helmet.

Ahead of them the cellar door by the kitchen stairs flew open. Grandpa was there, running towards them as pieces of the ground seemed to jump and shatter. She could see her mother behind him, calling something she couldn't hear. The world was full of a sound like thunder and gravel and the house seemed so far away.

Suddenly she was scooped from the ground, one of Grandpa's strong arms around her waist. She caught a glimpse of Billy, tucked under his other arm as he ran back toward the house. They were almost safe, but not yet. Something screamed through the air over their heads. A wave of hot air, like Grandma opening her oven, only hotter and meaner, swept over them.

Jessie kept her arms spread wide, protecting Billy and Grandpa as best she could.

Grandpa swung her up and around. The world seemed to tilt crazily and she saw a corner of the house and roof fly to pieces. Then her mother grabbed her, pulling her down into the cellar, hustling her toward the shelter. Behind her she heard Grandpa slamming the outer door and her brother's voice.

"I was trapped in the tree," he said. "There was a *Quickdraw* right next to me. Jessie came and got me."

Above them there was a great cracking and splintering. Jessie heard windows breaking and dishes crashing to the floor. The kitchen was going to be a mess.

Mother, holding one arm, half carried her and half shoved her down the shelter stairs. Billy came stumbling close behind, almost falling on the steep wooden steps.

"Everyone here?" Grandpa asked.

All around Jessie her cousins and aunts said "yes."

The room was big, but everybody was crowded close to the stairs, helping her and her mother and Billy get safely inside. Some held flashlights so they could see.

Grandpa slammed the thick metal door, throwing the lock and turning the wheel that slid bolts into the walls on either side.

Above them, against the door and ceiling, there was a bumping and thumping, like something big was stomping its feet. That big crab-bird, Jessie bet.

"So," said Grandpa, looking down at Jessie.

Jessie looked up at him, looking like a giant in the dim light, and pulled herself to attention.

"Mission accomplished, sir," she reported.