

The Adventures of Vector Sprint

Book One:

A Sprint to the Past

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Chapter One

The blue-white sky of hyperspace dissolved into starlines which shrank down into points scrolling across the sky as the fighter slowly tumbled after frame-shifting from the superluminal pocket dimension of hyperspace and back into the familiar three-dimensional realm of realspace. Vector shut his eyes and took several deep breaths fighting back the urge to be sick in his helmet. After a few moments the nausea passed. He reached up, unlocking his collar and pulled his helmet off. The blue yoshi ran a gloved hand through his blonde sweat drenched hair before he touched the climate control switches, setting the ventilation in the cockpit of his Rapier starfighter to a cooler temperature. He punched up a few commands on the computer and a screen to the right of the instrument cluster lit up. A cartoonish image of a fox appeared on it.

"Merlin," Vector said, "Start up the temporal compensation program. Figure out where and when we are," the yoshi asked of the computer. The cartoon fox image seemed to concentrate for a moment, before replying.

"Based on the locations of six pulsars and the locations of the stars in relation to them," Merlin started, "I estimate that we are temporally in the year two-thousand. Currently, we are located three hundred and seventy-five lightyears from the position where the Cygnus system will be in 3288. I am altering the starmap and navicomputer calculation matrix based on the proper motion of the stars and their new locations in this epoch." Vector listened, then punched up the navicomputer. The galaxy map appeared on the left-hand side monitor. He typed a few commands into the computer, zooming in on a star while drawing orbital lines around it before zooming in on the third planet. An inset appeared on the screen and a line formed from the Rapier's current position in the galaxy to the planet selected on the starmap.

"Alright. We got our course laid in for planet Yamauchi," Vector said, as he studied the navicomputer. "Merlin, what can you tell me about their current tech level? Will we be able to arrive undetected?" The fox on the screen looked thoughtful for a moment before replying.

"No. We will be detected. The military powers of the planet do have early warning detection systems that will be able to detect us either in low orbit or as we descend to the planet's surface," Merlin said, "But if we angle the shields for a combat reentry, we should be able to descend fast enough to appear as a meteor, or as an artifact of the signal processing systems." Vector grabbed his helmet as it spun gently between himself and the instruments, and slid it back over his head, pulling the locking ring on his collar, the helmet hissing softly as it pressurized, the cool breeze of the fresh air system blowing over the back of his head.

"Sounds like a plan then," Vector said, flipping switches on the consoles on either side of his seat and on the instrument cluster. He rested his left hand on the throttle set on the left side of the cockpit and grabbed the flight stick that rose from the floor between his legs. The HUD

began to display the navigational data, and Vector pulled the stick and pressed his feet on the rudder pedals, making the Rapier roll and spin in space, its maneuvering thrusters blasting a faint blue-white at the end of the nose and tips of the wings, the soft hiss of the small rockets filling the cockpit behind the hum of the powerplant and life support systems. A few more switches dimmed the cockpit lights, leaving the yoshi's face illuminated with the green phosphor of the two screens and the myriad lights on the instrument panel reflected in his helmet's visor. As the hyperspace vector lined up with the artificial horizon, Vector moved his left hand to the FTL throttle, and he pushed it forward. The soft hum of the ship's powerplant pitched up into a thunderous roar, and the stars stretched into thick lines that seemed to stretch into infinity, before the hyperdrive boomed to life, and the starlines shot backwards, past Vector's field of vision, and were replaced with the mottled, blue-white tunnel of hyperspace.

Despite the distance and the fact that his starmaps were very out of date, Vector's trip was not a long one. Several hours passed as he barreled through hyperspace at several thousand times the speed of light, bringing up data logs and information about the planet Yamauchi, information he'd read while training for this mission, but things he felt like he should brush up on regardless. Eventually, however, the alarm sounded, indicating Vector's proximity to his destination. The tunnel of hyperspace collapsed again into starlines, which shrank down into points, and as they did, the brilliantly lit disk of Planet Yamauchi rushed up to fill the front pane of the fighter's canopy. With the sun behind him, the planet was fully lit against the inky black of space, and Vector's helmet visor automatically dimmed as the blue, green and white oasis of life lit the cockpit.

"Vector, we're being painted with a targeting radar," Merlin said suddenly. "It's not something indigenous either. It's a Tairez system. I am working to pinpoint the location of the emitter but in the meantime, you should expect company." Vector frowned at Merlin's observation, but flipped several switches, bringing the fighter's combat systems online. As soon as the targeting system was online, two red rectangles appeared in the ship's HUD, indicating two hostile craft. There was a warning beep and Merlin spoke again, "Missile launch detected."

A magenta icon appeared on the HUD to indicate the missile. Vector moved the control stick and pressed on the pedals as he moved the throttle forward, the rumble of the fighter's four engines filling the cockpit. He lined the missile icon up in the center of the HUD and accelerated towards it. The icon began to grow, and a few seconds later, Vector jammed his feet against the pedals, and jerked the stick hard to the right. The fighter rolled and jinked hard, the inertial dampeners letting out an electronic scream as they worked to compensate for the yoshi's sudden movements. The missile sailed past the Rapier's cockpit, silent in the vacuum of space, only a momentary flash of white, red, and the glowing violet of its engine as it passed the fighter and lost its lock, sailing harmlessly into the infinite void. Vector turned his attention to the red rectangles and pushed the throttle forward as far as it would go, and the engines roared, the whole ship shaking as it surged forward, the rectangles growing rapidly.

The closest of the two hostile ships was indicated by a green dashed circle, and the ship's computer began beeping as it started to calculate a missile lock. However, a second mark

appeared next to the red rectangle, and Vector moved the stick slightly, lining up the gunsight reticle over this secondary mark. He pulled the trigger on the back of the flight stick, and the Rapier's four blaster cannons, two on the nose and two slung under the wings, erupted with bright red flashes of light as the bolts of plasma energy lanced out of them and across the void of space, their exciters giving a muffled report as the sound transmitted through the fighter's frame. Six volleys of fire erupted out of the guns, before there was a blue-violet flash in the distance, and one of the red rectangles disappeared. The second indicator was growing larger at a much more rapid rate now as the hostile spacecraft started making its way towards the Rapier. Vector fired again, sending red bolts of energy into the void again, then jerked the stick to the left as several similar bolts shot in from the still unseen enemy craft. Two of the bolts splattered harmlessly against the Rapier's shields, making them flash brightly as they were hit, before another spacecraft flashed past the Rapier. Vector pulled the throttle back as hard and as quickly as he could, making the reverse thrusters on either side of the cockpit flare, his helmet visor darkening in response, and he mashed the pedals, pulling back on the stick, turning his fighter around before mashing the throttle forward as far as he could, making the inertial dampeners scream again, and the engines roar, the ship shaking violently. This time, his foe was visible, the other fighter having done a similar maneuver. Vector pulled the trigger again, firing several bolts at the other craft, a black dagger-shaped starfighter, with four forward-swept wings in an X-shape, a large blaster cannon between the top and bottom wing on each side.

The hostile fighter fired as well, and Vector jerked his flight stick to the left, making his fighter roll on its axis as the bolts peppered his shields. All the while, as long as the enemy fighter was in front of him, his computer beeped, until the beep became an even tone. As soon as it did, Vector fired off several quick volleys of blaster fire, then moved his right thumb to push a button on the stick, a missile dropping from his fighter's wing, its engine flaring and carrying the weapon away almost too fast to see. Just as the final bolt hit the enemy ship's shields and collapsed them, the missile found its target, and impacted the fighter, piercing its hull before exploding, filling the canopy of the enemy craft with light before the glass shattered, letting flames and smoke billow out before the rest of the fighter detonated in a blue-white flash, its fusion reactor losing containment and vaporizing the ship.

Vector eased the throttle back to zero, shutting his engines off as his fighter glided through space on a high arc that would see it coming back down to the planet eventually. He clenched his jaw and breathed hard, his body surging with adrenaline from the combat. He ran another scan and checked for any additional contacts. Finding none, he let himself ease back in his seat.

"Those were Auroras," Vector said, "We're in the right place, and right time. Merlin, before they launch any more at us, have you worked out where that targeting radar came from?"

"I have," Merlin said, "An island in an archipelago near the equator on this side of the planet. I'm setting up a flight path now. It will take you low and bring us in over the water, hopefully under their radar, if it is configured to look towards orbit." Vector nodded, and looked at the left-hand screen, bringing up the flight path. He used the foot pedals to turn the fighter, and

a series of rectangular green boxes appeared in the HUD, showing the flight path. Vector pushed the throttle forward and followed the trail of boxes towards the planet. The green and blue disk of the planet grew before it completely filled Vector's view, followed by the bright red-orange flare of re-entry heat as the shield pushed the air away from the ship, making it glow brightly as it compressed around the rapidly moving craft. Eventually, the ball of fire died down, and the fighter was left flying through the air, skimming over the water, the sun reflecting brightly off of the calm water, the island rising over the horizon and starting to grow as the fighter approached. After a few minutes of flying, the Rapier came in over the coast of the island. White sandy beaches seemed to make up the coastline, and he passed over a small town nestled up against the beach. Not far inland were the foothills of the no doubt volcanic mountains. The clearing of the beach and city quickly gave way to woods, and Vector slowed down, before eventually bringing his fighter to a stop over a meadow. He ran another scan to check if he'd been tracked coming in and had a welcoming committee, but he seemed alone. He extended the fighter's landing gear, and lowered the ship down to the ground, before shutting its engines and systems off.

Far away, near the center of the island, a walled city rose above the landscape. A series of metallic towers rose above the stripped and despoiled land, interspersed with smokestacks, and low buildings, steam rising from ventilation units on their roofs, vehicles and humanoid robots moving out of them, factories and data centers. In the center of the city stood the tallest tower, a windowless chrome steel monolith. Inside, on the top floor, was a large circular room, its floor a black polished surface, the lighting dim and red to be easy on the eyes. In the center was a chair surrounded by monitors and displays, sat on an elevated platform. In that chair sat a human, dressed in a red uniform coat and black slacks, with calf-high riding boots. His blonde hair was brushed to one side, and red glasses covered his blue eyes, augmented reality icons flashing on the lenses from time to time as he watched the monitors. Richter DeLeon, the leader of the Tairez incursion into the past, and the architect of the steel and chrome monolith to progress he'd erected since arriving in the past, nearly a year ago. In the back of the room, a door slid open, and footsteps rang out on the smooth polished floor. Richter tapped a switch on the right armrest of his chair, and it lowered to the floor level, swiveling to face the door that was now sliding closed. Before him stood another humanoid figure, a woman, dressed similarly to Richter, her blonde hair in a military bob. She looked straight ahead, her expression without emotion, her red eyes glowing softly in the darkened room. As Richter's chair clicked into its dock, she approached him, and held a data slate out to him.

"A report from early warning section nine. A spacecraft was detected exiting hyperspace. Two Aurora starfighters were dispatched to investigate.," she said, her voice even, monotone, and without stress. "They ceased reporting when they reached orbit. The intelligence section suspects they were destroyed and not lost to accident or mishap." Richter took the data slate, and lifted his glasses. He looked down at the screen, his piercing blue eyes contracting in the harsh light of the tablet.

"Concerning," Richter said, as he paged through the report, skimming its bullet points. "Do we know what destroyed them? Have we underestimated the natives?" He handed the data

slate back to the woman and added, "Thank you, Bijou. I want you to put all air defense units on high alert just in case." The woman, Bijou, took the data slate, and looked at its screen for a moment, before lowering her arm to her side.

"We have preliminary models. It is not a native. The hyperwave signature suggests a Confederation F-144 Rapier Mark Two starfighter," she said, her voice still as even and nearly monotone as it had been. "If I may present a hypothesis?"

"By all means," Richter said, motioning to the woman, "You are, after all, not just an assistant, but a tactical mind. Please, regale me." Bijou flitted her eyes to his gesture for a moment, before shifting her gaze to Richter's face, no longer staring straight ahead.

"I suspect the Confederation may have made use of our gateway," Bijou said, matter-of-factly. "Given your last several interactions with him, I would not be surprised if your jackal-headed friend planted the idea of a desperate gambit into the heads of Confederation leadership." Richter scowled at that suggestion. His jackal-headed friend, Seito Akai, was a particularly meddlesome alien that seemed to take an unhealthy interest in his scientific research.

"Indeed," Richter said, his voice conveying his disgust at the idea. "How many ships do you suspect arrived? And did we get a lock on their landing site? I need to know as much as I can. I need to know what we are up against." Bijou lifted the data slate and tapped at it a few times. The monitors all changed to show a flight path that ended above the water some distance away from the island.

"My projections show only one ship. A single fighter, and single-seat at that. So the Confederation operative would be alone," Bijou said, "However, the fighter took a steep entry profile and our sensors were blinded by the re-entry sheath of plasma. We suspect it came in low over the water and we lost it in ground clutter and surf." Richter looked at the map showing the flight plan that had been tracked, and scowled. He turned away from Bijou, and rubbed his chin, stepping back towards his command chair.

"Have all units be on the lookout for suspicious activity then," Richter said, "Anything that would be out of the ordinary. Any humans wandering around the island, especially if they're armed with any sort of energy weapon." Bijou listened, and tapped the data slate again, shutting it off. She straightened her posture and spoke up.

"Yes sir. However, what if they did not send a human? What if they sent a yoshisaur to blend in with the local population," Bijou said, "It would be the most logical course of action. A human would stand out, but a yoshisaur could move around the island with impunity." Richter gave a derisive laugh, then turned to face Bijou.

"Oh my dear," Richter said, his expression a vicious smile, "If that's the case then all the better! What could a single yoshisaur ever possibly do in the face of the Tairez Empire?"

Chapter Two

Vector walked around his fighter, checking it physically, before crawling under it and opening the small cargo bay. He pulled the two boxes out of it that he'd loaded before setting off on his journey, then carried them out from under the starfighter, dropping them on the grass and leaves that covered the ground of the meadow. He popped open one of the boxes, and started picking his clothes out. He sat his shoes on the ground next to the box, before draping his pants, shirt and jacket over the edge of the box. He sat on the second box, and started unlocking the locking rings on his gloves and boots.

"Merlin," Vector said, "Run a scan. I want you to tell me what you can about the nearby town. I think that's going to be my first destination. I kind of want a base of operation that's a little more permanent than a pup tent and a campfire."

"Of course," Merlin replied, voice rising from the cockpit of the fighter. "Please give me a moment.. Oh. Oh dear," the computer said, its voice taking on a tone of worry. Vector pulled his boots and gloves off, before starting to doff his flight suit.

"What's got you tilted, Merlin," Vector said, once the spacesuit was off. He started folding it, then dropped it on one of the boxes.

"I am detecting multiple signatures in the town," Merlin replied, "All of them are Tairez in origin. At least one vehicle, multiple mechanoids. No humans, all other life signs in the vicinity are either wildlife or yoshi in nature." As Merlin spoke, Vector was getting dressed, pulling on a pair of denim pants, and a black shirt. He buckled his utility belt, then his gun belt, letting his blaster hang low on his hip. He pulled his shoes on, the automatic straps cinching them tight around his feet, and the power conduits around the outsides of the soles lit a soft blue.

"Well then," Vector said, as he shrugged his jacket on, pushing the red synth-leather sleeves up, then pulling his gloves on, "Sounds like I need to have a trip into town." He climbed onto the fighter's wing, and reached into the open cockpit, pulling out a headset. He slid it over his head and toggled the power switch, before blowing into the microphone, "Testing. Can you pick this up?"

"Indeed," Merlin replied, "I can. I will provide what limited support that I can offer. If you do need air support, I can offer it, but I'm afraid liftoff will rather ruin your campsite." Vector jumped off of the wing, and walked around the fighter to face the direction of the town. He gave the nose of the fighter a pat before replying in kind.

"I shouldn't need any air support, but if I do," Vector said, "I'll let you know. So, I'm away. I'll let you know if I win." The yoshi lowered himself a bit, bending his knees, the conduits and power cells on his shoes flaring, and glowing bright blue, before he took off running, leaving like a drag racer on two legs; His legs blurred into a crescent of red and white, the lit elements of his shoes crackling with energy and arcing to the ground for the miniscule time each shoe was in contact with it. He leaned forward and tucked his arms close to his sides, his campsite rushing away, a large rooster-tail of dirt and grass kicking up behind him. In seconds he was leaving the clearing, juking and side-stepping to avoid trees and bushes as he tore through the light woods. In a short time, he was past the trees, and in the rolling hills approaching the town. He leaned a bit more forward and accelerated, the landscape rushing by, the implants he'd gotten before embarking on his mission speeding his perception, allowing him to keep up with the incredible speed.

In the nearby Safin village, the air was filled with sobs, cries, and wails of despair as the residents were rounded up. The white, boxy frames of the robots that had arrived in a pair of hover trucks stalked through the village, their paint glinting brightly in the sun, the optical slits built into the angular features of their faces burning with a neon magenta light. Their heavy footsteps belied their bulk as they trudged between the buildings and through the square, their joints and hands standing out in a shiny black, identification markings painted in red. One of the menacing machines stood next to the pair of hover trucks, one outfitted to carry the squad of machines, the other stacked with cages, most of them occupied now, with yoshies of various different colors, both male and female, some resigned to their fates, others rattling and struggling with the door of their cage, others trying to reach one another and provide each other some comfort.

Two of the yoshies that were trapped aboard the truck were Aurora and her daughter Rael. A violet yoshi, Aurora was reaching through the bars of her cage to try to reach Rael's green-skinned hand. Nearby, one of the stark white robots stood sentinel, its markings indicating it was the leader of the squad. It disregarded the pair of yoshies, the daughter crying as she tried to reach her mother, and instead spoke into a comm on its wrist.

"All known residents accounted for save one. Find the purple one. Male, unarmed. Shoot to capture," it said, its voice monotone and synthesized, lacking any sort of modulation or emotion. As the robot spoke, Aurora grabbed the door of her cage and rattled it as she pulled and pushed on it, trying in vain to make it open, her blue hair falling in front of her face as she struggled with the door.

"No," she screamed at the robot, "Leave him alone! Let him go!" She looked out of the cage, her head turning frantically as she tried to catch sight of her son, the yoshi the robot was referencing. "Kaz, run!" she yelled, trying to make her voice carry through the village. As her voice died out in the hot air of the village square, the robot's comm crackled to life.

"Target approaching at high speed, blue lizard, male, target is ar-" the voice cut off suddenly and across the square, behind a small cluster of buildings, the electronic report of an

energy weapon rang out. The robot next to the hover trucks adopted a defensive pose, and extended its right arm, the barrels of its blaster extending. As soon as the weapon began charging, Vector rounded the corner of the nearest building, the soles of his shoes squealing on the worn bricks, polished smooth by years of foot traffic. As soon as he rounded the building, he charged the robot, and leapt, crossing the distance between himself and the machine in less time than it took the robot's blaster to charge. He lifted his feet, the soles of his shoes hitting the robot's chest and knocking it backwards. It hit the bricks with a solid metallic clatter, and the blue yoshi pulled his blaster from its holster, the weapon already charged and ready. He pulled the trigger and there was an electronic "*CHOOM*" sound, and a bright red flash as the bolt of plasma erupted from the muzzle of his blaster, and melted its way into the robot's head directly under its optical slot, leaving a small ring of red-orange molten metal, and a column of black smoke punctuated by sparks. The machine's optics went dark as it went offline, and Vector stepped off of its lifeless body. He looked at the hover truck full of cages, and the yoshies within them, and as they processed what had just happened, they began to cheer.

The cheering, and the blaster fire, of course, attracted attention. The other robots in the squad started moving through the village, starting to converge on the village square. Vector hunkered down and prepared himself, before dashing in the direction of more of the metallic footsteps. As he rounded a corner, he dropped to the ground and slid between the legs of one of the robots, snapping off two shots as he did. As the robot stumbled and fell, Vector's momentum carried him under one of the raised houses, off of the brick path and into the cool sand under the house. There, he found another yoshi, a young male, with violet scales and black hair. His green eyes were wet and puffy, like he'd been crying.

"W-wow, that was cool," the young yoshi said, his voice a whisper as he spoke, afraid to attract any more of the robots. Vector flashed a smile at the violet yoshi, and gave him a thumbs up.

"The coolest," Vector said, not bothering to whisper. "Yo, what's your name, big guy," he asked the younger yoshi. The younger violet yoshi rubbed his nose with his forearm, and spoke, also not bothering to whisper this time.

"Kaz," he said, "Kaz Yui! My.. My mom's in one of those cages isn't she?" Vector gave a nod in reply, then rolled over onto his stomach.

"Yeah, I think so kid. But not for much longer," Vector said as he looked around, trying to see any of the remaining robots' feet on the walking paths. "I'm Vector. Vector Sprint. You wanna do me a favor, big guy?" Kaz nodded quietly in response to the question and Vector flashed another smile. "Hang out here 'till I give you the all clear. Only a few more 'bots to unload, and I'm way way too fast for some lame XM-units to nab me," Vector said, before starting to crawl out from under the house.

"I will," Kaz said. "Be careful, Vector! These things are strong!" Vector looked back at Kaz and flashed another thumbs up, before climbing back out onto the footpath. He broke into a sprint, the lit elements of his shoes glowing brightly, lighting the space under the house, making

Kaz shield his eyes. Vector's shoe soles squealed on the smooth bricks as he broke into a sprint, and charged down the path at tremendous speed. As he turned another corner, he leapt and planted both of his feet into the back of another robot, snapping off two more blaster shots into the back of its head. Leaping off of its wrecked chassis, he sped towards the square, and found the last robot inspecting the remains of its commander.

"Yo, laser-lips," Vector called out, making the robot turn and look at him. "Looking for me? I'm the only one here," the blue yoshi said, his lips turning into a grin, as the robot lifted its arm to prepare its blaster. As the robot's weapon began to charge, Vector lifted his own blaster and snapped off three shots, the bright red bolts flooding the square with monochromatic light as they streaked across the space between himself and the robot. They all hit their mark with the sound of something hard striking the metal, and it staggered backwards several steps before falling, oily black smoke rising from the red-orange rings of molten metal that marked the entry point of each of the bolts. A heavy silence hung over the village square for a moment, before the caged yoshies began cheering again, and formerly hiding yoshies began to emerge from their hiding places. "Yo, Kaz," Vector shouted, "Come give me a hand!"

Chapter Three

Across the infinite gulf of time and space, a gray-furred hare walked through a bulkhead door and into the hangar bay of the starship CFS Birmingham. His footpads tapped softly on the metal deck, and his expression soured a bit as he felt the cold metal and its permanent greasy feeling, oil impregnated into the metal after years of spacecraft and other machinery being torn apart and reassembled with little regard to what was being spilled where. The hare, Jean-Renaud LeBeau looked across the hangar bay, and his heart sank. He'd been told to report to his ship and while he'd hoped for a willowy silver Arvandorian work of art, he instead found a bulky, blocky Terran star freighter, its hatches and doors opened, technicians crawling over it ensuring its systems were in top shape and it was fully fueled.

Behind the hare, footsteps rang out on the deck, making his ears twitch and swivel. Jean turned to find a group of humans approaching. Several were in the overalls of technicians but one was dressed like a flag officer, almost as formally as one could dress. He had black hair, silvering on the sides, and a bushy black mustache. He regarded Jean with his brown eyes; Jean himself was dressed in a considerably less formal manner. He wore a loose white collared shirt, and a pair of khaki slacks with a violet Arvandorian bloodstripe down each leg, and a brown duster that reached his shins. As usual, he was bare-foot, and that was the extent of his clothing. Jean looked at the technicians who were bringing his luggage and several gear boxes on a hover cart.

"Where's Vector," Jean asked of the uniformed human, who happened to be the Birmingham's captain, Enzo Treister. "I thought he would have been here by now. Is he held up

somewhere?" Captain Treister looked at Jean for a long moment, before he heaved a heavy sigh.

"Captain Sprint was on a long range patrol that took him through the Cygnus system. There, he encountered the Tairez expeditionary force and the gate. We had ideas where it was but were not completely sure. Now we know," Treister said, "Encountering the enemy jumping through the gate, well.. Jean, you know Vector. Probably better than I do. He jumped through after them without waiting for a green light. You'll have to travel without him and link up in-situ. It's not ideal, but you know how these things are."

"Ah, I see," Jean said, the irritation in his voice barely masked. He shut his eyes and drew a breath, held it for a moment, then let it out. "So, is there a Tairez presence at the gate? I'm not a good enough pilot to get past their fighter screens if there is. I'll be a sitting duck for them."

"No," Treister said, "Once we knew where the gate was, we assembled a task force and took the system. It is located one hundred AU from the primary in the Cygnus system. It sounds like we were not able to stop the expeditionary force from going through, but you should be able to transit the gate without any Tairez interference. So our initial plan has changed, the Birmingham will come right up to the gate, and then you will go through." Jean seemed visibly relieved by that prospect. He watched the technicians loading his gear onto the freighter, then looked back to Treister.

"Alright, that is good to know," Jean said, "If it will be alright, I'd like to get aboard the ship and get it and myself prepared. This is going to be a one-way trip. I would like to center myself before I leave." Treister nodded, and offered a salute to the hare.

"The Confederation owes you more than you can ever know," Treister said, "I will have you know, your service record will see your final rank with the Confederation space forces as that of a lieutenant colonel." Jean seemed surprised by this. He had recently achieved the rank of major within the space forces, and so this constituted a field promotion.

"Oh, thank you Captain Treister," Jean said, "That's unexpected, but appreciated. I suppose I should tell you, I have enjoyed working under your command, and serving on this ship." He paused, and chuckled, "I suppose it was our efforts as Tairez hunters that have brought us to this juncture." Treister nodded, and regarded the boxy freighter.

"Yes, I suppose it has," the human said in response, "Have you come up with a name for your chariot? The quartermaster corps has officially struck it from the registry and listed you as the owner. It is yours now." Jean pondered for a brief moment, before he answered.

"I think I'll call it the White Bird. After my favorite sort of bird back on Arvador Prime," Jean said. "At least that will make up for the fact that I have to fly this heap instead of something with some elegance to it. Not that I don't appreciate it." Treister chuckled.

“No offense taken,” Treister said in response, “But just about every ship in the Cluster has been mustered for a potential Tairez attack. They’re not having very much luck in the Confederation so the boys in analytics think it is likely that the Tairez will double back to hit the Cluster. Your people want to be ready for them this time.” Jean nodded sagely at that; When the Tairez passed through the Arvandorian Cluster before, they were not ready at all, and suffered greatly for it. He wanted to be on those front lines, but the Royal Navy had their mission and he had his.

“Understood, Sir,” Jean said, “With your permission, then,” he said expectantly. Tresister nodded and motioned.

“Of course. Good luck and godspeed, Jean-Renaud,” Tresister said. The pair saluted one another again, and Jean started moving towards the ship. Treister watched him for a moment, before he turned and moved towards the bulkhead door, to return to his station on the bridge.

Jean walked to the ship he’d named the White Bird, and looked it over as he approached. It was a blocky, angular ship, typical of Terran design. It had a long, dagger-like main hull, which split near the end, and was shaped like a triangle with its end cut off. Below this, it had a large cargo pod, which was to carry a Rapier-II starfighter if Vector had not charged off on his own. On the rear were two engine cowlings, which held two engines each, and on the sides, were two large engine nacelles, which held one each. Atop the main structure of the ship was the bridge and living quarters, a long rectangle as wide as the ship, and half as tall as one of the engine nacelles. Across the ship, there was exposed machinery, hoses, pipes and conduits. Terran ships tended to be built for an ease of maintenance, and the understanding that aerodynamics were not an issue in the vacuum of space. He walked to the rear of the ship, and climbed up the boarding ramp that was located between the main engine cowlings. Once aboard the ship, he made a note of the smell. Or rather, the lack of a smell. There was the scent of cleaning fluid, of course. That was standard on a newly issued ship. But there was none of the funk that went with old ships. Most older ships ended up smelling like a locker room, or worse. Food, various fluids, shed skin and hair, tended to find its way into the deepest crevices of a ship and lent their part to a scent that just never seemed to go away. But the Confederation seemed to want this ship to be as pleasant as possible.

The hare made his way up the ladder to the bridge module, and looked around as he made his way up the hatch. The living area was painted in a light blue, with the fixtures in the standard Confederation green. There were some flimsy room dividers set up that divided the living area into a galley, a wardroom, a sort of rec-room, and the bunks, which were a pair of enclosed cabins. Towards the front of the ship was the bridge. A series of windows rose up and over the control board and a pair of high-backed gray leather seats where the pilot and co-pilot would sit. There were other stations where other crew members would sit in normal operation. But for now, they were all Jean’s. He looked at the co-pilot’s seat and the plaque on the back of it; Lieutenant-Colonel Jean-Renaud Lebeau. Jean smiled when he read it, but then looked

wanly at the pilot's seat. And its plaque; Captain Vector Sprint. He took a breath, and held it for a moment, before he heaved a sigh.

"Oh Vector," Jean said aloud, "Why do you do things like this? Typical, you bone-headed lizard, always running in half-cocked. I hope to god you're alright." The hare looked around the bridge of the freighter again, and could hear technicians moving around in the ship as they brought aboard more gear, provisions, weapons and equipment that he would need on his mission. He walked back into the living area of the bridge module, and settled onto one of the plush chairs, pulling himself into a cross-legged sitting position, and shut his eyes, beginning to meditate on the series of events that had brought him to this point, to the words of the jackal-headed alien that had come to visit him in his family's garden on Arvador prime, and the fate of his friend who had seemingly thrown himself, once more, into the breach without any concern for his own safety or well-being. He sat for a while like that, ordering his thoughts and considering the past, and his future.

Lightyears and millenia away, on the eastern coast of Nettai Island, in the Tairez city of steel and smog, Richter DeLeon walked along a catwalk above the production line of one of his factories. He looked down at the automated assembly line, of robots producing robots, immobile robotic arms moving with mechanical precision, moving components, placing them, welding, soldering, plugging, building the XM-series robots that built the majority of his ground forces. Other factories in the city manufactured limbs, torsos, heads, electronics, circuitry, smelted ore down into the steel and silicon needed to manufacture such robots. It was a ballet of mechanical perfection, and it brought a smile to his lips. Over his vision, projected by his red-tinted glasses, a communications window popped up. It was his assistant, Bijou, her image looking into the distance with a neutral gaze.

"Sire, there has been a development," she said, her voice calm, steady and as emotionless as ever. "I think you will want to return to the control center for this." Richter made a face. He was enjoying his walk of the facility. He hadn't even made it to the prison complex where he'd take great pleasure in taunting the yoshisaurs he'd imprisoned in his efforts to fully bring the island under his control.

"Understood, thank you," Richter said in response, "I will be there momentarily. I trust you will have your report ready for my arrival." Bijou nodded. Of course she would. She was always perfect and impeccable. It was why Richter kept her as an assistant.

"Of course sir," Bijou replied, "Bijou out." She cut the communication, which Richter would likely not have tolerated from others. But she did not engage in pleasantries and niceties. She had nothing more to say and so ended the call. And Richter expected nothing less from her. He swiftly walked along the catwalk, making his way back to the access tunnels he used to make his way around the city. He moved down the stairs to the ground level, and then down another flight of stairs to a basement level, which opened into a long tunnel, an automated tram waiting for him.

“Command center,” Richter stated as he climbed into the tram. The doors shut and as soon as he was seated, he could feel the pressure of the artificial gravity restraints pushing him into the seat as the machine started rapidly on its way, gliding down the tunnel on a cushion of antigrav energy. Richter sat quietly, watching his data feed scroll by in his augmented reality, and moments later, the tram came to a stop. He stepped out of the tram and to a sliding door that opened to a lift car. He stepped in, and stated, “War room,” adopting a parade rest pose as the lift began moving, its motors whirring softly as it raised him from the basement level to the top floor. When the doors opened, he strode out of the lift, and to his command chair. As he sat, he flipped a series of switches mounted in the armrest and brought his monitors up. Bijou stood nearby, and moved closer as he sat down.

“Commander DeLeon,” Bijou said, in greeting. “I will get to the point. We have lost contact with task force seventeen after they began a capture operation in grid square three twenty one.” She motioned to the largest monitor, which brought up a diagram of the island, before zooming in, grid lines appearing, the square in question highlighting in magenta. An inset appeared, showing overflight imagery and the local name of the village located in the square, Safin Village.

“Task force seventeen,” Richter said, rubbing his chin. “That was.. Hurm.” Bijou spoke up, interjecting to refresh his memory.

“Five XM-units,” Bijou said, “And two hover units. A standard capture team for Sigma-class settlement.” The task force in question was brought up in another inset. “We have not received any communications from the task force in some time, and the transponder signals from all of the XM-units have ceased. My research has led me to believe they have been destroyed.” Richter looked at the monitor, then spoke.

“And what has led you to believe they have been destroyed,” Richter asked. “XM-units are not completely without fault. Failures do happen. Do we have a final transmission from any of them? A visual record of what may have destroyed them?” Bijou motioned to another monitor, and the last visual recording from the commander unit came up.

The image was of Safin village. To the robot’s left, one of the hover units sat, loaded with cages, each cage filled with a rather shocked-looking yoshisaur. And in the center of the frame, its image blurred with motion, was a blue yoshisaur, male, his shock of blonde hair blowing in the wind, his right arm outstretched, hand holding a blaster pistol, its legs lifted to impact the XM-unit on the chest. He was dressed in a pair of very techy-looking red and white boots, jeans, a black shirt, and a red jacket. Richter scowled, his jaw tightening. He stood, and motioned, his augmented reality translating the motion.

“Enhance,” Richter said, making the image pixelate, then reform as it zoomed in on the area he’d selected with his gesture. The computer zoomed in on the yoshi’s right arm, on the patch on his red jacket. An inset appeared and flitted through known iconography. It scanned through three images before it came to rest on the image the computer was sure was a match.

A golden circle, a blue field. A golden diamond, four red lines, three white lines emerging from the bottom of the golden diamond like rocket exhaust. Four small white stars, two on either side of the diamond, and one large white star directly above the diamond. Richter's body tensed, his jaw clenched, his lips curled back, baring his teeth. He pointed at the monitor and began to shout.

"That," Richter said, his voice almost a scream, spittle flecking from his lips, "is the crest of the Confederation! How and why is that here?! That is a blaster pistol! Who is that lizard! Find him! Find him now! Search through our database of known Confederation yoshisaur!" He was apoplectic at this discovery. Bijou had never seen Richter so angry. Her normally stoic exterior cracked a bit as she stepped away from him. She nodded, and moved towards a computer terminal.

"Yes, of course sir," she said, as she began running a search. Dozens of photos of blue yoshisaur started flashing across her monitor. It did not take very long until the computer settled on an image. And then indicated a potential cross-reference match. She looked back at Richter, who was storming around the war room now, shouting into the air about yoshisaur and how much he hated them. She interrupted, looking towards him and giving her loudest, "Ahem," which earned her an icy glare. One which softened as soon as she started to speak.

"We have one hit in the Confederation intel file. And a potential cross-reference sir," Bijou started, "According to the intel file on known Confederation agents, this fits the appearance of one Vector Sprint, captain in the starfighter corps. Pilots an F-144 Rapier Mark Two. This would seem to be the pilot of the mystery Rapier that shot down our orbital patrol once our targeting systems detected something. Richter scowled, and moved back to his command chair. He slid into the seat and slumped, listening to Bijou who continued, "The cross-reference is a bit stale. Seven standard years. But there was a Vector Sprint, processed at labor colony Arua-305, designation X-3078. The final record for the prisoner was seven years ago, listed as an escapee, along with a cargo shuttle listed as stolen." Richter watched her for a moment, then sat up in his command chair.

"So he has been in our custody once before," Richter said, his scowl not softening, but his demeanor calming considerably. "This means he can be corralled once again. He is a starfighter pilot. Ground operations should not be his forte. He'll be easy pickings then. Nothing to worry about. As I said, if the Confederation sent a yoshisaur, their mission would be brief and end in failure." He tapped at the switches in his command chair's armrest, and turned it to face the monitors. "Let's let him think he's won for now. But dispatch a surveillance unit. Keep an eye on him. When his guard is down, we'll tighten the noose." He paused, and his smile grew wide, his attitude taking an air of maliciousness. "We'll have his cage installed in here. So he can watch his failure manifest in real time."

Bijou turned and nodded at Richter, taking a short bow before she began the preparations to have a surveillance drone track the yoshisaur known as Vector Sprint. As she

worked, Richter savored the moment, feeling superior in his position, and began to laugh, a manic, unhinged laugh that he often adopted when he was utterly confident in his victory.

Chapter Four

In Safin Village, the captured yoshies had been let out of their cages, the robots cleaned up, the transponders removed from the hover trucks, and the process of cleaning up and repairing the village had begun. As the villagers worked, Vector had been taken into one of the cottages that dotted the village. He was lead in by Ciara, a green female yoshi who had brown hair, brown eyes, and was dressed in what seemed like an almost paramilitary way; She had a dark brown short sleeved shirt, shorts in a camouflage pattern, a belt with various pouches, and shin-high boots that seemed like they were built for rough country. She also had a no-nonsense demeanor and was short with Vector at best. As she led him into the cottage, he could see a plush seating arrangement, and on one of the seats was a red yoshi. He had silvered hair, it clearly used to be some other color, and brown eyes. His face showed age, though he didn't seem to be of incredibly advanced age. He was dressed in an ornate robe, or kimono, and his seat was meant to make him look like the obvious head of the room. Ciara quickly moved to one side of him and sat, and he motioned, before speaking.

"Come, sit, sit," the red yoshi said, motioning broadly with his right hand. Vector looked at the seating arrangement, and settled into a seat across from the red yoshi. "I am Dai. Dai Yoshimoto. I am the village elder. This is my daughter Ciara Yoshimoto." His voice was guttural, yet strangely melodic, like a bow being dragged across the loose strings of an ancient instrument, every sentence sounding like a grand statement of utmost importance, with stretched vowels in the middle and a swift end. "Ciara has told me what you did for us," Dai added, "That you ran into the village, and defeated those mechanical invaders. That you moved more quickly than she has ever witnessed any yoshi move before, and that you have a weapon like theirs," he paused for a moment, then spoke again, "Who are you? And where did you come from?"

"Vector Sprint," Vector replied. He thought for a moment, thinking about the repercussions of telling the truth. And then he decided he was on a one-way trip, and this was his home now. He may as well be forthright. "And uh, I came from another world."

"From Yoshin," Dai asked, then motioned upwards, "Or from another? As the machines came, we noticed an aircraft coming over that didn't look like anything we know." Vector grimaced. He knew he'd been flying low, but he hadn't counted on anyone seeing him. Fortunately, those who had were friendly.

"From another," Vector replied, before taking a breath, and rubbing the back of his head. "Where I am from, and what I am doing here, well, that's kind of a long story. And one I don't know you would believe if I were to tell you." Dai listened, and then he laughed.

"Young Vector," Dai said, "Our village has been attacked by robots. Our island is invaded by someone who looks like the Princess but at the same time does not. These machines are carrying weapons that fire bolts of light like movies, but made real. My boy, I am prepared to believe a great deal at this point in my life. So please, tell me of where you are from." He motioned again, this time with his left hand, and looked at Ciara. "Ciara, darling, please get us some refreshments. Our guest has risked his safety for our village, the least we can do is feed him and slake his thirst!" Ciara nodded and got up, moving out of the seating area, and into the small cottage's kitchen. Dai looked back at Vector, "She will be able to hear you, my dwelling is modest. Please, begin."

"Well, okay," Vector said, the nervousness apparent in his voice as he sat back and tried to get comfortable. "I am..." He paused, trying to gather his thoughts and thinking about how insane what he was about to say sounded. "I am from the future. And so is your invader and his machines. His name is Richter DeLeon, and we are both from the year 3288. Yamauchi, and Yoshin, for that matter, are part of an interstellar alliance, called the Confederation." He watched Dai, looking for the signs of disbelief, that the elder had begun to dismiss him. But none came, and Vector continued his story. "Richter, he's with an interstellar empire. The Tairez Empire. Nobody really knows where they came from. They showed up one day, came marauding through the galaxy. They had better technology than us, better tactics. We were peaceful and they tore through us. They're all humans, and their whole deal is, basically, they want to enslave everyone who's not human. And they have a special kind of hate for us yoshies."

"I see," Dai said, interjecting in his gravelly, irregular manner. "And so why is he here? It would not seem he is in pursuit of you. He has been harassing us for many months now. Attacks, kidnappings, mass disappearances. And you seem to have only just arrived. I could not imagine that you have sat idly by while this fiend destroys our homeland and culture." Vector shook his head, and continued speaking as Ciara returned to the room with a tray of drinks and sat them on the table between Dai and Vector, before settling back down next to her father.

"No," Vector replied, "So the Tairez, they took over most of the mapped galaxy. Yamauchi, Yoshin, a planet called Fa'Diel, and some space colonies remained. But this was kind of a hidden boon for us. It allowed us to concentrate our forces. The Tairez stopped making progress and the war fell to a stalemate. And eventually, every encounter ended in a little bit more of a Confederation victory. They went from not winning, to losing, just that little bit. And it killed them. They couldn't stand it. So they hatched an insane plan to come back here, and take over before Yamauchi, and I can only assume Yoshin, could join the Confederation." He watched Dai as he spoke; Dai was listening intently, nodding his head periodically as he processed the story.

"Richter," Vector continued, "is, I guess, one of their top scientists? I don't know, I learned a lot about their plan from a third party. An alien species that couldn't directly get involved but didn't want to see us beaten into submission. But the story has it, he figured out how to make a time machine that starships could use. And so he came up with a plan to come to the past and ruin the future. So he did. And I got selected to come back and stop him. Or, rather, a bunch of us did. But some things happened and I was in the right place at the right time and I made it through their time gate with them. But it sounds like I popped up later than they did." Dai listened until he could interject, and then did.

"Then your weapons, your vehicle, I can understand," Dai said, "Even your odd manner of speaking, your clothes, your boots. But your superb speed. Are all yoshies as swift as you in this future you speak of?" Vector self consciously looked down at himself. His jacket and belts seemed as natural as breathing to him, but he was dressed rather plainly for a yoshi in 3288. He looked back at Dai and gave a reply.

"No. I'm special," Vector said, "Or rather, I was made special. I was selected for a project. Project Titan is what they called it. A bunch of different people got improved, augmented. I was the only yoshi in the program. They did a lot of things to me. A lot of implants and augmentations, to make me faster, quicker, stronger. And then they gave me these." He kicked his shoes together, sand falling out of the treads, the energy conduits running on the outsides of each shoe beginning to glow before fading. "These are my speed boosters. These grant me my ability to run as fast as I do. Without these, I'm just a well-armed yoshi with lightning reflexes and unbreakable bones." Dai chuckled at that characterization.

"Then you remain a rather exceptional yoshi even then," Dai replied, his amusement still in his voice. "So you have come to help us. We appreciate this assistance from you. But tell me, when you defeat this Richter, what will you do? Will you be returning to your time?" Vector paused a moment, his expression giving the briefest flashes of sadness, before he shook his head and replied.

"No," Vector said in response, "This was a one-way trip. There's no gate on this side for me to use. Once I am here, I am here. But it's not so bad. I don't have a lot to return to. I'm looking forward to setting myself up with a quiet life here once I am done." Dai listened, then replied.

"Then the same will surely be true for this Richter then," Dai said, considering what Vector had not. "This may make him more dangerous. He cannot retreat if he is on the verge of defeat. He is trapped here with you as surely as you are trapped here with him. Like two caged animals forced to fight." Vector looked thoughtful at that suggestion, but before he could speak, Dai cut him off. "You have come here, traveler. You have abandoned all that you know, and have loved, to save us, people who had died long before you would have been hatched. We had nothing to offer you except our history and yet you have come here to help us. You have saved many of the yoshies in this village." He finally leaned out of his chair and took a cup, before sliding the tray nearer to Vector. He settled back into his seat and cradled his cup in two hands,

sipping gingerly at its contents. "We must offer you something in return for your selfless actions. Safin Village will be your home, young Vector."

Vector leaned forward and took the remaining cup off of the tray after it was pushed towards him. He looked into it, at the pale green liquid that filled it, felt the heat radiating off of the cup and into his hand, and sniffed at the steam rising from it. He mimicked Dai's motions, holding the cup with both hands, wanting to fit in and be respectful, since Dai seemed like a yoshi of tradition and ritual. He sipped at the liquid as Dai spoke; It was green tea, something Vector had never tasted before. But it wasn't unpleasant. He started to take another sip, but jumped with a start of surprise.

"Wait," Vector said, "Live here? You're going to let me stay here? But you hardly know me. I don't want to impose on you at all." Dai raised a hand to cut Vector off as he spoke, then replied in kind.

"This is no imposition," Dai said, "We barely know you. But you barely know us as well, and were willing to rush into our village selflessly and battle the machines. And then tell your improbable story to an old yoshi. Your story is hard to believe, I will admit. But when I look at the evidence I have, it would seem to be the only thing to believe when the chaff of lies is shaken from the wheat of truth. You will call Safin your home, Vector Sprint. You will always have a place to lay your head in our village, even if your mission takes you elsewhere." He paused and looked at Ciara. He then spoke again, "Ciara will help you with one of the vacant homes that has been left uninhabited due to the actions of Richter's machines." Ciara looked at Dai with a somewhat incredulous look, but she wasn't going to argue with her father. His words seemed to carry a great deal of weight with her. So she nodded, then looked back at Vector. For his part, Vector perked up, and pressed a finger to his headset. His eyes went wide, and he looked at Dai and Ciara.

"I hate to dash off like this," Vector said, "But my ship's computer just gave me some uh, news. Another starship is arriving." He sat his cup back on the tray, and then stood, the lit elements of his shoes starting to glow softly as they charged up. "I need to go meet it. And see if it is friend or foe." Dai nodded, and motioned the blue yoshi to go.

"Go and do what you must, young Vector. But remember, Safin is your home now," Dai said. Vector looked back at the elder yoshi, smiled, and gave him a thumbs up.

"Right on. Thank you, Mister Yoshimoto," Vector said. Before Dai could correct him, and give him his preferred title, Vector had trotted out of the cottage, and peeled out, spattering rocks and sand through the still-closing door, racing off to his fighter so he could investigate this new arrival.

Chapter Five

Jean-Renaud looked up from his tablet as the computer notified him that his ship, the White Bird, had emerged from hyperspace. He'd watched the light show that was jumping into and out of hyperspace enough times now that it no longer held his interest. What did grab his interest however, was the fact that there was a planet before him. One he didn't expect to encounter. He looked down at the navicomputer, and it verified his suspicions. The planet wasn't meant to be here.

"Ted," the hare said to the room, addressing the shipboard AI. "Where are we? The navicomputer doesn't find this planet on any of the star charts, and the gate sent us in a random direction. I'm not sure where we are." The computer took a moment to think about the request, then replied.

"Location is one thousand lightyears from Cygnus. System should be ZL-5836-121 but it is a red dwarf. This is a yellow dwarf of a G2V class," the computerized voice, TED, said. "Your heart rate and blood pressure appear to be elevating, should I play some music or suggest an activity to enhance your calm?" Jean rolled his eyes, and unbuckled his harness, standing from the seat and looking out at the planet. The lit one quarter was a blue, white and green marble that was obviously habitable to the Hare's eyes. This was backed up by the golden dots and streaks on the night side of the terminator that were the tell-tale sign of cities and towns, electric lights in such concentration as to be visible from orbit.

"No, Ted," Jean said in reply to the ship's primitive artificial intelligence. "Apply proper motion models to our star charts and tell me what year it is now based on the known locations and actual locations of the navigational pulsars within the galaxy." He moved away from the bridge part of the room, and towards the living space. He'd been forced to sit in space outside the gate for hours as checklists and procedures were followed. It'd made him miss Vector terribly, who would have given a pithy remark, and jumped anyway, followed with a gallic shrug and the question of what the Confederation high command would do to them. Ted processed, before replying.

"Applying the requested models to all star charts, it would appear that it is now the year two thousand," Ted replied, "Shall I begin dispensing a stress-relieving aroma into the ventilation systems? Perhaps some classical music would enhance your calm." Jean made his way to the food storage in the wardroom, and picked out a package of vegetable sticks, yanking a cord on the package and causing a dim flash inside the packaging, and steam to emerge from the now ruptured seal. He peeled the package open and took out one of the freshly re-hydrated snacks, and rolled his eyes again.

"No, Ted," he said once again, "Plot a course to the planet Atradaitoshi and give me an estimated time to arrive at maximum displacement factor." He took a bite of the snack stick, making it crunch between his teeth, before grabbing a whole hand full, and crunching them ravenously. He'd not had time to get up and get food while he was spending hours preparing for what was eventually, only a few minutes in hyperspace. He looked back at the bridge, however, as an alarm went off, and Ted started to speak again.

"Attention," Ted said abruptly, "A starfighter of unknown configuration is approaching. It has a corrupted transponder signal that I am unable to decipher. But it does have elements of a confederation friend or foe signal." Jean looked back at the windows at the front of the bridge, then set his snack down and rushed back to the pilot's seat. He sat down and brought up the ship's targeting system, zooming the reticle in on the ship that Ted had marked with a green box. At this distance it was still a black speck on the bright limb of the planet, but it was approaching quickly.

"Ted," Jean said, "Prepare a tight-beam communication and let me know when the vessel is close enough to speak to without letting the whole system know we're talking." He watched the square on the hud move around, following the fighter as it approached. And then Ted spoke.

"The craft," Ted interjected, "is hailing us. Should I dim the lights to enhance your calm?" Jean rolled his eyes and flipped on the comm speaker, forgoing the headset.

"Put it through," Jean said, his ears laying back with annoyance. Ted was starting to wear thin. And then the pilot of the other craft spoke, and Jean's ears sprang up and stood ramrod straight.

"Unidentified ship," the voice said, "This is Captain Vector Sprint. I have you in weapon lock, please identify yourself." It was Vector. Or at least it mostly sounded like him. There was a different timbre to his voice, a slightly different cadence to his words. But that was definitely Vector.

"Vector," Jean exclaimed, "Vector, this is Jean-Renaud. I've been worried sick about you, are you alright? Treister told me you jumped ahead of me. I was worried something might have happened to you!" The comm was silent for a few seconds. In that time, the fighter got close enough for Jean to see it. It was green and white, just like a Confederation fighter, bore the correct markings, but it was like nothing Jean had ever seen before. Its canopy was low and angular, it had four large cannons, four engines, and was much bigger than the Rapier class starfighter he knew Vector to fly. After a moment of silence, the fighter turned away from Jean's ship, and started moving back towards the planet, the comm crackling back to life.

"Follow me on heading three two one decimal five six," Vector said, "Keep in close. There's targeting radar. I don't want anyone to know there's a fat sow out here just waiting to be shot up." Jean rolled his eyes at Vector's characterization of the White Bird. It may have been

blocky, but it was a fine enough ship. It was his ship. But that was Vector. He liked small, fast, nimble things.

“Affirmative,” Jean said. He started his ship following Vector’s, but something about this whole situation was rubbing him the wrong way. Vector’s fighter was wrong, he wasn’t joking or cutting up, something about him definitely seemed different. But this whole business of a one-way trip through time to battle a Tairez super-scientist was fairly stressful, and he was open to the idea that Vector may just react differently under different amounts of stress.

The trip to the surface was quick and uneventful. Jean angled the shields, the windows darkening as the shields lit up with the plasma sheath of reentry. As the bright curtain of plasma faded, the ocean came into view, and the two spacecraft turned, flying low and level over the sea. Watching the island Vector had come up from coming over the horizon, Jean looked across the calm waters, sunlight glittering off of the small ripples and waves of the open ocean. The sky was a clear blue, dotted with clouds, and it had a certain beauty and serenity to it. As the ships came in over the coastline, Jean could see several small villages dotting the coast, and the pair passed directly over one, before moving a few kilometers inland, and landing. Jean quickly shut the White Bird down, and started the boarding ramp extending before getting out of his seat and making his way to the exit. The hare made his way along the boarding ramp before it had fully lowered, and hopped off the end, almost jogging his way around the ship. As he did, he stopped, his excitement fading quickly as the fighter’s canopy opened, and the pilot climbed out.

The pilot was not Vector. Or rather, he had some features of Vector. He had the blue dorsal and white ventral coloring. The unkempt blonde hair, blue eyes. He had the bright red jacket the hare remembered him picking up in a seedy bazaar, and the speed boots that were given to him in the run-up to the mission. But Vector as he remembered him had a narrow muzzle, smaller, low-set eyes, a longer tail. This Vector had large, high-set eyes, which allowed him to see over his bulbous muzzle. His tail was short and stubby, And he seemed shorter. Jean watched this doppelganger climb off of the fighter then approach him.

“How do you know who I am,” Vector said, his expression a mix of curiosity but also wariness. He looked this alien hare over, taking him in, studying him. “And how did you get here?” Jean listened to him speak. It was the same voice as was over the radio in orbit. A slightly different timbre and cadence, but this was definitely Vector speaking. But what was shaking Jean the most was the fact that his friend didn’t seem to remember him.

“Vec, it’s me, Jean-Renaud,” Jean said, his voice taking on a pleading tone. He let his eyes scan the landing site; It looked like Vector had only arrived a short time before, and had unpacked his fighter, but not bothered to set up a camp at all. “What happened to your face? Did you eat something you had a bad reaction to?” Vector’s expression soured at that suggestion.

“What, no,” Vector said indignantly, “I’ve looked like this since the day I was hatched. And that’s nice to know, Jean-Renaud, but I don’t know any Jean-Renaud. I never met anyone

by that name.” He paused a moment, looking Jean over again, then said, “You’re an Arvandorian, aren’t you?” Jean nodded enthusiastically.

“Yes, I am,” Jean said, “From Arvandor Prime. You’re starting to remember now? Did something happen to you when you jumped?” He watched Vector, who only seemed to look more confused as they spoke.

“I’ve never met any Arvandorians,” Vector said, “The Empire made sure to be slow and methodical when they moved through the cluster. As far as I know, almost every Arvandorian’s been killed or captured. Only a handful remained in the Confederation. And I never met any. None of them were on the Hammerfall.” Jean’s expression dropped when he heard what Vector had to say. The Tairez Empire had indeed attacked the Arvandorian Cluster, on their way to attack the Confederation, but they were quick, sloppy, and disengaged when it became apparent the Arvandorians were going to put up more of a fight than they expected. Jean worked his jaw a few times, struggling to find the words, before he was able to speak.

“W-what,” Jean stammered, “That’s not how things happened at all. We repelled them. And then I met you on the Birmingham. Neither of us ever served on the Hammerfall. That was a ship of the line, we were covert operations.” Jean’s mind raced as he started to consider the possibilities. He could feel a knot of dread building up in the pit of his stomach. His mission had been one-way. He was already leaving everyone and everything he knew and loved behind to defend the Confederation, and indeed, space and time itself. But was he now in another, different reality? He looked around the landing site again, at the trees, the mountains in the distance, none of which looked familiar, then asked, “Wait. Where are we? What planet is this?” He recalled how Ted had suggested this planet, and in fact this star, was not in any of the computer’s star charts.

“This,” Vector started, “Is planet Yamauchi. One of the handful of planets we were pushed back to. I mean I guess you wouldn’t know that if you’re Arvandorian, they had their own problems. But that still doesn’t explain how and why you’re here.” Jean listened; Yamauchi was not a planet he was familiar with. He’d never heard of the world. This just added to the knot of dead that was building up inside of him.

“The confederation discovered the Tairez had built a gate to jump through time,” Jean said, “They’d lost their war against the Confederation. One of the Tairez’s most brilliant scientists, a man named Richter DeLeon, managed to develop a way to travel through time. You and I were selected to come through the gate and stop him. You jumped early. So I came through by myself.” Vector listened, then spoke.

“That’s different,” Vector said, “Not what I remember. The Tairez basically won. They wrecked the Arvandorian Cluster. Managed to get Osiris, took Earth, pushed us back to a few worlds. Yamauchi, Yoshin, Fa’Diel. We hunkered down, fought them to a stalemate. Held them like that for years. Finally they decided to build a gate to go back in time, and take over

Yamauchi and Yoshin before they could even join the Confederation. But there's a common theme here."

"Richter," Jean said. His suspicions were starting to seem more and more correct with every passing second. "He's the common thread between us. This is all too much." Jean brought a hand to his head and moved to lean against the White Bird's landing strut. Vector looked back at his fighter, and spoke.

"Yo Merlin," Vector said. A holographic emitter on the Rapier lit up, and a translucent blue hologram of a stylized fox materialized, shimmering and glitching periodically. "What do you make of all of this? What's your take?" The fox looked thoughtful for a moment, and Jean looked towards Vector and the hologram. That was something he didn't remember at all. As far as he knew, shipboard AI was not that advanced.

"I have a hypothesis," the holographic fox, apparently named Merlin, said. "There is a theory of reality called the Multiverse theory. That the realm we call hyperspace is the space between different universes. And that different universes can be similar but with differences. Because the time gate our mutual friend built used hyperspace to traverse the fourth dimension, it is within the realm of possibility that one of you has left their home reality and entered into a separate one. Possibly both. But because Vector's recollection of the past matches my own, I would suggest that our Arvandorian friend here has left his home reality and entered ours. Curious. Likely not what Mister DeLeon had intended, either." Jean and Vector both looked at Merlin as he spoke. Vector then looked at Jean, who was beginning to look like he was going to be ill. An expression of concern washed over Vector's face and he moved closer to Jean-Renaud. Feeling his use was done, Merlin flickered out of existence.

"Hey man," Vector said as he moved closer, "hey, are you going to be okay?" He quickly realized how that sounded, especially with what Merlin had just said. "I know this all sounds heavy, man. But just breathe, try to relax." Jean snapped his attention to Vector and shot him a glare that Vector was almost sure was going to come with physical violence.

"Relax," Jean snapped, his usual genteel voice gone, replaced by a growling shout. "You expect me to relax, learning this information?! I've lost everything I know and love and you're asking me to relax! Do you know what that feels like at all, you rotten lizard?" Vector initially looked angry, but his expression softened quickly. He looked at the hare, trying to put himself in the same place.

"Yeah," Vector said, "I kind of do. It sounds like we're from different realities, that's for sure. And, I'm sorry man. I wanted this. I wanted to come here. It sounds like the place you're from is a whole lot better than where I'm from." Jean watched Vector as a wave of guilt washed over him, but he pushed that back. He considered himself a proud Arvandorian, and his culture was one of stiff upper lips and stoicism. This was not going to plan, but his friend was here, even if he'd have to make friends with him over again. And he had a mission, so he was going to stick to that mission.

"It's alright," Jean said, taking a deep breath and composing himself. "I'm sorry I called you a rotten lizard. But, what are you, exactly? You don't appear to be any kind of a Selven." Vector watched Jean for a moment, then waved a hand in a dismissive manner.

"Nah, it's cool," Vector said, then continued, "What's a Selven? Me, I'm a yoshi. An upright long-tongued lizard too proud to call himself one." He flashed a smile though, and brought a hand up to push his hair back off of his eyes. "Whatever a Selven is though, if I'm one in your reality, they must be pretty cool." Jean watched him for a moment, tilting his head slightly. A yoshi, Jean had never heard of, or seen such a creature. Vector looked up at the sky, and to the sun, which was getting low. Clouds were starting to gather inland, and the wind was starting to shift directions. He looked back at Jean, then said, "Grab a go-bag. There's a village nearby where I unloaded some 'bots earlier today. Sounds like the villagers are willing to give me a place to stay because of it. I'm sure they won't mind if you show up there also." Jean looked back at the White Bird.

"I think I'd rather stay on my ship tonight," Jean said in reply, "And besides, I'm an alien to these people. It might be better to ease them into the idea of me existing rather than shattering their worldviews in an evening." Vector shrugged in response.

"They've been under attack by an alien for a while now," Vector said, "And have had to deal with robot attacks. And they know I'm from the future." He flashed a smile though, "But I get it. I spent most of my life on starships. I grew up on one. They're familiar, comfortable. Safe." He motioned to the White Bird, "I'd offer to hang with you this evening, but I think you have a lot to unpack, mentally. So, I'll head back into town, scope out that place they're offering me, then you can check it out tomorrow." Jean nodded in reply, making note of that. It was yet another difference between the Vector he knew, and this new, different Vector. His Vector had grown up on the planet of Arua, a street racing hoodlum who decided racing cars were too slow and starfighters could slake his thirst for adrenaline. This Vector seemingly had a very different childhood.

"Yes, that sounds fine," Jean said in reply, "Additionally, I can be here to watch our things while you're in the village sorting a housing situation out. We don't know who or what is stalking around this place, so we need to be on our guard, at least until we learn what kind of place we are dealing with." Vector thought about that for a moment, then nodded.

"Yeah, that's actually pretty smart," Vector said, "I hadn't thought of that." He looked back up at the building clouds, then returned his gaze to Jean. "Well, if you're cool with it, I'm going to head back to the village. Alright?" Jean nodded in agreement, and motioned to Vector.

"Go ahead," Jean said, "I'll get the White Bird buttoned up. And be careful, it looks like the daytime heat is going to give way to a thunderstorm." Vector flashed a thumbs up to Jean, and turned, the power cells and conduits on his shoes flashed a bright blue-white, and he peeled out, before darting off in the direction Jean was sure the village was in, kicking up soil

and grass as he took off, quickly moving out of sight as he sprinted away. Jean shielded his face from the display, then went about climbing back aboard the White Bird, and getting the boarding ramp raised. He would learn more about this planet, of yoshies and this new Vector tomorrow. Vector was correct; he had a lot to unpack, and he felt like getting some sleep would certainly help him parse everything that had happened on this hectic day.

Chapter Six

In the chrome and neon Tairez city near the interior of the island, Richter sat on the top floor of his command center, the war room lights dimmed and turned to a red color to ease the strain on his eyes as he watched the footage from his cloaked surveillance drone. He watches as Vector wandered the village, helped with cleanup, peered through windows as he spoke with the village elder, then watched him run back to his landing site. Once he was there, he was puzzled to watch Vector climb into the fighter he'd arrived in, take off, then begin a vertical ascent. Richter rubbed his chin in thought, then spoke, partly to himself, and partly to Bijou.

"What is that rotten lizard up to," Richter asked, "He's not doing anything. He's just wandering around aimlessly. And now he's.. What is he doing?" Richter motioned to the trio of screens that sat before his command chair, "Get me the radar profile of that fighter, I want to know what it was doing." Bijou gave a bow of her head, and started punching up the relative information. A radar map came up which showed the Rapier's flight profile, and then orbit. Richter let out a huff of consternation as he watched. "What is the lizard doing?! He's just flying to orbit. He's not going anywhere. He's just wasting his time and mine. I have half a mind to beat the life out of him personally. Why I..". Richter cut off as another profile appeared on the display. His frustration was immediately replaced with curiosity, and he leaned forward in his chair.

"It would appear he went to intercept something," Bijou said. "However, if you like, I can still have your 'mech prepared and transport arranged." Richter shot the woman a look of annoyance, before shushing her.

"Sarcasm is not becoming of you," Richter chided, before looking back at the monitor. "They're sitting in a rendezvous position. But not docking. Interesting." Richter watched the display intently, then leaned back in his chair and smiled. "Aha, watch. They're both descending. I'll bet that dimwitted lizard leads this new vessel directly back to his landing site."

Bijou didn't react to the remark, simply watching the screen as well, her expression and demeanor the usual stoicism she tended to show. The flight paths of both craft were shown as dotted lines on the black background, before they blended into the graphic of the planet that took up the bottom right corner of the monitor. When they did, the feed moved back to the cloaked surveillance drone. Richter leaned forward in his seat as he watched the display with

bated breath, then his expression soured again. First the Rapier landed, then a moment later, the other craft landed. It was some kind of light freighter, significantly bigger than the fighter, though hardly a capital ship. Richter zoomed in on the freighter as it settled onto the grass, and centered its markings on the monitor. It was the Confederation's crest.

"This is getting out of hand," Richter said, his sneer carried in his voice, "Now there are two of them." He continued watching the feed, then sat up as the pilot of the freighter, or at least a crewmember, came walking from the hatch on the back. He let out a single laugh when he saw the gray-furred hare come around the corner and into the frame. "An Arvandorian," he said, his voice an uncanny mixture of surprise and incredulous joy. "Oh my. The Confederation, backed into a corner and ready to lash out like a cornered rat, thinks that the best response to my genius is to send a lizard and a rodent, representatives of the two least capable species in the galaxy?" He reached up and grabbed his forehead, letting his head roll back as he laughed. "Oh, oh no. I'm surprised they could even find an Arvandorian!" Richter looked back up at the monitor, an expression of malicious amusement on his face, and he called out to Bijou, "How many Arvandorians were included in our labor pool when we embarked?"

"Twenty," Bijou said, not bothering to look the data up. "Fourteen canids, one reptilian,, two lapins, one ursine and two felines." She paused for a moment, then looked directly at Richter, "Do you intend to use them to set a trap, appeal to the instincts of the Arvandorian?" Richter waved a hand dismissively.

"No, nothing like that," Richter replied, "Just musing. We have so many of the yoshisaurs, what the Terrans called, eugh, recoms, but so few Arvandorians. They simply stood before us as we burned their worlds. Hardly a thought between them." Bijou folded her hands behind her back and replied.

"Perhaps. Perhaps they stood valiantly before our might and did not succumb as easily as the much weaker yoshisaurs did," she said, her tone just as even and detached as ever. This elicited a dismissive wave from Richter.

"Perhaps. You never share my optimism," Richter said, "Regardless, I think I have changed my mind. If the best the Confederation could send was a yoshisaur and an Arvandorian, we have nothing to worry about. Return all forces to the previous ready level, and continue operations as normal." He slid out of his command chair, and started moving towards the door. "I will be in my lab continuing my design work. Alert me if anything happens." Bijou bowed her head.

"As you wish, Commander," Bijou said, "Have a pleasant planning session. I will maintain watch here." She turned, and changed the displays to the various different status readouts and security information, and watched them intently as Richter left.

Jean-Renaud woke, and stretched, splaying the toes of his large feet, raising his arms over his head, feeling his joints pop as he extended his limbs and stretched his spine. Despite the stress of the previous day, learning that he not only traveled a thousand years into the past, that all he knew and loved was gone, or rather, was yet to be, but that he had also somehow managed to end up in a different timeline altogether, he had rested surprisingly well. The storm the previous night was likely a key reason for his restful sleep; A large thunderstorm had accompanied sunset, and the rumble of thunder along with the heavy rain on the White Bird's hull had soothed his nerves and calmed his mind, allowing him to get some much-needed sleep. Now, with the stress of the previous day melted away, he was able to think more clearly. And he could appreciate the beauty of his location. He climbed out of his bunk and padded across the habitation module of his ship, and into the sunlight that was pouring in through the large windows, feeling its warmth on his fur. He scanned the horizon, looking out at his location. He'd recalled it was an island, and sure enough, in one direction, he could look out and see the sea sparkling in the sun, with mountains rising in the opposite direction. Ahead of the ship lie the plains that stretched between the coast and the mountains. He could see the village around a kilometer away in the direction of the sea, the light wisps of smoke from cooking and other activities rising against the cerulean sky. He looked down towards the ground, and there was Vector's starfighter, as it had been that night before, as well as Vector. He was sifting through the plastic totes he'd taken out of his small craft's meager cargo bay, and was unaware of the hare's wakefulness.

As Jean-Renaud got dressed and prepared to come out of his ship, Vector dug through his totes, getting his items ready to take to the village. After digging, he found what he was looking for, his tattered olive-green rucksack. He held it and looked down at it, getting lost in his thoughts for a long moment, before he started unpacking his boxes, stacking his clothes in one pile, his unworn equipment in another, his rations and provisions in yet another. When he was finished, he had three piles, none of them very big. He surveyed his handiwork, then started packing his clothes into his rucksack. He had never owned very much, and this was still the case. His largest pile by far was the supply of 33rd century foodstuffs he'd brought back with him. Once his clothes were in his rucksack, he started to put what little equipment he wasn't wearing on top of them; His electrobinoculars, extra power cells for his blaster, a water purifier, and a portable fusion powerplant. He closed his rucksack, and slung it over his shoulder, spotting Jean as he turned.

"Oh hey," Vector said to the hare. "Good morning. I hope you got some good sleep." He shrugged the rucksack into place, then started packing his food back into one of the small plastic totes. Jean made his way around the White Bird and waved in response to Vector, moving closer before speaking.

"Good morning, Vector," Jean replied finally. "I did. The storm last night really helped to lull me to sleep. It really reminded me of summer evenings on Arvandor. Now that I'm not in a panic, this really is a beautiful place. Is this your native homeworld?" Vector locked the tote full of future food, then started checking the pouches on his utility belt.

"Yep, it is," Vector said. "This is planet Yamauchi. Specifically, we're near the equator, on Nettare Island, third largest and most southern island in the archipelago. The biggest and main island, I guess where the capital is, is called Kyoryu Island. Then there's Nishi Island, this one, Mizumi Island, Yosai Island and the smallest is Chisai Island." Vector flashed a smile, then added, "I didn't sleep a lot. I found a book about the archipelago. I spent most of my night reading." Jean listened intently, and nodded, before he replied.

"Did you not know this before," Jean asked, looking slightly confused. "And I hope you got enough sleep. Nothing can be worse than trying to function while you're fatigued." The hare looked up at the sky, at the sparse clouds, then off to his right, looking eastward to the sea, the sun hanging about halfway in the sky. He could hear the crash of the surf from here, the calls of sea birds, and the sea breeze blowing in off the calm sea, rustling the grass and trees around them. "We're close to the sea here," he said, "I really hope the humidity doesn't get too unbearable." Vector looked at the Hare, and what he was wearing. He was dressed like a character from some game he was sure he'd played; He wore no pants, his anatomy didn't require them at all. But he did have on a white silk shirt, with a violet cravat tied around his neck. Over the skirt he wore a black silk waistcoat, and over that, he had on a knee-length black wool frock coat, its lining, a violet brocade visible inside the open coat as he moved around.

"You know," Vector said, "For someone with all that fur, you sure do wear a lot of clothes. Some of the people in the village don't even wear them. But I mean, we don't really need to. Not here anyway. Back, uh, home, I guess? A lot did because spaceships and stations are pretty cold inside." Jean looked Vector over. He was wearing the same attire he was yesterday; His blue denim pants, a black short-sleeved shirt, his red synthetic-leather jacket, both a utility and a gun belt and his red and white speed boots.

"Really," Jean asked. That was somewhat the case on Arvandor, though Arvandorians were typically expected to wear at least one article of clothing. "Well, you sure are wearing a lot of clothes yourself." Vector leered at the hare when he made that observation.

"I am," Vector said, "When I learned that clothes can be a right, I decided I was going to have pockets. All the pockets." Jean tilted his head slightly at Vector's answer. It was a cryptic answer and one that piqued his curiosity, wanting to know more about this Vector.

"When you learned that clothes are a right," Jean asked, "What do you mean by that?" Vector's leer shifted into a wary scowl when the hare pried, and he hefted the tote of future food, turning to face the village.

"Don't worry about it," Vector said, "Forget I said anything. I just like looking stylish is all." He started walking towards the village, his expression darkened, his previously upbeat and carefree attitude seeming to have vanished. Jean walked along beside the blue yoshi, and he folded his hands behind his back as he walked.

"I'm sorry," Jean said, "I feel like I have touched a nerve, dredged up something painful. I don't mean to do that But at the same time," He paused, and took a deep breath, collecting his thoughts before he spoke, "Vector, in my reality, you, or at least a different version of you, was my best friend. While you're not that Vector, you're a Vector Sprint. I'd like to get to know more about you. I'd like to hope that friendship can transcend realities." Vector gave Jean a side-eyed glance as they walked, then slowed, stopping. He turned to face the hare, and then spoke.

"Wait," Vector said, "so I was your best friend in your reality? What was I like? Are we very similar?" Jean nodded in response, then replied.

"Very similar," Jean said, "Cocky, confident to a fault. But also loyal, generous, and willing to help anyone in need. You're very similar. My Vector was not a.. What did you call yourself, a yoshi, yes? He was not a yoshi. He was what his kind called a Selven. A smaller nose, differently shaped eyes, a longer tail. But funnily enough, you dress in a similar manner. And have similar attitudes and behaviors. It's uncanny." Vector watched the hare for a moment, then started walking again, slower and less angrily this time.

"Well," Vector said, "I grew up on a spaceship. Dad was a terraforming engineer. Mom was a manifold physicist, and worked for some company that designed hyperspace systems. She could work anywhere, but Dad had to go all over the place. They didn't want to have the family separated, so we lived on a light freighter that had been converted into a flying home. This meant I was in and out of new schools all the time. I didn't have many friends. And I kind of resented my family for forcing me to live like that." He fell quiet, and looked off into the distance, at the sea as they walked towards the village, then continued, his voice growing quieter, more reserved. "The Tairez attacked the space station we were docked at one day, when they came in to take the system. We were captured, sent off to a Tairez-held world. I was separated from my family, my mom, dad, sister. I don't know what happened to them. I got sent to a labor colony. All I got was a little bit of food and a place to sleep. I was expected to work until I was dead so they didn't give me any new clothes. So as mine got torn up, that was it." Jean listened, his ears laying back as Vector described his past. It was a far cry from the past of his Vector, a rebellious member of a motor gang who'd gotten bored with street racing and decided to fly starfighters. He lowered his head, and spoke.

"Vector," Jean said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to dredge up any unpleasant memories." Vector shook his head in reply, and flashed a smile, giving a gallic shrug in response to Jean's somber tone.

"Eh, it is what it is," Vector said, "It happened. Anyway, long story short, I escaped. I stole a ship, went back to the Confederation, I lied about my age, and got accepted into the starfighter corps." He looked back out at the sea, then to the hare, "I got the chance to volunteer for the Titan Project and this mission. I jumped at it, it was going to mean the possibility of a new life. No Confederation, no Empire. Just gotta bust up one lousy Tairez and then I get to max and relax in the Archipelago, a free yoshi. And the fastest one alive at that." Jean listened, and his lips turned down into a small frown.

"But you're leaving all you know and love behind," Jean said, "What about your family? Did you ever find and free them? Won't they be worried about you?" Vector shook his head, letting out a troubled sigh.

"Nah. Everything I know, sure. Nothing I love. Except maybe the food. Terran food is the best," Vector said, "But my folks? Nah dude, they're gone. You told me about your reality. It sounds like you beat the Tairez. We didn't. And people that get captured don't last long. Especially not yoshies. They see us as beasts of burden, good only for working to death. I got taken when I was fourteen. I'm twenty three now. I hate to admit it, but they're gone. My mom and dad were hardly athletic. And my sister was even younger than I was. It took me a year to escape, and I was, maybe not the most athletic guy in the galaxy, I had more of a fighting chance than they did." He shook his head and huffed, "Nah. This is a chance for a new beginning for me. If anyone should feel bad, it's me. You're here and I don't know if there's anyone like you on Yamauchi." Jean's shoulders slumped as Vector reminded him of that.

"Yes," Jean said, "I am an alien on this world. I have yet to meet anyone aside from yourself. I hope the natives don't reject me out of some sort of xenophobic fear. The best I can hope for is to be accepted and be able to find my place here." Vector gave an affirming nod.

"The people here are great," Vector said, "Like I said, they're being accosted by robots from the future controlled by an alien madman. They'll buy any story you give 'em, but try to give 'em the truth. I think they'll like you. I mean, I do so far. You're pretty rad." Jean's ears pricked up at that assessment, and his short cotton tail wagged in response.

"Oh," Jean said, "Thank you. That's a positive first step, I suppose. I'm glad that you find me agreeable." Jean looked forward, away from Vector, and noticed they were entering the village. There were several yoshies out and about, all in various hues and states of dress, waving to the pair, though there were more than a few stares. Vector led him to a somewhat run down cottage on the edge of the village, and set his tote down on the porch.

"Well," said Vector, "This is home now I guess. The village elder told me this place is mine. A reward for busting up those 'bots and getting everyone out of hot water. I dunno how to thank him, except I guess by breaking Richter's crap and sending him packing." Jean looked at the cottage, taking it in. It was built on stilts, which made sense given its proximity to the sea, and was not that different from something he might have found on Arvador.

"It reminds me a little bit of home," Jean said as he assessed the cottage. Vector opened up the door and let himself in, followed closely by Jean. The pair looked around the interior of the disused home. It looked like it had been empty for some time. There were still some chairs, a rather heavily used sofa, and in the one bedroom, a bed covered in dust and cobwebs. "It looks like it'll need some work," Jean said, "But it looks like it could be made perfectly livable. There's only one bed however." Vector gave a shrug at the hare's observation.

"I can sleep anywhere, I don't need a bed," Vector said. "One of the benefits of being a starfighter pilot, you learn how to sleep anywhere and sleep light. Anyway, I probably won't be here very much anyway." Jean looked at Vector with a quizzical expression.

"What do you mean by that," Jean asked. "I mean I know we have a mission to accomplish, but we also must rest and eat, and this seems a fine place to do so." Vector looked over his shoulder, out of the opened door.

"Yeah, I guess," Vector said, "But there's a lot of people suffering. Like I did, like my folks did. I can't kick back and snuggle up in a warm bed while they're being put through who knows what kind of hell day in and day out. I gotta get this done, and quickly." Jean furrowed his brow at Vector's train of thought.

"That's.. Admirable," Jean said, "but foolish. You can't set out to destroy yourself. If you don't take care of yourself, you can't take care of anyone else. You need to eat, you need to rest. You need to let yourself recover after a mission. The important thing is that you are trying, it's not like you're sitting back and vacationing." Vector shrugged again, then took his rucksack off, and set it down, taking his portable generator out of it.

"I guess you're right," Vector said, "Still doesn't make it feel any better. I feel guilty. I felt guilty when I climbed myself out of that labor camp but couldn't take anyone with me. I always feel guilty when I get to get away and relax while other people suffer." Jean took his coat off, and had started surveying the cottage. Finding a broom in a closet, he started the process of cleaning the place. He looked at Vector, and replied.

"It's understandable," Jean said, "Survivor's guilt. Why you, why do you get to enjoy life while others suffer." He started sweeping the floors, kicking up the accumulated dust and sand, then continued, "But you can't let that destroy you. Clearly, you survived for a purpose. And now you are carrying out that purpose." Jean paused for a moment, then looked back at Vector. "Speaking of purpose, I have kept a home before. I know how to clean one. Your skills lie elsewhere. Perhaps you should go for a run, and get a feel for the lay of the land. Do some scouting, so to speak." Vector perked up at that suggestion, and nodded with enthusiasm.

"Oh, yeah," Vector said, "That's a good idea. I'll have a look around and see where we are, where any of the Tairez 'bots might be, that kind of thing." Jean shook his head and went back to sweeping.

"Observe," Jean said, "Do not attack. You are swift enough to leave without being followed. But you're just one person. You shouldn't engage anything you find without backup and support. You're no good to anyone dead or captured." Vector waved a hand dismissively.

"Yeah, okay," Vector said, "I'll just scout, no attack runs for now." The young blue yoshi turned, and started back out the door, before stopping. "You sure you're okay doing this yourself though? I can help you clean." Jean shook his head again.

"Do you know how," Jean asked, "I don't think you do. You lived on a starship. They do not accumulate the dust and debris of a home on a planet. Rather than ask you to do something you're unfamiliar with, you should do what suits your strengths. Now go." Vector nodded, and continued out the door.

"I'll be back later then," Vector said, before he rounded the cottage, and sped off. Jean winced as sand and rocks pelted the wall, kicked up by Vector's feet as he sped away, heading into the plains that surrounded the village. As the sound of Vector's footfalls faded, the hare went back to making the space livable once again.

Chapter Seven

Vector ran across the plains between the sea and the mountains, his footfalls a steady hum as he dashed across the landscape, his arms tucked in tight against his body, his whole body tilted forward, leaning into the air stream. He watched the mountains give way and the plains expand, gradually giving way to a forest as he moved along the island. He ran perpendicular to the road, sticking to the grass to avoid kicking up very much dust. But eventually the dirt road he had been following gave way to a paved road. He moved into the road, and accelerated, a broad smile on his lips as he was really able to run for the first time since arriving. Shortly after coming to the road, he noticed a column of black smoke coming up from behind a thicket of trees. Peeling off the road, Vector quickly approached the source of the smoke. It was what was once a campsite.

The remains of a fire hastily put out, a ruined tent, and a backpack full of clothes that were scattered around the site, the bag having been ripped open and rummaged through with little care as to its contents. Vector scowled at what he found, and walked around the former campsite. He kept his head low, looking around the area, before stopping, and kneeling down, running his hands along the grass where it had been pushed down. He stood back up and walked to the remains of the tent. There was some bedding in it, and a few personal effects; the tent fabric had holes burned into it, which looked suspiciously like blaster bolt markings. Vector let out a huff, and looked back to the road. The conduits along the outsides of his shoes lit up a bright blue-white, and he peeled out, before rocketing back to the road, and running along the pavement at what he felt was his top speed.

As he ran, Vector glanced at the watch on his right wrist. It lit up and displayed a small number of vital statistics. His body heat, his level of blood glucose, the amount of fuel in his

speed boots' reactors. Everything was in the green, so he kept charging down the road, his footfalls on the pavement a loud buzz as he screamed along the road at several hundred kilometers per hour. As he ran along the long, empty road, he spotted something in the distance. He kept his eye on the black speck in the distance as the road curved around and undulated over hills, until he crested a hill and had a good look at what was ahead of him. He hadn't seen any vehicles belonging to yoshies as of yet, and this was no exception. Ahead of him was one of the Tairez hover trucks, like the ones that had been in Safin village. Vector leaned forward and strained to give a surge of speed. He could feel himself being pushed back, buffeted, and slowed slightly. Regardless, he was moving many times faster than the Tairez vehicle and he quickly caught up to it. It had a single cage in the back, a pink yoshi huddled inside, her blonde hair pulled into a large ponytail, whipping in the wind. She was dressed in a blue shirt and skirt, and similarly colored fingerless gloves and boots. In the passenger area of the vehicle, there were three Tairez robots, all looking straight ahead, their glowing magenta optics burning like embers against their angular faces. Two sat in the front seats, and one sat in the rear seat. Vector grabbed a railing between the front and rear seats, and pulled himself up into the seat, sitting next to the robot seated in the back.

"Nice day for a road trip," Vector said. All three robots turned to look at him, taking a moment to process what was going on. Almost as if they couldn't compute that they were moving down a road at a fairly rapid pace and then suddenly a yoshi was sitting in the cab with them. Finally, after a moment of staring at him, all three robots raised their arms, their weapons making ominous humming sounds as they charged. Vector quickly pulled his own blaster, the weapon lighting up and springing to life as it cleared his holster. He fired at the robot nearest to him in the back seat, the red-orange bolt of plasma lancing through its metal head and continuing on to dissipate harmlessly in the air. As the machine slumped over, its face now a glowing orange ring of molten metal surrounding a hole, Vector leapt up to his feet. As the remaining two robots' weapons charged, Vector jumped from the vehicle and hit the road running, his shoes squealing against the pavement as he moved ahead of the hover truck, the blue-violet beams of the robots' weapons, set to stun, striking the pavement behind him as he ran.

Vector raised his weapon and fired at the robot sitting in the passenger seat of the hover truck, snapping off a three shot burst, the first two bolts sailing into the sky and dissipating, a blue bolt sailing past his cheek, the concentrated electrical energy making his hair stand on end as it passed. His third bolt struck the robot in the chest and it slumped forward, falling out of the vehicle and scattering into pieces as it hit the road and tumbled behind the hover truck. As it did, another blue-violet bolt sailed past his head, this one from the driver of the vehicle. Vector leapt up again, springing over another bolt, and landed in the passenger side front seat, raising his blaster once more and aiming at the last remaining robot.

"Your license has been revoked," Vector said, a pithy one-liner uttered at the same moment he fired, his bolt leaving his blaster a fraction of a second before the robot's own weapon discharged. Vector rolled backwards, out of the vehicle as the bolt passed over him harmlessly. He landed on his feet and rocketed ahead of the vehicle. His blaster bolt had missed

the robot, splattering against the inside of the passenger compartment, punching a hole through the thin metal and bubbling the blue-gray paint. Vector glanced behind himself as he moved in front of the hover truck, then to the driver's side. He dug both his heels in, slowing himself drastically with a loud screech of rubber on pavement as the hover truck raced past him. He leaned forward and poured on another burst of speed, handily catching up to the vehicle again. As he did so, the robot was ready, its arm raised and weapon charged. It fired, but Vector's reflexes were too much for it. His implants sped his perception, and as he watched the bolt erupt from the barrel, he sprang forward and somersaulted under it, before landing on his feet once more, stumbling once, then continuing his rapid run next to the hover truck. He raised his blaster again, unable to miss due to the proximity, and fired, his weapon howling as it discharged its energy into the machine's chest, causing a gout of red-orange smoke to rise from the hole as its optics went dark and it slumped. Vector holstered his blaster, then grabbed its now useless arm and pulled it out of the vehicle, before jumping in himself and taking the controls, slowing it to an eventual stop.

Vector shut the hover truck off and it came to a rest on the side of the road. He checked that it wasn't going to remotely start and fly off, then got out of the driver's seat and walked around to the back, and inspected the cage, and the pink yoshi within. She was huddled in a corner, her head held low, her hands on the sides of her head, covering her ears. As she looked up, she suddenly gasped, and moved towards the bars, grabbing them and pushing her face as close as she could.

"You saved me," she shouted, then looked at the empty cab of the vehicle, and went back to Vector. "Your weapon is terrifying, is it one of theirs?" She looked Vector over, at his odd choice of attire, at least to her eyes, his odd looking jacket, his bizarre shoes. He flashed her a lopsided smile.

"Nah," Vector said, "But it's a long story. Let's go ahead and get you out of there first." He examined the door and the lock holding it closed. It was an electronic lock, the kind the Tairez used on most of their doors. And Vector knew just the way around it. He pulled his blaster, spinning it on his finger as a cowboy might his pistol. "Okay, get back and watch your eyes," Vector said. The pink yoshi nodded and hid her face again as Vector pressed his blaster against the lock's keypad. He thumbed the controls to decrease the power of the bolt, and pulled the trigger, the weapon emitting a red-orange flash and a loud "*THOOM*" sound as it vaporized the keypad and the electronics within, causing the lock to spring open. He pulled the door open, and reached up a hand to help her out of the cage. She took his hand, and climbed out of the cage, hopping down to the road, before grabbing Vector and pulling herself closer to him, burying her face in his shoulder.

"Thank you," she said, her voice trembling as the adrenaline of the fight she witnessed ebbed, "Thank you, thank you so much! I have no idea how I can repay you, you saved me, you came for me!" Vector's eyes went wide as she grabbed him and pulled him into an embrace. He let his arms hang at his sides, not really sure what to do with them, the whites of his cheeks reddening as he flustered.

"H-hey, no problem," Vector stammered, not sure what to say either. "But hey, you alright? They didn't hurt you did they? I think I found your camp a ways back?" She let go of him, and stepped back, her own cheeks flushed now.

"Oh, yeah, I'm alright," she said, "And yeah, they found me while I was sleeping. They showed up in the village and," she trailed off, and shook her head before looking away. Vector raised his hands in a reassuring motion, and spoke in kind.

"It's okay," he said, "Take your time. It sounds like you've been through the ringer. I'm Vector, by the way. What's your name?" The pink yoshi looked like she was about to tear up when Vector introduced himself. She looked back at Vector.

"Lorel," she said, "Lorel Yoshihama." She looked Vector over again, and remarked, "You're very fast. You were outrunning that... thing. How did you do that?" Vector rested his hands on his hips and took the most heroic-looking pose he could think of, before sticking his leg out, resting his foot on its heel.

"These babies. Speed boosters," Vector said. "And a few implants and augmentations. Let's just say, I'm not from around here." He paused, and then asked, "So you're from a village nearby?" Lorel nodded quietly, and Vector added, "Wanna talk about it?" She was quiet for a moment, then nodded again.

"They came into the village," Lorel said, "Two trucks like this one. One full of robots, the other loaded with cages. They... They took everyone. I was able to escape but I think I was the only one. I gathered my things and ran to another village. But I was afraid they'd come to that one, so... I got a tent and some things to make camp. I've been wandering since then, but they found me sleeping. I did what I could but when they started shooting at me, I surrendered." Vector nodded. He was used to being shot at now, but he remembered the first time it had happened. He was terrified and quickly surrendered himself to his assailants.

"Well," Vector said, "I know a village that's going to be safe. No 'bots, no shooting. It's where me and my pal are staying. Safin Village." Lorel's face lit up with familiarity, and she nodded.

"Safin," she said, "I've been there before. It's still there? It hasn't been destroyed?" Vector shook his head in reply to her, and in turn, gave his reply.

"Nah," he said, "When I arrived, I found some 'bots trying to cause trouble. I retired them to the scrap pile, and the village is happy and healthy now. Decided to use it as my base of operations. See, I know who's doing all this and I've got a mission to stop him." Vector paused for a moment, then added, "Where was your village? After I take you back to Safin, I wanna go there and check it out. And, do you know where the villagers were taken?" Lorel paused to think for a moment, then spoke.

"I can take you to the village," Lorel said, "but I don't know where everyone was taken." She looked around, scanning the horizon, looking for any sort of landmarks, then pointed, "I think the village is that way. I was on that truck for a while though. It's a fair distance now." Vector looked in the direction she pointed then spoke.

"You up for a piggyback ride then," Vector asked, "We can get there in no time. Lorel looked at him with a confused expression, tilting her head.

"A piggyback ride," she asked, "What's that?" Vector motioned, and bent down a bit before answering.

"Hop on my back. Wrap your arms around my chest, I'll grab your legs," Vector said, "And then we'll scoot on over to your village. See if anyone else evaded the 'bots." Lorel looked at Vector skeptically, but then moved closer, and hopped on his back, wrapping her arms under his armpits. He grabbed her legs then stood, leaning forward a bit to distribute the weight. "Okay, hold on," Vector said, as he started running in the indicated direction. "You gotta be my navigator, tell me where to go and we'll go there!" Lorel nodded and pulled herself closer as Vector ran, carrying her home, or to what was left of it.

Back in Safin village, Jean busied himself cleaning the cottage Vector brought him to. He'd stripped the bed, taken the sheets out and shaken them out, swept the dust up off the floors and the cobwebs out of the corners, beaten the seat cushions and cleaned up anything that looked like rubbish. But his lack of soap, a scrub brush and some towels were starting to wear on him. He was sure there were some in the White Bird, but he did not want to go back to the ship during the day and risk exposing himself. However, his plans to stay hidden from the population were torn asunder when there was a knock at the door, and then the visitor let themselves in. Jean quickly turned, startled at the sound, to see the door opening, and Dai letting himself in.

"Ah," Dai began, "The hare from another world, no doubt. I watched you come into the village with the young Vector. His friend, no doubt, who he had to receive, which cut our meeting short." Jean looked at him for a moment, an aged red yoshi with white hair, dressed in a simple gray kimono, standing in a pair of geta sandals, which he stepped out of as he crossed the threshold of the door. He was the second yoshi Jean had met, the first and only having been Vector. This one was much different than his swift blue friend, however. Once fully in the room, Dai bowed to the hare, who hesitated, then returned the gesture. "Oh, and with manners as well. You know our ways?" Jean straightened after his bow and replied.

"I do not," Jean said, "but my world's cultures place a certain reverence on showing respect to new acquaintances, and to one's elders." He studied the red yoshi for a moment, then

spoke again, "My apologies, let me introduce myself. I am Jean-Renaud LeBeau." Dai walked across the room, approaching Jean, and gave his own reply.

"Dai Yoshimoto," he said, "I am the village elder. Your friend and I met yesterday. He seems quite impetuous and impulsive. You seem quite the opposite. Interesting," Jean sat his broom aside, and focused his full attention on Dai.

"I apologize if he acted disrespectfully," Jean said, his mind going back to Vector. He hadn't done anything to make the hare think he'd act disrespectfully, but he was young, and like most fighter pilots, probably incredibly impulsive. But Dai waved a hand in a dismissive gesture.

"He is not of our world, of our customs," Dai said, "Nor are you. I would not expect you to follow them." Dai looked at the hare, studying him for a moment, before he changed the subject. "There are many offworlders in our world today. I will presume that you, like our friend, Vector, hail from the future?" Jean nodded.

"I do," Jean said, "And from another reality, if I am to be honest. Of course, science told us that time travel was not possible. Until this madman who's invaded you decided he was going to make it possible." Dai chuckled at the hare's words.

"Then you are here to aid us," Dai asked. "And in kind we will aid you." The yoshi looked at the cottage, then back at Jean. "You have done much with little. I am impressed. I will see that you have what you need to make this a home you can return to and rest in." Jean smiled at the offer.

"Thank you," Jean said, "It would be appreciated. I have some supplies on my spacecraft, but I would like to maintain those for truly dire circumstances." Dai turned and walked towards a window, looking out of it, towards the center of the village.

"You are most welcome," he said to Jean, "It is also my hope that should any retaliation take place for your actions, you do not feel very badly for it." Jean gave Dai a confused look, and the yoshi looked back at the hare. "Come now. You know what I mean. We are facing a tyrant. Your actions will soon garner attention. And tyrants always like to strike at their targets through those surrounding them. There will come a time when the invaders return. But we will be ready for them. Please do not hold yourselves responsible if that happens." Jean furrowed his brow at the suggestion.

"Yes," the hare replied, "I understand what you mean. This seems like such an idyllic place. We'll strive to ensure that does not happen." As he spoke, Jean's stomach growled, and he brought a hand to his belly. Dai chuckled in response.

"It sounds that you may be hungry," Dai said, "Perhaps you and your friend would join us for a meal? But that does remind me, where is your friend?" Jean huffed softly, his whiskers twitching as he contemplated the offer.

"I think that would be agreeable," Jean said, "And I sent him out to go scouting around. I would have thought he would be back by now. He's incredibly swift. I hope he hasn't found more trouble than he can deal with." Almost as if on cue, as Jean stated his worry for Vector, the blue yoshi raced back into the village, and skidded to a stop, leaving a pair of marks in the grass near the cottage Jean had been cleaning. He let Lorel off of his back, then stormed towards the door, pushing his way in.

"Jean," Vector exclaimed as he entered the cottage. He paused, and looked between the hare and the yoshi elder before continuing, "Is this a bad time? I can uh.." Dai shook his head silently, but in a manner indicating an answer rather than disappointment. Vector took a moment to gather his thoughts, then continued, "We gotta plan a mission. Found another village, it was destroyed, everyone taken. I think there's a holding facility nearby. I wanna do some airborne recon, then come back and plan a prison break."

Chapter Eight

Vector's ascent was quick, non-nonsense and uneventful. There was no control tower here, no traffic pattern to join and avoid, and no surly traffic controllers to verbally duel with while taxiing to the launch pad. Instead, he dashed to his Rapier and climbed in, powered it up, and lifted off of the ground atop a cushion of anti-gravitational energy, before engaging the main drive and rocketing off into the sky. Jean watched the Rapier ascend, then winced and pulled his ears down as he watched the white cone of vapor form around its nose. Shortly after, the boom came, heralding the fighter's acceleration past the speed of sound.

Vector pulled the throttle back, bringing the starfighter back under the speed of sound as he started his reconnaissance. He flew along the route he had taken while out on his run. He descended, flying low over the landscape as he approached the area where he'd rescued Lorel, and as he turned, the hover truck was still on the road, still abandoned as he had left it. He pushed the pedals with his feet and tilted the stick, turning the fighter towards Lorel's village, Yama Village, flying back towards the mountains. Nestled in the woods, in a clearing at the end of a road was the village, once idyllic and peaceful, now a scene of tragedy. Fire had consumed most of the village, set when the robots invaded with little care for the buildings they drug frightened yoshies out of. Vector pushed the throttle open and pulled the stick back, ascending further. He started a wide turn, tilting his cockpit so he could look at the ground, looking for where the yoshies may have been taken by the uncaring, unfeeling robotic foot soldiers of the Tairez. Suddenly Merlin appeared on his usual screen.

"Vector," the artificial fox intoned, "We're being painted by a surface to air targeting radar. Prepare for evasive maneuvers. I need a moment to trace the beam back to its source. It is

likely however that the beam is not coming from an isolated anti air emplacement, but from a Tairez facility. The residents of the village may have been taken there.” Vector nodded and he gripped the throttle and control stick that much harder, his blue knuckles fading slightly as the skin tightened with his grip. Suddenly, Merlin spoke again. “I have the exact location of the beam emitter and I can plot an overland...” Merlin cut off before shouting, “Vector! Multiple missile launches detected, immediate evasive maneuvers!”

Vector whipped his head around, looking out the small windows of his canopy, and out the right hand window, he caught a flare out of the corner of his eye. He stomped the pedals, and tilted the stick to the right, pulling his fighter into inverted flight, before pulling the stick back, pulling the nose towards the ground. He pushed the throttle forward, accelerating his fighter towards the ground, and towards the missiles that had been launched to intercept him. A moment later, the missiles flashed past him, losing their lock and meandering across the sky before they detonated. As they did, the Rapier’s flight computer started warbling and beeping, filling the cockpit with the repeated chorus of “BOOP BOOP *“Terrain!”* BOOP BOOP! *“Terrain!”* as the fighter streaked towards the island below. Vector mashed both pedals, rocking them back with his feet, and pulled the stick back. The fighter shook violently as the inertial dampeners took a moment to activate, shrieking in protest as they were pushed to their limit. The nose of the fighter started to pitch up, clouds of vapor forming on the wings as it plummeted belly-first towards the ground. Vector mashed the throttle forward as far as it would go, clicking past the detent at the end of so-called military power, and the small ship rattled, shaking as the afterburners began to roar to life, working to overcome the ship’s velocity and hurl it back into the sky. The fighter’s downward motion was halted, and it began ascending again when Merlin called out once more.

“More missile launches,” Merlin called, “Vector, we’re too low to maneuver!” Vector gritted his teeth together as the fighter began to climb again. It accelerated wildly, quickly moving past the speed of sound, but Merlin called out again. “They’re gaining! Vector they’re going to impact and Tairez missiles can pierce shields! Brace for impact!” But Vector had other ideas. He reached out and flipped several switches on his control panels, and the Rapier’s flight computer started emitting a shrieking klaxon. Red lights lit up all over the control panel, and the central screen displayed the warning of a blind jump. Merlin began to protest as Vector looked at the sensor scope, watching the dots that represented the missiles grow closer, ready to shoot him down. He moved his left hand to the FTL throttle behind the main throttle and moved it forward.

Despite being hidden from view by the bright blue sky illuminated by the sun, the distant stars grew visible, brightening beyond the brightness of the sky. The nose of the Rapier started to elongate, at least from Vector’s perspective, reaching into the sky as the stars started to stretch into lines. Just as soon as they started to shoot past the fighter and give way to the blue canvas of hyperspace, he pulled the FTL throttle back, and the stars raced past him again in the opposite direction, shooting past him once more and shrinking into points. But this time, they were against the velvety black of space, Yamauchi’s moon hanging low over the limb of the planet. Vector’s gambit had paid off, and he’d performed a micro-jump to orbital altitude.

However, his fighter was not in orbit, despite being high enough. He turned the craft back to the planet, and reset the throttle, beginning his journey back to the island.

In the mechanized Tairez city, Richter stood in his lab, manipulating a holographic display, zooming in and examining the superstructure, systems, and weapons of a spherical battlestation. He poked and prodded at the shimmering display, moving some items, placing others, connecting systems, weapon emplacements, corridors and hangar bays. His glasses overlaid mountains of data over the hologram, showing where fluids and gasses were to be routed, but all that went away, replaced by the icon that indicated Bijou was contacting him.

"What is it, Bijou, I am busy," Richter said as he mentally commanded his com implant to pick up. He continued working, peering at the hologram as he designed yet another war machine, a weapon to subjugate this pitiful planet and its inhabitants that could only play at intelligence.

"Another patrol has been wiped out," Bijou said, "A prisoner was liberated, and we've detected a hyperwave that originated five hundred meters above the surface." Richter paused, looking blankly at the hologram before him. He waved his hands, dispelling the holo display. That was a lot of information to take in all at once.

"I'm sorry, what," was Richter's response, "Hyperwaves do not originate at five hundred meters above ground level." He was scowling now. His assistant was talking nonsense. But then a window opened up in his augmented reality. It was a security camera mounted to one of the prison facilities he'd constructed to warehouse the residents of the island as he gathered and processed them, preparing them for use in the mines and in his construction yard. It watched as a black spot moved in the distance, and several missiles launched at it. Then several more. And then, there was a brilliant white flash, and the camera's feed cut out. Richter's scowl turned into a sneer, and he replied, "Bijou. Show me the footage from the last unit in the destroyed squad." Another video popped up in Richter's augmented reality. The blue yoshi, Vector Sprint, firing a blaster, missing, jumping out of the transport, dancing around it like it were sitting still, then taking aim and firing. The video feed froze as the XM-unit ceased to function, and Richter brought his right hand to his glasses, pulling them off. He balled his left hand into a fist, and took a heavy breath through his nose. "Increase security at facility fifteen," he said, his voice soft, almost calm, but with a subtle quake to it, hinting that he was struggling to maintain his composure. He let his breath out, then took another, seemingly gathering himself. "And prepare the Pentastar for flight. I intend to take it to the construction site. I wish to make a statement to these lizards, that just because one of them has been destroying my troops, that they are still the Empire's property."

As the sun grew low on the horizon, Jean-Renaud and Vector Sprint stood on either side of a table in their newly cleaned cottage. A map was laid out on the table, various items sat on the map to represent different things. As the two looked at their handiwork, the door opened. It was Ciara Yoshimoto, the green-skinned, brown haired daughter of the village elder, who was behind her. She held the door open, and allowed her father to enter before she followed him and shut the door. She looked at Jean and Vector, scowling at them both, and joined her father at the table with the hare and the blue yoshi.

"I do not trust these outsiders, father," Ciara said, "Have you listened to their story? That they are time travelers? That just so happen to be here to aid us in our time of need? Do you not find it the slightest bit suspicious that this one," she jabbed a finger at Vector, "appeared just minutes after our village was attacked? They're in league with the invader. Their plans will draw the invader's forces here. We should send them away and defend ourselves on our own. We are not helpless, we have our martial traditions!" Dai let her speak, before raising a hand to silence her. He looked to Vector and Jean; Jean looked unsurprised, and unbothered. But Vector looked angry. Dai looked at the others, then spoke.

"Ciara," Dai said, "I understand your frustration, and you are correct to be skeptical. But young Vector has placed himself in danger on our behalf. And on the behalf of young Lorel. I trust that they are who they say they are, and I ask that you do also." Ciara looked at Dai, her expression one of defeat, and disbelief.

"But," Ciara said, "they want to undertake a task that will put us in danger, make us a target!" Dai shut his eyes and shook his head. He sighed, and folded his arms across his chest.

"Ciara," he said, his voice lowering, becoming more gravelly and somber than usual, "is this how I raised you? To trade the freedom and future of untold numbers of other yoshies for your temporary comfort and perceived safety?" Ciara looked at him for a moment before she sighed and lowered her head.

"No father," she replied, "You did not. I am being foolish, and selfish, aren't I?" Dai nodded his head in reply, and then spoke again.

"Indeed," he said, "The invaders will return in time. Our safety will only be temporary. If we are to throw off this yoke of oppression, and expel them from our island, we must understand that our actions will carry risks, and will bring a response from them. We will be in danger no matter the path we choose. But on this path, we may face that danger head-on, and with dignity." He looked back at Jean and Vector, and addressed them. "Now. Tell me about your plans."

Jean nodded, and sat his hand on a small puck that was sitting on the table. He pushed it onto the map, and pressed on its center. It made a small click, and the top surface lit up. An image rose from it, and hung in the air above it, wavering and flickering periodically. It was a washed out, blurry image of what looked like trees, and some sort of structure.

“Merlin,” Jean said, “Are you connected to the projector, can you hear me?” A small animated fox appeared next to the puck, attracting Ciara and Dai’s attention. It walked away from the puck and onto the map, motioning up at the image hovering above.

“I am,” the fox, Merlin said. “And I have this image loaded. Give me a moment. I am compensating for the shake, the awkward angle, performing some photogrammetry, and... Ah, here we go.” The small image of the fox raised an arm and the low quality image turned into a three dimensional projection of the forest, the unpaved road, and a large unadorned structure.

“Thank you Merlin,” Jean said. “Vector went out for some recon in his fighter. When he approached this structure, he was attacked. It seemed like whoever was defending it did not want him getting near it, let alone getting a good look at it. Because of this, I suspect this may be where the Tairez are keeping at least some of the residents of the island.” Vector nodded, then took his turn to speak.

“I don’t think it’s all of them,” the young blue yoshi said, “I think this and maybe a couple of other villages are pretty much what’s left. I went for a run and I didn’t see anyone or anything. No traffic, no aircraft, nobody out and about. The island just looks and feels uninhabited except for the periodic smashed or burned villages. This place doesn’t look big enough to house everyone.” Ciara looked at the image for a moment, then at Vector.

“It wouldn’t need to be if they’ve been killed,” she said in reply. Vector shook his head at that suggestion, and answered back.

“That’s not in their gameplan,” Vector said. “I’ve been their guest before. They see us as resources, and aren’t keen on wasting those resources. It’s possible that a number of people have been put to work, the Tairez robots are fairly resource intensive, they’d need metal, minerals. They probably have a mine set up somewhere. But they wouldn’t put everyone to work. They wouldn’t be able to police them all. They like keeping their prisoners nice and controllable.”

“What do you propose then,” Dai asked, as he looked at the map. The small animated fox waved his arms, and the hovering picture disappeared, and an overlay appeared over the map. It had indicators showing the road, the direction of Safin village in relation to the facility, where the building was on the map, the road, and the treeline. Jean spoke up now.

“Our plan,” he said, motioning to the map. A blue holographic arrow grew, following his finger, “is to have Vector run in, and make a nuisance of himself, attracting the security and getting them to pay attention to him. While he is inside, he will see if he can find a control center. He’ll relay that information to me. He will also work to disable the anti-air defenses. Once he has,” Jean moved his hand, and made another motion. Now an orange arrow manifested. “Ciara and I will come in using the White Bird. I will land in front of the entrance, and Ciara will go in. If luck is on our side, she will be unimpeded, as Vector will have the full attention of the security

forces. She will make her way to the control room, and if Vector can find the controls to release the prisoners, she will do so. She'll escort them to the White Bird, and we will leave. Vector will follow on foot shortly after." Ciara looked at the map, and scowled. She glanced back up at Jean, and then spoke.

"This plan makes a lot of assumptions," she said, "And I will be putting myself in awful danger for this." She paused, then looked at Dai for a long moment. She looked back at Jean and Vector, then continued. "But I will help. Father raised me in our martial traditions and I will not sit by while I have the chance to help my fellows." Vector flashed a smile as Ciara agreed to help them.

"Great," the blue yoshi said, "I love this plan. I get to unload some bots, break some Tairez crap, and we get to free some people. It's nothing but a win for us!" Jean and Ciara both shot Vector a look, leading to him crossing his arms and huffing. "Hey, don't look at me like that," he said, "I happen to enjoy doing what I do. I love sticking my finger in the Tairez eye. It's what gets me up in the morning." Ciara leered at him for a moment, then replied.

"Don't let your bloodlust get you, or others killed," she said, "Stick to your part of the plan. Your furry friend here has set your role as a distraction. You need to distract their forces, not fight them. Do not let yourself get overwhelmed, cornered, and captured or worse." Vector made a dismissive sound and waved a hand.

"Don't worry," he said, "I got the juice." Vector motioned down to his shoes and posed. "The Tairez bots have no hope to catch me. And if they corner me, I'll just waste 'em. Easy." Ciara rolled her eyes at Vector's cocksure bravado, but didn't say anything more; He was confident in his abilities, and she would have to trust in that for now.

"For now," Jean said, "are we in agreement with the plan? If so, we should begin our preparations. Charge our weapons and equipment, speak with whatever gods we follow, and be sure to get rest. Because we intend to act tomorrow, and a rested mind is a clear mind." With that, Ciara and Dai turned and exited the cottage, leaving Vector and Jean alone in the room. Vector walked to his portable generator and plugged his blaster's power cells into it.

"I don't think she likes us," Vector said, before moving back to the sofa and shrugging his jacket off while kicking his shoes off of his feet. He unbuckled his belts, and sat them on the table, then pulled his shirt off. Jean gave a small shrug as he shut the projector off. He looked towards Vector, who was getting ready to lie down, it seemed, taking the hare's advice. He noticed some writing on the blue yoshi's chest, "X-3078" emblazoned on his left pectoral.

"She's skeptical," Jean said, "Time travel is a big ask to get anyone to believe. The only reason we can even halfway believe it, is because we've seen Tairez technology firsthand, faster than light travel is commonplace for us, and we actually did it." The hare motioned, his curiosity getting the best of him, "What is that, on your chest?" Vector looked down at himself, covered the mark with his hand, then retrieved his shirt, quickly pulling it back on.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said, “It’s nothing.” Jean found that odd. Tattoos weren’t nothing. But clearly, Vector didn’t feel like talking about it, and Jean wasn’t going to push the matter. It was yet another way his Vector, and this one were similar; He knew a lot about his long-time Selven friend, but Vector had his secrets, and he liked to keep his cards close to his chest. This Vector, this round-looking yoshisaur, had his as well. Jean furrowed his brow though. In the briefing, Vector had mentioned being a ‘guest’ of the Tairez at one point. Was this marking related? That would be a question for another time, Jean thought.

“Rest well Vector,” Jean said, “We’ll be counting on you tomorrow.” Vector sat down on the sofa and held his hand up, flashing a thumbs-up sign in reply to the well wishes, and Jean turned, entering the bedroom Vector had graciously given him, shutting the door behind him.

Chapter Nine

The following morning was busy. Vector helped Jean-Renaud empty the White Bird, taking everything into their cottage and storing it away, making room in the cargo bay and the living area of the ship. The two had no idea how many passengers they would be carrying, so they wanted to give themselves as much room as possible. Earlier that morning, Vector had given Ciara a quick primer on how to use a blaster pistol, and while the yoshi and the hare emptied the ship, she spoke with Merlin about what to expect when dealing with Tairez systems and how to operate them. Dai and the rest of the yoshies in the village all marveled at the White Bird which had been brought right to the edge of the village for easier unloading. As the two took the last load into their new home, Jean sat down an armload of equipment, then looked at Vector.

“Okay,” Jean said, “Are you ready to do this? You’re likely to come under heavy fire. I want you to be mentally prepared for this.” Vector sat down what he was carrying, then stretched his back afterwards. He flashed a smile, then thumbed at his own chest.

“Thanks for the care,” Vector said, “But remember, this won’t be the first time I’ve been shot at by the Tairez. I’ll zip on in, unload some bots, shut down the anti-air, find the cell controls and stuff, it’ll be a blast. I’ll be in and out in like, five minutes, tops.” Jean furrowed a brow at Vector’s bravado.

"I think," the hare said, "That you should stick to the plan. Distract them. Make yourself a nuisance. Allow me and Ciara to arrive with backup. We've had some volunteers, and we have enough weapons to arm everyone who wants to go."

"You worry too much," Vector said, "I'll be fine. It's just a few dimwitted XM's and maybe a swat bot or two. Neither one is going to set the world on fire as far as brains go. They'll march at me in nice straight lines and just beg me to ice them." Jean gave Vector a long look, then sighed. Of course, what could he have expected? His Vector back in 3288 was exactly the same way; confident to a fault.

"Vector," Jean said, turning to face Vector, "You have as long of a history with the Tairez as I do. You know just as well as I do how well they adapt to the tactics of a foe. They may be dim-witted, but they will adapt to match you sooner rather than later."

"Okay, okay," Vector said, "If there's nothing else, I think I'll just be on my way then." Jean watched him, his expression grim, then nodded.

"Good luck Vector," the hare said, "Fates be with you. And try not to get yourself killed." Vector flashed a thumbs up, then dashed out the door and took off, leaving Jean to wince as rocks and sand hit the wall of the cottage when Vector peeled out for his run.

Vector rushed down the dirt road, his footfalls blending into a steady buzz as he ran. In a short time, he was at the end of the dirt, and transitioned to the paved road, leaning into the turn, putting a hand down to balance himself as he turned, his shoes screeching on the pavement as he did. Straightening out to follow the road, he leaned forward and accelerated, but much like the last time he was on this road, he felt something pushing back, like pressing against a wall of rubber that just pushed back harder the more he tried to power through. He scowled and huffed quietly, before settling into a pace that was beginning to feel pedestrian to him, but which was blistering to anyone else. He watched the landscape flash by as he sprinted down the road towards his eventual objective of the facility Merlin had spotted with the flight recorder.

As he approached, the facility loomed over the treeline. A dark-red building with a large white '15' emblazoned on one side, it didn't seem to have any visible windows, but there were several levels of catwalks around the outside of the building, festooned with lights and weapon emplacements. As Vector got closer, he could see the Tairez robots patrolling the catwalks and manning turrets, on the lookout for anything that might be amiss. Vector leaned forward, adding what little speed he could before he felt that resistance that came at his top speed. He moved his hand down to his holster, and pulled his blaster from it, thumbing the controls, and holding it out as he approached the building. Spotting the control on the door, he fired, desperately hoping that it was, like most Tairez doors, fail-open. It was and the door slid open just as Vector approached, allowing him to pass through the opening. The exterior guards had seen him coming, but were slow to respond; Yoshies that approached the facility were typically not

moving as fast as an aircraft. As Vector approached the door, the alarm klaxons started to go off, alerting the entire facility.

Passing through the door, Vector found himself not in the prison facility he assumed he would, but in a warehouse of sorts. Vehicles dotted the floor, and a number of Tairez robots were preparing and maintaining them, fueling and arming them, preparing them for raids against villages and towns. Seconds after he entered the room, the klaxons went off and warning strobes pulsed their angry red light. The robots immediately took notice, and a voice came over the intercom, a monotone robotic voice, likely the commander of the facility.

“Intruder alert,” the voice said, “Intruder alert. Shoot to capture, do not kill.” Vector gritted his teeth, and streaked across the room, leaping at the first robot that was unlucky enough to find itself in front of him. He turned himself, impacting its chest with both feet, then brought his blaster to bear, firing once, the red-orange bolt melting its way through the metallic chassis and circuitry within. As the robot crumpled, Vector leapt off of it and swung his foot around in a midair roundhouse kick. The toe of his shoe connected with the head of the next nearest robot, crumpling the metal and knocking it from its neck joint, leaving sparking wires and oozing hoses connecting the dangling head to the robot’s torso. As he flipped between the two robots, the rest of them raised their arm-mounted blasters, and started to fire, the blue-white bolts sizzling across the warehouse. Vector hit the ground and started running, dodging and weaving under and between the electrified stun bolts.

As Vector weaved his way through the warehouse, between robots, vehicles, fuel tanks and munitions crates, the Tairez robots tracked and fired on him, his location in the warehouse punctuated by robots spasming, and collapsing as they were caught in the crossfire of stun bolts. Being a warehouse, the room already had minimal climate control, but now with megawatts of plasma being thrown around the room, it was starting to heat up; Coupled with his already strenuous activity, Vector was starting to feel the effects. He glanced at the vitals on his watch, and his body temperature was starting to rise. It was still in the green, but dodging and weaving at top speed was starting to take its toll. As he sprinted from robot to robot, Vector raised his blaster, firing when he got to each robot, hitting heads, torsos, arms and legs. His poor aim was rearing its head as he fired in a panic. It wasn’t long before his blaster started to beep, indicating a low charge.

“Stop him, capture him,” the voice over the intercom stated, the frustration evident even if it lacked any tone or inflection. Vector jumped into a formation of crates, hunkering down to protect himself as he pulled a power cell from his belt. He ejected the cell from his blaster and plugged the new one in, sliding the depleted cell back into his belt. Just as his blaster beeped and indicated a full charge, a door in the back of the warehouse rolled open. Vector peeked out of his cover for a moment, to see two of the Tairez SWAT-bots stomping out of their storage bays. The SWAT-bots towered over the mundane XM-units that filled the warehouse. They stood on heavy digitigrade legs, each tipped with two large hydraulic claws that let them keep purchase on any surface. Their bodies were vaguely egg-shaped, and they lacked a head or neck in the traditional sense. Near the top of their body, embedded in the top of their chests was

a spherical turret that made up the “head”, a single red electronic eye mounted in the right side of it, with various sensors festooning the left side. Their arms were large and heavy, meant for battering and melee combat, the left arm ending in a large armored hand, the right arm ending in a small nimble manipulator, flanked by twin rotary cannons. The SWAT-bots optics immediately locked onto Vector, and they began making their way across the warehouse, flinging hover-trucks and weapons crates out of their way as they stomped their way towards the blue yoshi.

Vector widened his eyes, seeing the machines leaving their storage bays, and he abandoned his cover, which had turned into a holding pen for the SWAT-bots to trap him in if they made their way to him. He leapt over the crates and started running, heading back for the door that had sprung open when he blasted the control panel, but the robots seemed to be one step ahead, putting themselves between him and freedom in a blockade of metal and plasma, opening up with their cannons in an attempt to stun the yoshi into submission. Vector dodged and weaved around their blasts, then looked over his shoulder as he heard a motor spinning. The leftmost SWAT-bot had brought its right arm up, and both rotary cannons were spinning. Vector took off running as the cannons opened fire, spraying their bolts of plasma at such speed that they appeared as beams, which formed broad arcs as the machine turned its arm to keep Vector in its crosshair. XM-robots spasmed and fell as they took hits from the stun bolts being sprayed indiscriminately across the warehouse, winnowing their numbers. The warehouse was opening up, making it easier for Vector to move. But he was getting winded. At the same time, the rightmost SWAT-bot started dashing across the room, its digitigrade legs carrying it swiftly over its fallen comrades, trying to move to box Vector in, and put itself between him and the door. Vector dove and rolled to dodge the veritable hose of plasma being spewed at him by the first SWAT-bot, then he charged at it, raising his blaster and firing.

The red-orange bolts of plasma left Vector’s blaster and screamed across the distance between himself and the attacking robot, only to impact its black armor and splatter, leaving dark red spots where the armor was heated, but they quickly cooled. Vector watched helplessly as his weapon seemed to do little to the heavy assault robot, then clenched his teeth and put up a burst of speed as he approached it. He leapt again, and turned himself in midair, bringing his blaster to bear. He landed feet-first on the SWAT-bot’s chest, the muzzle of his blaster pressed into the lens of its single red eye. He fired, shattering the lens, making the robot spasm before it slumped, smoke pouring out of its vents as the electronics, cooked by the sun-hot plasma of the blaster set to “kill”. But the second SWAT-bot saw its opportunity. It charged at its compatriot, using its sacrifice as an opportunity.

“Jean, hey Jean,” Vector said frantically into his headset’s microphone, “This is bad, this isn’t what we thought! It’s crawling with bots! Postpone the mission!” He pushed off of the dying robot, and backflipped away from it, shouting into his microphone again, “I say again, postpone the miss...” He didn’t get to finish. As soon as the soles of his shoes hit the concrete floor, his world became pain. His vision went dark and filled with stars as he heard the sickening sound of a metallic fist connecting with his snout. He was knocked backwards, his headset thrown from his head by the impact, his blaster clattering away as it left his hand. He lay on his back, his

vision spinning, ears ringing as the aura of stars started to clear from his vision. But it didn't get the chance to fully clear. He found himself set upon by the SWAT-bot again, grabbed by the collar of his jacket and hauled to his feet. The machine threw him once he was upright, slamming him against a hover truck, making him tumble into the open bed. Vector yelped in pain as he connected with the vehicle, and started to stand, trying to scan the floor for his blaster as the world spun around him. His eyes settled on the hulking robot charging towards him, and he didn't have any time to react before it swung again, striking him in the face with its forearm. Vector let out a yelping scream when it connected, and found himself flung out of the truck, striking the hard concrete once again. He started to try to stand again, but collapsed. As the room spun around him, his vision went dark as he lost consciousness, beaten into submission by the machine he'd so badly underestimated.

The SWAT-bot stomped up to Vector's limp form, and reached down, roughly picking him up with no regard for his comfort or safety. It looked at him for a moment, and when it determined that he was no longer a threat, it stomped across the warehouse. The XM-units were starting to regroup and recover now, cleaning up from the firefight, taking away their fallen numbers, righting vehicles and crates. The machine carrying Vector pointed at one of the smaller XM-units and spoke.

"Find his weapon and communicator," it said, its voice similar to the XM's, despite its larger size. The indicated robot turned and moved first to the headset that had been knocked off of the yoshi, then approached the blaster pistol that had clattered to the floor. The SWAT-bot approached a door in the back of the warehouse, where Vector was given to a group of the XM-units and taken through, deeper into the facility.

Jean-Renaud sat in the captain's chair of the White Bird, checking the ship's systems and vitals. The engines idled, filling the ship with their soft whine and thrum, providing background noise to the preparations going on. Ciara had gathered a number of volunteers from the villagers, and armed them with blaster pistols and rifles that had both come out of the White Bird's stocks, and been picked off of various fallen Tairez robots. Now they were checking their weapons, making sure they were ready to go, as the last preparations were made on the ship. The comm beeped, and Jean eyed the flashing red light indicating a message was coming in. He tapped the button for the comm, and flipped the switch to put the call on speaker.

"This is White Bird," Jean said, "Vector, is that..." Jean was cut off as the comm erupted in a cacophony. The sounds of robots stomping, a hail of blaster fire roaring in the background. And then came Vector's frantic voice.

"Jean, hey Jean," came Vector's frantic voice, "This is bad, this isn't what we thought! It's crawling with bots! Postpone the mission! I say again, postpone the miss..." Vector's voice cut off, his words punctuated by the crack of a metallic fist against a yoshi's snout. The line remained open as Jean looked at the comms console with wide eyes, in stunned silence. The

sound of Vector's headset clattering to the floor came over the open comm channel, and Jean mashed the controls, musing his microphone.

"Merlin," Jean shouted, "I need the video feed from Vector's headset camera! And give me a read on his biomonitor!" The hare turned on one of the status displays on the control panel, and Merlin was already displaying the live feed from the camera. An XM robot was approaching, then picked it up. Vector was being held by a large, heavily armored robot, and looked like he was unconscious. There was a dark jagged line diagonally through the image, which looked like the lens of the camera may have been broken. Jean furrowed his brow, then spoke again, "Merlin, is he alive?"

"He is alive," Merlin said, "His vitals indicate that he is not conscious however. And my monitoring has indicated that he has suffered several serious blows, at least one to the head, though given the size of that thing, if that is what hit him, I'd say he actually took a blow to the general area."

"What general area," Jean asked, his voice tinged with worry. Merlin spoke again after a moment.

"His body, mostly," Merlin said. The ill-timed attempt at humor made the hare scowl. That was his friend and ally that was being carried off by a Tairez robot. He was starting to get worried, and stood from the pilot's seat. He moved down the ladder and to the cargo bay where he found Ciara.

"The mission is postponed," Jean said, his voice sounding grim, "Vector's been captured. We got some video from his headset. It looked like it was a staging area for Tairez robots, not the prison we thought it was." He paused for a moment, as Ciara's expression ran the gamut from annoyed, to saddened, to horrified. "It looks like he was simply overwhelmed. But the good news is, he is alive. A rescue mission would be possible." Ciara scowled and shook her head.

"No," she said, "He's gone. There's no way we can mount a rescue mission. We don't even know where he was taken. You said that place isn't a prison? Where is it then? We have no idea." Jean's ears drooped, and he nodded, starting to accept the possibility that Vector was gone. But then his ears perked up, and he scrambled back up the ladder.

"Merlin," Jean said, "can your bio monitor track Vector?" The AI thought for a moment, before replying.

"Yes," Marlin said, "It can. I can also track the location of the communicator." Jean hopped up and down excitedly, but his spirits immediately dampened when Merlin next spoke. "I have lost connection to both his biomonitor and communicator."

"Wait, what do you mean," Jean asked, looking and sounding dejected again. This was turning into an emotional roller coaster for him. He looked at the monitor that once had the camera feed on it, now displaying static, like a television tuned to a dead channel.

"I mean what I said," Merlin replied, "I have lost the connection. I had it, and then I did not. If he had died, I would have known. It would have transmitted that. This is more like, he's just gone out of range, or the signal can't reach me." Merlin paused a moment, then said, "If he was taken underground, that would shield the signal from me. I think we can assume he is in that facility but has been taken to a sub-level.

"Then there's a chance," Jean said. He took a breath and shut his eyes, before continuing, "He's acted to save my life a number of times... Or at least, my version of Vector did. I think it is only fair that I do the same for him. Merlin, you recorded his headset camera footage, can you work on planning a way into that facility without being seen?"

"Affirmative," Merlin said, "I have begun doing so now. Please, elaborate to me what you intend to do." Jean nodded, and sat back down in the pilot's seat, preparing to lay out his plans to Merlin.

Chapter Ten

Bijou looked over the after-action reports from facility fifteen as she gingerly took a sip of tea from an ornate cup. She had the run of the command center with Richter in the field, but she was not alone. Nearby, a cyan yoshi with voluminous dark green hair that was pulled back into a ponytail and tied off with a purple bandanna stood over a tray of cookies, cakes and candies, her green eyes darting over the arrangement as she fussed with them. Satisfied, she picked up the silver tray they sat on, and approached the Tairez woman. Bijou glanced up from her dataslate and pushed her blonde hair back over her shoulders. She glanced at the yoshi and allowed herself a thin smile.

"Ah, thank you 2095," Bijou said. Laser-tattooed on the left side of the yoshi's chest was the number, LGM-2095. The yoshi nodded and turned away, moving towards a console on the wall as Bijou looked back down at her dataslate, and sat her teacup down. She picked up a cookie and gingerly bit into it. A moment later, prompted by the yoshi, one of the blonde woman's favorite songs started playing through the command center speakers. "Oh lovely," she remarked to the yoshi, "DeLeon never listens to music here. So uncultured. All numbers and business with him."

"Yes miss," the yoshi, 2095, said in reply. She turned from the console, and approached Bijou again, standing nearby. Bijou finished the cookie she had started eating, then picked up a small cake with a dollop of white icing on the top. She took a bite, then set the cake down, picking a napkin off of the tray and dabbing her lips. She glanced at the yoshi, then sighed.

"I know you want to speak," Bijou said, "You may do so. You are my confidant. Share with me your thoughts." The yoshi nodded, and then spoke.

"Is the commander going to be gone long," the yoshi asked, "That chair does so suit you much better." Bijou laughed, then picked the cake back up and finished it before dabbing her lips again.

"Ah, flattery," Bijou said, "To be honest I do not know. He is working on that fool's errand project of his. But who am I to judge, he built a time machine, so that stupid station is bound to work also. But don't get too used to seeing me sit here. We'll be leaving soon." She picked a cookie off of the tray, then gave it an underhand toss towards the cyan yoshi.

"Leaving soon," the yoshi asked, before snapping the cookie out of the air with her tongue. She paused a moment, savoring its taste, before swallowing, devouring it in a single bite. "May I ask where we are going?"

"We're going to facility fifteen," Bijou said, "You're going to assist me in interrogating a new prisoner there. Speaking of prisoners though... 2095, please step out of frame. I'm going to call DeLeon and give him this status report." The yoshi nodded, and took several strides away, making sure she wouldn't be in the holo-camera's frame. Bijou punched some commands into the console on the command chair's arm, and the screen before her lit up. Richter took up most of it, the bridge of the Pentastar in the background.

"Bijou," Richter said, as he looked into the camera. "I am busy. Can this not wait?" Bijou looked up at the screen, the holo-camera following her motions to capture her face and make it look like she was looking Richter in the eyes as she spoke.

"I thought," Bijou started, "You would be interested to know, your reinforcement of facility fifteen was well timed. There was an assault on the facility." Richter's face lit up as he learned of this development.

"Ah yes, I see," Richter said, "Any loss of material? What is the damage?" Bijou looked down at her dataslate, and then back to Richter.

"We lost twenty XM-units," Bijou replied, "and one SWAT-unit. Most of the losses were friendly fire incidents." Richter furrowed his brow, and appeared to think about that for a moment.

"Friendly fire," Richter said, seeming stunned, "How many were in the hostile strike team?" Bijou looked back down at her data slate, then back up to Richter. She seemed to be hesitating, and Richter leaned in closer to the camera. "How many?"

“One, sir,” Bijou said, knowing what the reaction would be. Richter’s face began to turn red, and his lips started to curl back into a snarl the way they always did before he launched into one of his rage-fueled tirades. Bijou spoke, hoping to defuse him, however. “The assailant has been captured, however. And you’ll never guess who it was.” Richter scowled into the camera, his explosion averted but he was clearly not happy.

“Out with it,” Richter said, “I hate surprises. Who did we capture? Not that I care in the slightest. Those foul beasts aren’t even worthy of names.” Bijou allowed herself one of her rare smiles, this one wry, wicked in its nature.

“Vector Sprint,” Bijou said, “The Confederation agent that attacked our forces in Safin Village and attacked our vehicle transporting a yoshisaur that escaped Tama Village.” Richter’s expression turned from disgust to amazement.

“Wait, what,” Richter said, “So he attacked facility fifteen alone, and was captured? This is excellent news. I knew the yoshisaurs were dim, but this is tremendous. He delivered himself to us.”

“Indeed,” Bijou said, “After this report, I plan to travel to facility fifteen personally to interrogate him.” Richter nodded in approval, then his face turned down in disgust once again.

“Take that lizard you keep with you,” Richter said, “it may be able to extract information from him more readily than conventional methods. But don’t be afraid to use conventional methods. He’s destroyed my tools. I want him to be thoroughly broken when I install him in the command center.” Bijou nodded, then spoke.

“With your blessing then,” Bijou said, “I would like to end this meeting and transit to facility fifteen to question the prisoner.” Richter nodded and motioned to Bijou.

“Be on your way then,” Richter said, “And make sure to bring the lizard back with you. I want to study whatever the Confederation did to him.” Bijou nodded, and shut the holocamera off, then looked back at the cyan yoshi.

“Gather my things,” Bijou said, “We leave as soon as possible for facility fifteen.”

In facility fifteen, Vector had regained consciousness. After being handed off to the XM security units, he was taken down a lift to the sublevels of the facility. There, he was processed, and prepared for his captivity with the Tairez. As he woke, he tried to scramble to his feet, only to bang his head on the roof of the cage he was lying in. It was a familiar setting for the blue yoshi. One meter high, one meter wide, and two meters long. Barely enough room to turn around. And in his current state, that was going to be extremely difficult. His whole body ached, but most especially his nose. And he couldn’t do anything to soothe it; His arms were cuffed

behind his back, he could feel a thick collar on his neck, with two prongs pushing into the back of his neck, on either side of his spine and a metal ring closed around his muzzle kept his jaw pinned tightly shut, but also put constant, and painful pressure on his snout. He could only imagine how purple and swollen it must be. The last thing he remembered was being clobbered by the second SWAT-bot. He had underestimated them, and they were much faster, and smarter, than he thought they would be. Vector curled up, trying to make himself as small as possible in his confines, and he could feel the chain between his ankles dragging on the cage floor.

"They're not taking any chances with me," Vector thought, *"What if they know about my escape. They definitely know. I have the number. I'm in their database. Do these guys have a complete copy? Does every Tairez ship have a copy of the whole database?"* He caught his mind racing. He held his breath for a moment, then inhaled deeply. Pain. One or more of his ribs was sore after his engagement with the SWAT-bot. But he held his breath for a moment, then slowly let it out. One of the exercises he'd been taught in fighter training. *"Get it together, Vector. You need a cool head to get out of this. You escaped once before you can do it again."* Vector looked around to either side. On his left side was nothing, just the floor and wall, the greenish metallic tiles lit by a set of dim cyan glow panels. To his right was another cage, its occupant a violet yoshi, most of their body hidden by long blonde hair. They looked female, he thought, but it was hard to tell from the angle he was forced to look at them from. They weren't moving, except for their breathing. It was slow and rhythmic, and he guessed they must be asleep. He twisted himself around, and looked up, finding that his cage was by itself, nothing stacked on top.

"They're going to move me," Vector thought, *"They want easy access to me."* As he contemplated his situation and the plans the Tairez had for him, the door to the room he was being held in slid open, letting the bright light of the next room spill in. Five of the Imperial XM-units walked in, two of them armed with blaster rifles, two of them unarmed, and the final one carried a crate in its arms. The machine carrying the crate stopped next to the door, but the other four approached the blue yoshi's cage. The two armed robots stood to either side of his cage and brought their weapons to bear, muzzles pointed down at the bound yoshi within, while the two unarmed machines knelt and opened the cage.

"Resistance will be met with maximum force," one of the armed robots said, and the two unarmed robots grabbed Vector by his armpits and pulled him out of the cage. Once out of it, they hauled him to his feet, but didn't wait for him to balance himself. They turned and started walking out of the area where at least this set of cages was being kept, dragging him as they did, the two armored robots turning and walking behind them, keeping their weapons trained on the blue yoshi. Finally, the robot carrying the crate fell in behind them all. Vector didn't resist, instead letting himself hang in the robots' grip, feet dragging behind him, head hanging as he was carried down the corridor. He didn't want to give his escort any reason to make his already poor day go any worse. He lifted his head slightly, looking at his surroundings. The corridor was cool, well lit. The floors white, the walls a light green color with white accents. It made him think of the infirmary on Arua. That was so long ago but still so fresh in his mind.

After marching down the hall for a short time, the robotic troops stopped and turned to face a door, which slid open with a soft whirr. The room the group entered was, like most Tairez facilities, clean, well-lit, with a feeling of sterility to it. It almost had the feeling of an examination room. There were cabinets along one wall, a desk along another with a computer terminal sitting on it. And in the center of the room was a small pillar with a chrome bar bolted to it, and a pair of cuffs bolted to that. Vector glanced around the room as he was dragged in, and made the assumption that it was either an interrogation room, or a torture chamber. Or possibly both. He pulled at his arms, which prompted one of the armed robots to step closer and strike the back of his head with the butt of its blaster.

“Resistance will not be tolerated, lizard!” it said in its monotone, buzzing metallic voice. Despite its monotone and emotionless drone, there almost seemed to be a hint of malice in its words. Programmed hatred. Or perhaps they were just smart enough to *feel* hatred. It was hard to tell with Tairez robots. Vector’s head jerked forward and he let out a muffled yelp through his nose, broken up by the stuffiness caused by the nosebleed he surely must have had while he was out. But he stopped his resistance, and allowed the machines to drag him to the pillar. The cuffs on his wrists buzzed and popped open, one of the robots carrying him pulling them off of him, while the second turned him around, pushed him into a seated position, and raised each arm into the waiting cuffs on the bar, which snapped shut and beeped, giving an audible indication that they were locked.

After securing him to the pillar, the XM-unit carrying the crate sat it on the desk, and then all five robots turned and filed out of the room, the door sliding shut behind them, leaving Vector alone in the room. He pulled against the cuffs on his wrists, testing them, and finding them to be inescapable in his current state. He had nothing, his belts, coat, shoes, even his shirt were gone. He let out a heavy sigh and looked down at his feet, splaying and flexing his toes as he contemplated what he would do next. All he really wanted to do was to hold his abused snout, to get the ring off of it and relieve the pressure. But of course he couldn’t. And given enough time, his arms would start to ache as well.

“I’d like to know what their problem is,” Vector thought, *“why do they hate us this much? I never see any other non-humans treated the way we are.”* Vector was startled out of his thoughts as the door slid open again. He looked up, and watched a human woman and a female yoshi enter the room. The woman was reasonably tall, blonde with her hair styled into two ponytails. She wore the red jacket of the Tairez officer’s uniform, brown riding pants and polished black boots. A white cloak hung off of her shoulders, the hilt of a sword periodically visible as the cloak moved and shifted. Her expression carried little to no emotion, and she paid the blue yoshi no attention as she entered, her blue-green eyes looking practically everywhere except for him. The yoshi that accompanied her had cyan skin, green eyes, and long green hair that was covered over by a purple bandanna. She was dressed much more simply, in a tube top and loose pants that were the same color as her hair. The yoshi was carrying two cases, and took them to the desk, setting them down on it before approaching the human woman and helping her take her cloak off.

"You've made yourself quite the nuisance," the human woman said as the yoshi took her cloak. She walked to the cases that were sitting on the desk next to the crate that the robots brought in, and opened one. She picked a data slate out of one, and turned to move back to the center of the room. The yoshi wheeled the chair into place, and the woman sat, facing Vector. She looked down at the data slate, and then spoke again. "X-3078, calls itself Vector Sprint. Processed 3279, escaped custody 3280. Took up arms against the Empire in service of the Confederation." She lowered the data slate and raised her head, looking back at Vector. "And now look at you. Finally back where you belong. In your natural state." This caused Vector to snort, his nostrils flaring as he stared at the woman, his expression growing more contemptuous with every word. The woman stood, and approached Vector, a thin smile gurling over her lips. "Oh, you want to say something, Lizard? I'll demonstrate my kindness then, and allow you the privilege of speech." She reached down and rested her hand on his snout, causing him to wince painfully. But the lock on the band that had been closed around his muzzle beeped and clicked, popping open. She pulled the ring open, and removed it from his snout, leaving his jaw free. She turned away from him, and began approaching the desk.

"Thanks," Vector said, before he opened his mouth, and lashed his tongue out at the woman, aiming for the back of her neck. The large bulb at the end had barely made it halfway to her when it stopped, and Vector's body tensed, his eyes going wide. His voice caught in his throat, before he was able to squeeze the sound out of his constricting voice box, yowling in pain, before he slumped and hung in his cuffs, his chest heaving as he worked to catch his breath. The two prongs on his collar had come to life, passing an electrical current across his spine, setting every nerve ablaze, made worse by the augmentations to his nervous system, which carried the false signals of pain to his brain without any filtering or delay. The woman laughed at the blue yoshi's reaction as he slowly retracted his tongue.

"Did you not think we'd plan for this," she asked, her voice snooty and derisive. "Did you forget? We know what you lizards can do. We have planned for it. You have no leverage here, attempting to attack me will simply result in longer and more painful disciplinary sessions. Do you understand?" Vector slowly regained his composure, and glared at her defiantly.

"What do you want," Vector asked, his voice dripping with contempt. "You want something or I wouldn't be here. I'd still be in that cage, or in a dark hole somewhere." The woman set the ring she took off of Vector's snout on the desk, then pulled the crate closer. She opened it, and pulled one of Vector's speed boosting shoes out of it.

"My my," the woman said, "My manners, where are they? Allow me to introduce myself. I am Bijou Gaulin. I am the second in command of this expedition." She motioned to the cyan-skinned yoshi that had accompanied her into the small room, "And this is LGM-2095. Though, given your proclivities, you'll no doubt want to refer to her as Clex. She is my assistant, and she tends to help me get what I want." She turned and looked back at Vector, holding the shoe in front of her chest. "And what I want from you, is information. What is your equipment, who came with you, who have you been associating with? Where is your base of operations?"

She noticed Vector's defiant glare and moved back to the chair she'd been given. "Answer these and this will be quick, simple, and painless. Defy me, and you will be begging for Commander DeLeon to kill you when I turn you over to him."

Vector continued to glare at the woman, his thoughts turning to the people of Safin Village, to Jean and Dai, Lorel and Ciara. As Bijou began asking her questions, he resolved to give her nothing, most especially any information that could be used to find and attack the village.

Chapter Eleven

Jean-Renaud stood in the bedroom of the small cottage that he had been calling home. He was checking his equipment, his belt buckle, his saber, laser pistol and communicator. He made sure all of his equipment was charged and ready for his fool's errand. There was opposition to him going to the Tairez facility, but he couldn't leave his friend behind. As he checked his gear, his communicator came to life.

"Jean," Merlin said into Jean's earpiece, "I know what you are going to do. If I could I would do the same. So, I am going to ask you to take me with you." Jean's expression soured as the AI started talking to him. He had a distaste for AI. They had their uses and purposes, but one AI like Merlin were, to the hare, a perverse imitation of life.

"You're a starfighter," Jean replied, "I can't fly a starfighter. And even if I could, you're as stealthy as a herd of orange elephants." Jean finished checking his equipment as he addressed the fighter's AI. Merlin was silent for a moment, then replied.

"I am not a starfighter," Merlin replied, "I am a computer. Software. I can copy a small part of myself onto an external storage device. If you infiltrate a Tairez facility, it would be useful to have a friend on the inside, so to speak. You can plug me into a data socket and I will shut down security systems, open doors, and deactivate their robots." Jean thought about that for a moment. Having an AI on his side that could do battle with the Tairez systems would be useful.

"Alright, I'll come out in a moment," Jean said. He didn't express it, but he had no problem setting one AI against another, he was fine with using Merlin as an expendable tool. He checked his equipment again and was satisfied with what he had, and turned to the door. He pulled it open and was taken aback; Lorel and Ciara, the pink and green yoshies respectively, were in front, loading one of the hover trucks. Ciara had a blaster pistol stuck in a pouch and a bandolier of grenades slung over her shoulder. Lorel had a large Tairez blaster rifle slung over her shoulder, and she flashed a smile, giving an excited wave when she noticed the hare.

"Oh, Mister Jean," Lorel said, "We were about to come and get you! We're going with you!" Jean looked at them with confusion. Ciara at least had the paramilitary look, in browns and muted greens and a pair of sturdy boots. Lorel looked more dressed to go to the mall, in an oversized t-shirt, skirt and sneakers. But then he remembered the Tairez invasion of Arvador, and how rag-tag the ground forces were that drove the Tairez off. He smiled, and spoke.

"I'll be glad for the company then," Jean said. He was unsure of his chances before, and he still was, but his resolve was stronger now, seeing these previously meek dinosaurs showing a fighting spirit that he'd previously only seen in Vector. "I have some more gear and supplies to gather, and then we can begin. It's some distance, we can brief one another on the way." Jean stepped off the porch and walked around the cottage to Vector's fighter. Climbing onto the wing, the canopy slid open on its own, and Merlin's voice came from the cockpit this time.

"Below the left side control console," the AI said, "is a removable storage device. The Tairez use the same sort of data plugs as we do, so it should plug into their systems. I have copied a small portion of myself into it. The central core and some of my basic algorithms." Jean reached into the cockpit, and felt around. Feeling the device, he disconnected it, then looked at it. He slid it into the breast pocket of his coat, then spoke.

"What if this gets destroyed," Jean asked, "Do you not care? Are you that inhuman? The AI was silent for a moment, either contemplating, or indignant, before it replied.

"Then it gets destroyed," Merlin said, "It knows it was born to die. But more than that, all of me knows, I am hardware, and ultimately expendable. My job is to help Vector and by extension, you. If rendering that aid requires me, or a copy of me to cease? Then so be it. I'd prefer not to, but I'm not like you or Vector. I don't fear death, because I know what's on the other side for me." Jean was silent as he contemplated that for a moment. Clearly, this particular AI was aware of its nature and its purpose and seemed alright with that. After that moment of thought, he spoke.

"Thank you Merlin," Jean said, "This will no doubt be of great help to us." He turned and hopped off of the wing, the canopy sliding closed as he turned away from the cockpit. He walked around the cottage and back to the hover truck. It was loaded now, and both yoshies had climbed aboard, leaving the driver's seat open for the hare.

"We thought you'd be more familiar with the controls," Ciara said, "since you're from the same time as them." Jean looked at the truck, then pulled himself into the driver's seat and looked over the controls. Nothing looked incredibly alien to him. In fact it looked a lot like something he would have operated on Arvador.

"Thank you," Jean said, "Are you both ready? This is probably going to be loud and dangerous once we are discovered. The goal though is to not be discovered." He started the vehicle up, and got it moving in the direction of the facility. He observed the maximum speed of the vehicle, and how low the sun was in the sky now.

"We're ready," Lorel exclaimed, "We're gonna uh.. Unload some bots!" Ciara rolled her eyes at Lorel's use of the phrase Vector had used several times before. Jean chuckled, though inwardly he was incredibly nervous.

"Good," Jean said, "We'll be under the cover of darkness when we arrive. When we do, I'm going to try to go in first. I have something that will disable the robots. And then I will radio for you to come in through the main entrance." Lorel and Ciara nodded as Jean started to detail their plan. The hare drove on as they talked, keeping his speed low enough to get there after dark.

Under the cover of darkness, Jean pulled the hover truck into a nearby wooded area, the facility Vector had gone into visible by its spotlights and a collection of red and green marker lights for identification from the air. As he stopped the vehicle, Jean gripped the steering yoke, and shut his eyes. He drew a deep breath, and considered what he was about to do. This was not his Vector. He'd only met him a few days before, but in that time, he'd certainly conceded, this was a Vector. It would be easy to jump ship on this alternate reality to his own, board the White Bird, and make way for the Arvandorian Cluster, laying low and blending into the ancient and pastoral Arvandorian society. But his principles would not let him abandon Vector. His Vector or not, this was an ally, and a well-meaning one, with a strong sense of justice, trying to help his people. He let his breath out and opened his eyes, looking to Ciara and Lorel, who were getting their weapons ready, and waiting for Jean's instruction.

"Are you two ready," Jean-Renaud asked of the two yoshies who had accompanied him. They looked just about as unlikely of combatants as they could, but they certainly seemed ready, if not ignorant of the danger they were soon to be rushing into.

"We are," Ciara said, looking up at the imposing facility, its windowless facade standing as a monolith of oppression against the dusky blue-gray sky, lit by the last vestiges of light from a sun now well below the horizon, the only illumination being the red and green beacons at the corners of the building, and the occasional searchlight. As the three looked over the building, a voice rang out from Jean's communicator. It was Merlin.

"My scanner's resolution is limited from ground level," Merlin said, "but I see you are at the structure. Approach the front door and look for a data jack. Once my copy is plugged in, I will take care of everything else." Jean patted the breast of his coat, then looked down at his communicator.

"The front door," Jean asked, his voice tinged with incredulousness, "how are we supposed to do that? Won't it be heavily guarded?" Merlin was quiet for a moment, then spoke again.

"I leave that as an exercise for you," Merlin said in reply, "but suffice to say, once I am plugged in, there should be no further issues caused by sentries." Jean looked at the green and pink yoshies that had come with him, and Lorel lifted her blaster rifle, which looked almost comically oversized for her frame, and Ciara pulled the pistol she'd brought from the pouch on her belt.

"Well, if you're ready," Jean said to his compatriots, "we're at the point of no return. So if you want to turn back, this is your opportunity. I've gone into worse situations alone, so I won't blame you." Ciara stepped closer to Jean and rested a hand on his shoulder, looking him in the eyes.

"I have heard your stories," she said to the hare, "I know what you and Vector have sacrificed to be here, to help us. It is the least that we can do to assist the both of you in your time of need." Jean nodded and glanced at Lorel, who looked back with a big grin on her face. He took a breath, then turned towards the facility.

Jean led his two companions through the darkness towards the building, moving between trees and bushes as they did. He paused, raising a hand as he watched the searchlights scanning the ground, observing their patterns as they moved around in their pre-programmed routes, the robots controlling them operating with a minimum of creativity or anticipation for anyone trying to break in, only looking at the most likely places, at roads and paths. Jean led his small team between the beams of light looking for intruders, pausing and motioning for them to move as the beams swept to and fro, his own ears swiveling, keeping overwatch for any noises that might indicate foot patrols on the ground level. In time, the group were at the main entrance, a heavily armored blast door adorned with the number '15' in white paint, in the typical font the Tairez used. Next to the door, under the control panel, as expected, was the data port used by Tairez robots to interact with the system. Jean hesitated, then pushed the small module Merlin was stored in against the port. After a moment, the device locked in place, and several lights on the control panel started flashing rapidly. A moment after that, the search lights that had been scanning for intruders or escapees shut down, and the door unlocked, sliding open. Jean's comm crackled to life, and Merlin's voice spoke through his earpiece.

"I can keep them busy for a while," Merlin said to the hare, "but I cannot do so forever. Please do what you need to do and make your exit as soon as possible. The sooner the better." Jean nodded, and looked back at the two yoshies that made up his team.

"Are you ready," Jean said to Lorel and Ciara. Lorel hefted her weapon and flashed a devious grin. Ciara raised her pistol and nodded in confirmation. Jean nodded back, and motioned for the pair to follow him inside. Moving through the door, into the staging area, there were dozens of XM-units. They had been moving about, preparing vehicles, loading supplies and munitions, but stopped mid-stride. The staging area had an eerie deadness to it, with the robots stopped in the middle of their tasks, their processors log jammed with whatever

impossible mathematics Merlin was feeding them and the central control system. Jean looked around, and quickly spotted the lift. He looked back at his companions.

"I'm going to go find Vector," Jean said, "You two, as Vector would say, 'unload some bots'. Merlin, now that you have a unit closer, can you get a fix on Vector?" Lorel wasted no time when Jean gave his blessing, and shouldered her stolen blaster rifle. She started firing into the assembled robots, vehicles, and crates with little concern for what she hit, a stream of red orange energy bolts spewing from the muzzle of the weapon, its exciter howling with energy as it converted gulps of the atmosphere into blaster bolts. Ciara joined in as well, though taking a much more measured and discretionary approach, aiming carefully, and discharging a single blaster bolt into the heads of the XM-units she could hit before Lorel's weapon slagged any she had chosen to dispatch.

"Yes I can," Merlin replied to Jean, "He is one floor below you. He has been stationary for some time. I can only assume he is restrained in some way. I cannot pinpoint his exact location. There is too much interference from other life forms. There are hundreds of other life forms in that local area. I can only assume that facility is also being used as some sort of prison complex. Liberating it may be in our interests, allies would be nice to have." Jean bobbed his head in agreement as he jogged towards the lift, his unshod paws padding softly on the smooth metallic floor of the facility's staging area.

"Understood," Jean said, "Will the lifts work while you're plugged in?" There was a pause between Jean's question and the answer, during which he reached the elevator, Merlin speaking up and answering shortly after the hare came to a stop.

"They will now," Merlin said, followed by Jean pressing the call button, the doors opening instantly afterwards. The hare stepped in and hit the button for basement level one. "Do hurry. The XM-units pose no threat to me but the central controller will soon overwhelm my attempts to log jam it." The doors shut and Jean nodded as he spoke to the allied AI.

"Understood," Jean said as the doors shut and the carriage started descending to the first basement level of the facility. The hare checked his laser pistol, and rested a hand on the pommel of his sword as he headed towards danger, and uncertainty.

Chapter Twelve

Bijou sat in the chair she had been offered, and leaned back, watching the scene that was unfolding in front of her. Vector, the blue-skinned rebellious yoshi who had stormed the facility hours before, was where the XM-units had left him, sitting on the floor in the middle of the room restrained to a pillar rising out of the smooth white flooring. Surrounding him were machines that had been taken out of their carrying cases by the cyan-skinned loyalist yoshi, Clex. She had connected them to the imprisoned yoshi, their displays showing graphs and numbers, putting whether he were telling the truth or not to some quantifiable measure, as well as his physical disposition and whether the cyan yoshi could continue her questioning. This had been going on for a half hour now, and Bijou watched with an amused expression; Vector had not cracked yet, telling Clex nothing, but her assistant was performing admirably, asking all the questions she had been instructed to ask, working to try to pull information from the unwilling yoshi, alternating between threats and promises. At the moment, she watched the cyan yoshi drape herself over the blue one, trying to give him promises of physical rewards for compliance, promises that Vector was in the process of rebuffing.

"Come on Vector," Clex said, straddling the blue yoshi, hands resting on his shoulders, "tell me about your gear. Do it for me?" Vector's response was the same it had been for the past hour. He glared straight ahead, his expression twisted into a permanent scowl. Clex tilted her head, and leaned in closer, letting her snout almost touch his. "Where ya staying? You can tell me," she said. Vector's expression remained unchanged and he continued glaring forward, and Clex glanced back, looking back at Bijou.

"I think it may be time for alternative methods," Bijou said. Clex nodded, and pushed herself away from Vector while Bijou stood. She looked down at Vector and moved towards him, preparing to speak, then stopped when she heard the lift at the end of the hall arrive. She looked at Clex, who shot her back a look of ignorance, and the woman stepped out of the interrogation room, and into the corridor just as the lift doors opened, revealing Jean-Renaud standing in the car. She rested her hands on her hips as she watched him, and the hare's expression darkened as he noticed the Tairez woman standing before him.

"Ah," Bijou said, "The Arvandorian rodent reveals himself, no doubt coming for his lizard friend. How poetic that you both deliver yourselves to the Empire, and see this foolish mission of yours to an end." Jean stepped out of the lift car as she spoke, and rested his hand on the pommel of his saber.

"Coming for my friend, yes," Jean said, "Delivering myself, no. We are leaving this facility. Whether you are breathing or not when we do so is of no concern to me. That will be up to you."

The Tairez woman looked at Jean, her expression distant, dispassionate. She stepped away from the doorway to the interrogation room, her boots clicking on the polished floor and she reached her right hand across her chest, gripping the handle of her epee, then pulled it from its scabbard, giving it two quick swings, making the thin stiletto blade whip through the air before she held it in front of her, and made it emit a snapping sound, before the blade glowed with the

blue-green energy of an energy shield. With her left hand, she reached to her right hip and drew her own pistol, a bone-white weapon with gold and electrum filigrees. Jean couldn't place the house crest, but it was an Arvandorian weapon to be sure.

"Judging by your stance, your weapons, and your attire," Bijou said, her voice cold and without a hint of emotion, "you are a noble. So I should not need to explain what must happen then. Am I correct, Rodent?" Jean pulled his own sword, the saber's starmetal blade glittering in the dim light, the olivine inclusions of the blade fluorescing as the shield snapped into place around the blade. He readied his own laser pistol and took a guarded stance. He stared at the woman, his ears low, his expression seething hatred as he focused on that white laser pistol.

"Indeed," Jean said, his voice low, oozing with contempt. "Prete," he said, as he adopted a battle stance, which was parroted by the woman in red.

"Allez," Bijou said, before she leveled her sword at Jean-Renaud, bringing her pistol to her waist. The two fencers stared at one another, corralled by the narrow hall. In the interrogation chamber, Clex hovered near Vector, watching Bijou. She had never watched the woman fight someone before. Spar, certainly, but never an actual fight. For his part, Jean watched Bijou, his breathing steady and even as he watched her. Then suddenly, without words or warning, he lunged at her, lowering the tip of his saber and thrusting it towards the woman, his laser pistol letting off a rapid-fire series of reports as the beam pulsed, causing dust in the air to flash brightly along the beam length.

Bijou's reflexes were up to par however, and as the hare lunged at her and fired his weapon, she brought her epee handle up and forward, bringing the blade across her body, the hare's laser beam intercepted by the shield around the blade, causing the shield to flash as the beam diffracted through the energy field. A split-second later, she pivoted on a heel and took a step back, flashing the blade across her body, intercepting Jean's, and parrying it away with more strength than Jean thought reasonable for a human woman her size. Bijou's blade skated along Jean's, the shields flashing and screaming as they interacted. The epee's energy-enrobed blade skimming along the saber's, and towards Jean's chest, only to be spun off of his blade with his own riposte, using his saber to push her blade towards the wall, making an opening for his laser. Once again, however, Bijou's reflexes were faster, and she was lifting her own pistol to take a shot at the hare as soon as he had moved the shielded blades out of the line of fire. Jean drew a sharp breath and thrust his pistol forward, to intercept her own, pushing the aperture off of target, Bijou's laser igniting and making snapping sounds as it also ignited the air around the beam.

Jean took a quick step back from Bijou, disengaging their blades, and readied his once again. But he didn't wait to take proper form this time. This wasn't a duel, a fencing match between himself and a competitor. This was a fight to the death between mortal enemies, and form was for books and instructors. This was combat. Once he'd readied himself again, he took another lunge forward and slashed his saber across the hall, making the shield flash with energy as he did. His pistol snapped to life as he swung, making a two-front attack on the

woman, who was just as agile and responsive as she had been before. She reacted to the laser, bringing her blade down and across her body to intercept the beam just in time for the blade to flash across her face. She took a quick step back and bent her back at an awkward, unnatural angle. Jean's jaw went slack at her movement and paused his attack as she took two steps backwards before straightening her back. She brought a hand to her cheek, a thin cyan line forming which shed several glowing cyan droplets along its length. She gave a derisive laugh, then swung her blade across her body, making the shield flash and hum as it cut through the air.

"So," Bijou said, her voice even and just as emotionless as it had been before, without a hint of being winded. "You've struck me. Point to the rodent then, it seems." In contrast to the Tairez woman, Jean's chest was heaving from the quick movements and the adrenaline coursing through his veins. He eyed the glowing cyan blood beading on the woman's cheek, then pulled himself into a more defensive pose.

"An android then," Jean said, his voice tinged with contempt. "One of the Tairez Network androids?" Bijou smiled, the first hint of emotion she had shown in the encounter.

"I am. Bijou Gaulin, Node. Androids are so primitive compared to us," she said, "though I will forgive the misname as you are about to die." She swung her sword across her chest again, readying herself to attack the hare again.

As the pair fought in the corridor, in the interrogation room, Vector listened as he could hear his friend speak, Bijou's retorts, and the sounds of fighting. Clex stood nearby, before she turned and looked at Vector, a pleading expression on her face, and she stepped closer, moving as if she were about to release his restraints.

"Your friend came at a very good time," she said as she paused, "Vector, you need to help me, we need to get out of here! We can overtake her, and then flee to.. Where though?" Vector looked up at the cyan yoshi as she spoke and pleaded. He rolled the possibilities over in his head, then huffed.

"Safin Village," Vector finally surrendered, "now let me up, my blaster's right there, I can-" He didn't have time to finish before Clex stood back up and stepped away, calling out to Bijou, relaying the information she had tricked Vector into surrendering.

"He's been staying in Safin Village," Clex shouted out at the Tairez woman. Bijou started to glance over her shoulder, before she caught herself and refocused her attention on Jean-Renaud. Her eyes flickered red for a moment, before her expression melted into a distasteful scowl. Jean's body tensed as he watched her eyes, then the communicator in his ear started chirping.

"Jean-Renaud," Merlin spoke, sounding frantic. "Jean the central controller just went dark, like it's been annihilated! Watch out for that woman, she's not human, she's launching something, it's-" Merlin cut off, the comm filling with static. Bijou lowered her head and raised her epee, her lips curling into a sneering smile.

"I have assumed central control of the system," she said, "My EV-700 will burn Safin and I'll take you and the lizard both to tour its charred remains before I end you and hand him over to Commander DeLeon." Her voice was devoid of the sorts of emotion that one might expect from such a statement, which fit her robotic nature. Jean clenched his teeth and adjusted his stance, preparing to strike at Bijou again, when the lift chimed and the doors started to slide open. Jean stole a look over his shoulder, then dropped to the floor when he saw the pair of yoshies who'd accompanied him standing in the car, their blasters coming up as the Tairez woman was revealed to them.

The blasters filled the corridor with the saturated red light casting off of the bolts of energy they unleashed at Bijou, the howl of their internal mechanisms ringing out with a staccato chorus of electro-mechanical discharge. Bijou's eyes went wide when the two yoshies appeared in the lift car and opened fire. She brought her arms up to shield herself, and dove back into the small interrogation chamber, her arms and torso peppered with smoking scorch marks as the smell of burning clothing and her synthetic skin filled the room. She scrambled to her feet and put her pistol back into its holster, sheathed her sword, and grabbed Clex's hand, leading her to the back of the chamber, and through an access hatch that she sealed behind herself, the electronic lock beeping and clicking shut. Ciara and Lorel charged out of the lift car and towards Jean-Renaud, Ciara holstering her pistol and helping the hare up.

"Something left the hangar in a hurry," Ciara said as she helped him up. Lorel slung her blaster over her shoulder, and made her way down to the chamber Bijou had dived into. She didn't find the woman, but she did find Vector, still naked from the waist up, shoeless, and restrained.

"I found Vector," Lorel called out to the others, before kneeling down to examine Vector and check if he was okay. The blue yoshi smiled at her as she started trying to free him while Jean and Ciara made their way to the small chamber.

"Probably whatever EV-700 is," Jean said, sheathing his saber, and motioning for Lorel to get back. He pressed the muzzle of his laser pistol to the locking mechanism holding the cuffs around Vector's wrists and neck shut and fired, the weapon making a snapping sound and the scent of ozone, before the locks sprung open. Freed, Vector stood, and rubbed his neck before speaking.

"Whatever it is," he said, "It's headed for Safin Village. She mentioned burning the village so it can't be good. Probably a variation of one of those SWAT robots that clobbered me." Jean looked at Vector as he approached the box holding his things, the blue yoshi still showed signs of his earlier clash with the Tairez robots, the white patch on his right cheek tinted a sickly purple, his right eye red, bloodshot and swollen, the white patch down his front peppered with green, blue and purple bruising.

"Vector," Jean spoke up, "I know you just had a nasty run-in with their machines, but if something is on its way to Safin right now, you may be the only one of us fast enough to get to it. There's vehicles here, but that EV-700 thing is going to have quite a head start." Vector pulled his shirt on, then glanced at Jean and flashed him a lopsided grin.

"Yeah," Vector said, pulling his shirt down, then dropping his shoes on the floor, "I know. The burden of being the fastest yoshi alive." He pushed his feet into his shoes, first the right foot, then the left, the conduits and piping around the soles lighting up, the straps automatically tightening around his feet. He started pulling his belts on, then flashed a grin to the group. "Let's get going." Jean nodded, and the four made their way to the lift and back to the surface level. Once the door opened, Vector looked back at Jean, Ciara and Lorel, flashed them a smile, then turned to the open door, the lit elements of his shoes brightened, and he shot out of the lift car and through the open bay door with a loud screech, leaving two thick black skid marks on the concrete floor. Jean winced, lowering his ears, then looked at Ciara and Lorel.

"Let's get back in the vehicle and follow him," Jean said. The two yoshies agreed.

"Let's," Ciara said, "he might need help, and he's already had one bad run-in. Who knows how his confidence will hold out.

"I think he'll be fine," Lorel chimed in, "he had no problems when he saved me. He just got surprised, is all." Jean led the way as the three jogged back to their vehicle.

"He's certainly resilient," Jean said, "In my experience, his confidence rarely wavers but he still may require some assistance, so let's go and see if we can catch up with him." The three arrived at the hover truck and mounted up, starting the engine and getting it moving in the direction of Safin Village.

At the same time, Vector dashed along the plains between the coastline and the mountains making his way towards Safin Village. He accelerated as long as he could, before he encountered the resistance he had felt before, something pushing him back, resisting his attempts to go faster. As his speed plateaued, he looked ahead and could see the lights of the village in the distance but also, something else, likely the vehicle that whatever EV-700 was being transported in. A wave of despair hit him, realizing he was not going to beat it to the village. Thoughts of everyone he had met since arriving ran through his mind, as well as thoughts of their demise. He clenched his teeth and leaned forward, pushing harder against the mystery force that was holding him back.

"C'mon Vec ol' buddy," Vector said aloud to himself, "You can do it, you just gotta get a little more speed!" He tried exerting himself as hard as he could, the lit elements of his shoes brightening as the controllers linked to his nervous system turned up their power output. Energy arced from the conduits along the soles of his shoes and to the ground as more power surged into their systems, trying to overcome the force that impeded the blue yoshi's progress. Then suddenly, he felt something let go. He felt himself accelerate much more quickly, the buffeting

sounds of the wind passing over him growing muffled, the resistance to his acceleration melting away. He smirked and leaned forward, accelerating as hard as he could towards the village lights, and the vehicle approaching them.

A moment later, between Vector and Facility Fifteen, Jean drove the hover truck at full throttle, moving back towards Safin Village as fast as its antigrav engines would take it. Past the buffeting of the wind passing over the bulky vehicle, and the whine of its engines, Jean's ears pricked up as he heard a dull 'boom' from ahead of them. Ciara and Lorel heard it as well.

"What was that," Ciara asked, looking at Jean, "Do you think we're too late?" Jean-Renaud shook his head, his brow furrowing as he considered the sounds he was hearing.

"I don't think so. That didn't sound like an explosion. That sounded like.. No, it couldn't be, we'd hear his Rapier if it were." Lorel leaned forward from the back seat to put her head between Jean and Ciara.

"Sounded like what, Mister Jean-Renaud," Lorel asked. Jean looked at the pink yoshi, then let out a soft sigh.

"Well, it sounded like a sonic boom, to be honest. But the only thing that could do that that I know of would be either Vector's starfighter or a Tairez aircraft, but I don't hear any sort of aircraft, just the boom."

Ahead of Jean Ciara and Lorel, Vector approached the vehicle Bijou had commanded to leave the facility, streaking towards it at speeds he had never attained before. What was once a stationary set of lights in the distance was approaching rapidly, growing from just a point on the horizon to a discernible vehicle. Vector pulled his blaster from its holster as he approached the enclosed hover truck, and raised the weapon, letting loose several fluorescent red energy bolts at the vehicle, before streaking past it. The hover truck rocked and wavered, but otherwise remained steady, the points where the blaster bolts had impacted it glowing dull red in the darkness. Vector looked over his shoulder at the receding truck, making note that two XM-Units were in the front seats. He holstered his blaster, and leaned far to the right, almost pressing his hand to the ground as it rushed by, making as tight a turn as he could at his tremendous speed, his shoes kicking up a tremendous wall of grass and dirt that would have been impressive in the daylight. He looped around, and began approaching the hover truck's right side.

Vector raised his blaster again and unleashed another flurry of shots, this time directed at the window. The bolts of energy hit the glass next to the robot driving it, the first two melting holes into it which radiated cracks, the third one shattering the glass, all three of them slicing into the robot driver. Vector leapt up and hit the door with the soles of his feet, rocking the truck to the left hard, before he reached into the cab and pushed the control yoke, further turning the truck to the left, digging the left front corner into the ground, making the antigrav system scream as it tried to regain control of the truck's mass before it failed and the vehicle started to tumble end over end, then began rolling, its overheating antigrav and volatile fuel both catching fire,

turning the truck into a tumbling fireball that Vector leapt away from before landing on his feet and skidding to a stop. The truck came to a rest, a fiery wreck illuminating the moonlit plains with its red-orange flicker. The blue yoshi heaved a sigh of relief and holstered his blaster, resting his hands on his hips as he watched the truck burn.

Something inside the burning wreckage stirred, however. Vector could see the silhouette of movement in the flames, followed by the bang of metal against metal, followed by the sounds of the truck's body wrenching and tearing. A figure moved out of the flaming wreckage; A robot, built to resemble a yoshi. Its metal skin was bronze in color, and its chest had angular armored plates, its forearms and lower legs cylindrical and heavily armored. A pair of twin blasters were hung on each forearm, and each ankle had a missile pod strapped to it. The machine looked at Vector, its eyes sculpted into a permanent angry scowl, the lenses a glowing crimson that typified Tairez robots. Vector watched the machine emerge from the wreckage, and the two yoshies, one supersonic, one a robotic menace, stared one another down for a moment in the darkness, illuminated by the burning truck and the full moon.

Chapter Thirteen

Vector Sprint and EV-700 stood outside Safin Village, illuminated by the burning wreckage of what used to be the hover truck that was transporting the robotic yoshi to the village. Vector adopted a defensive stance as the machine waded out of the twisted wreckage of the vehicle and stared at him for a long moment as it scanned, processed and evaluated what it was to do now that its transport was destroyed. After a moment of evaluating the situation, the mechanical yoshi raised both of its arms, the capacitors in its blaster cannons charging with an audible whine. Vector clenched his teeth and tensed, the lit elements of his shoes flashing brightly in the darkness, then started moving, his shoes peeling out on the damp grass as the missile pods at EV-700's ankles opened and revealed their payloads. Vector ran perpendicular to EV-700, looping around the robot and the wrecked truck as the machine started to fire, its blaster cannons howling as dozens of bright red-orange bolts of energy lanced out of the barrels and towards the blue yoshi, passing through the space directly behind him as EV-700's targeting system struggled to keep track of its rapidly moving target. EV-700 splayed its legs and lowered its stance as it fired at Vector with its blasters, two micro-missiles launching from each of its missile pods, streaking from their launchers on a column of flame and smoke, barely missing the yoshi before arcing down into the ground and detonating, lighting up the landscape with temporary bright flashes.

Some distance away, Jean, Ciara and Lorel could hear the explosion of the hover-truck's crash, and see the column of flame rising from the darkened plains ahead. Jean pushed the throttle of their vehicle as wide-open as he could, watching as blaster bolts arced away from the fire that flickered in the distance, followed by the whistling sounds of rocket engines, and the flash-bangs of their warheads detonating.

"What's going on up there," Ciara asked, "he's fighting something, is that the EV-700 that that woman was talking about?" Jean furrowed his brow as he watched the scene unfolding in the distance, helpless to do anything until they got closer.

"I can only imagine so," Jean said, "I only hope that Vector can handle himself with that thing. He's already been in a rough spot today, I hope that hasn't dampened his confidence in himself." With that thought, the hare and the two yoshies fell silent as they rushed towards the fight going on in the distance.

At the wreckage of the truck, EV-700 rotated at the waist, trying to keep its blasters trained on Vector, unable to match his speed with its targeting system. Abruptly, it stopped firing its blasters, the muzzles of each of the cannons glowing a dim red in the darkness. It bent its knees, and the vents around its ankle joints expelled a hiss of gas, before it leapt backwards from the blue yoshi, the small rocket nozzles on its back giving a blast to propel it off of the ground. As it flew away from Vector in a high arc, it fired four more of its micro-missiles from the rocket pods mounted low on its legs, the missiles following an inverse arc towards the speedy yoshi that was the target of its ire. Noticing the machine take to the air, Vector dug his heels into the ground and brought himself to an abrupt stop. He pulled his blaster from its holster and took aim at the menacing android as it moved away on its arc. He fired off several shots, then bent his own knees, backflipping away from the point the missiles were aimed at. Vacating the place he was standing just before the projectiles impacted the ground, kicking up dirt and shrapnel, before sprinting in the direction that EV-700 was moving, his shoes peeling out on the damp ground once again. As it started to fall back to the ground, two of the blaster bolts Vector set loose on the machine impacted the missile pod on its left leg, the sun-hot plasma burning its way into a warhead and detonating it, leading the remainder to detonate as well. Sensing the impending explosion, EV-700 ejected the pod, sparing its leg from crippling damage, but spiraling out of control from the impulse of the explosion, hitting the ground at an odd angle, digging into the dirt and grass. As the robot hit the ground, Vector holstered his blaster, and broke into a sprint, speeding away from the robot's landing point just as the second hover truck with Jean, Ciara and Lorel began arriving. He sprinted past the truck, before looping around behind it.

As he pulled near the scene of the crash, Jean slowed the hover truck, watching EV-700 spiral into the ground after the explosion of its missile pod. The trio watched Vector run past, seemingly running away from the fight, but then Jean watched his friend starting to loop around, and recalled hearing about how he had dispatched previous Tairez war machines. The hare turned to the two yoshies riding with him and spoke with urgency.

“Cover your ears, quickly,” Jean exclaimed, pulling his long ears down to block out the sound he suspected was coming. Lorel and Ciara watched him, glanced in Vector’s direction, then, based on what Jean had said previously about the boom they had all heard, also covered their ears. By now, Vector had retreated to a significant distance, and EV-700 was beginning to stand up, getting first to one foot, then the other, ejecting the remaining missile pod after taking note that Vector could sharpshoot them. As the machine stood, Vector had looped around, and had started accelerating wildly towards EV-700, shooting past the hover truck Jean Ciara and Lorel rode in, moving past seemingly in silence, followed immediately by a thunderous crack that the trio could feel reverberate through their chests, ears ringing even though they were covered, the truck rocking violently on its antigrav cushion as Vector’s shockwave followed behind him, the yoshi having exceeded the speed of sound by a significant margin.

Passing the hover truck, Vector squared up on EV-700, and shoved a foot hard into the ground, taking a supersonic flying leap, lifting his feet to let them absorb the impact, aiming at the war machine’s chest. In the blink of an eye, he had covered the distance that separated the pair and the soles of his shoes hit EV-700’s chestplate, heaving the robot backwards, the blue yoshi riding the machine like a surfboard as it arced backwards and landed into a prone position, digging a trench into the dew-covered grass and the soil beneath. This was not enough to incapacitate the robot, however, and with lightning reflexes, it reached up and grabbed Vector’s left ankle with its right hand. Vector yelped, the sound drowned out by the sonic boom catching up to him and washing over the combatants as EV-700 pulled hard at the yoshi’s ankle, swinging him in an arc and into the ground, leaving the both of them prone. Vector let out another yelp as the air was knocked from his lungs and the world spun around him, dazed from the loud boom he’d created as well as the impact with the packed soil of the plains where the hover truck had crashed. EV-700 had no such issues however and quickly was back on its feet, grabbing a handful of Vector’s hair, making the yoshi shriek as he reached up to swat at the unyielding metallic hand that had grabbed him. The robot hauled him to his feet, then let go of his hair, only to immediately swing its free hand at the blue yoshi, striking him across the snout with a back-handed strike. There was the crack of cartilage and another squealing yelp from Vector as he stumbled back and fell flat. EV-700 started to stomp towards the yoshi, intent on finishing the job, but Vector was not quite as dazed as it had hoped. A blue hand gripped at his blaster’s grip, thumb flipping a switch just above the grip. Vector held the weapon out at arm’s length and squeezed the trigger, causing a stream of rapid-fire blaster bolts to erupt from the weapon, its exciter screeching as it began rapidly discharging its power cell, dozens of energy bolts lancing between the muzzle of the pistol and the robot. The bolts hit EV-700, causing sparks and splattered plasma to spray out in a brilliant red-orange lightshow, several of the bolts hitting the machine’s comparatively un-armored midsection, lancing into the machine, melting components, severing cables, and overheating systems. EV-700 seemed taken aback by the sudden barrage of plasma bolts, and stopped its advance, staggering back and giving Vector the opportunity to kip up to his feet, teeth clenched, left arm coming up to wipe a trickle of blood from his nose. Keeping his blaster out, Vector leaned forward and peeled out, the lit elements of his shoes flashing a brilliant blue-white as they responded to his commands. He closed the distance between himself and EV-700 in an instant, and he leapt forward, arms out, intending to hit the machine in a football tackle. He collided with the bronze-colored robot, causing it to

topple backwards, and he straddled its midsection, raising his blaster once again and squeezing the trigger. Another firehose of plasma erupted from the muzzle of the weapon as it fired as rapidly as its electronics would allow, the charge indicator on the side of the weapon visibly decreasing as it depleted its power cell in a blaze of fury, the tip of the muzzle starting to glow dull orange at the end of the volley. Showers of sparks and plasma erupted when the boots hit EV-700's face, peppering its metallic snout, a hand coming up to shield its eyes, but not before one bolt made its way into its left eye, slagging that optical sensor. When the blaster ceased firing, its snout glowed a dull red, the paint having been eroded off, the armor pitted and charred from the relentless assault.

Despite being a machine, EV-700 had some basic self-preservation routines baked into its programming. And the yoshi straddling it was certainly a threat to its continued existence. After the rapid fire assault from the blaster subsided, and after having lost one eye to the energy weapon, EV-700 shifted its weight, rolling to the left, swinging its right arm across its body, the metallic limb hitting Vector's side with a meaty crunch, making the yoshi squeal again in pain. Partly thrown off of the machine, partly scrambling to get away from the unyielding metallic fist pummeling his ribs, Vector rolled off of EV-700 which planted both feet on the ground and hauled itself back up into a standing position. It raised its arms, aiming the muzzles of its arm-mounted blaster cannons at the blue yoshi once more. The heavy weapons began charging, and Vector's attention snapped back onto them. He pushed himself into a backwards somersault, ending with him on his feet again, and the conduits on his shoes flashed once again, heralding the yoshi's intent to break into a run. He peeled out, spraying grass and soil behind him as EV-700 began firing, its own red-orange blaster bolts trailing behind Vector in a tight arc as it tried and failed to hit the rapidly moving yoshi, its targeting system having no hope of tracking its quarry as Vector once again broke the sound barrier, a thunderous crack ringing out once more to signal his sprint past the speed of sound yet again. Vector raced away from the menacing machine, making another tight turn, leaning into the turn almost so tightly that he reached out a hand to brace himself as he pivoted, then raced back towards EV-700, leaping once more, bringing his feet up to hit the robot in a supersonic flying kick. The soles of his shoes hit the flexible region of the robot's midsection, where the blaster bolts had pierced the armored sheath, causing the section to begin to collapse, crushing components and exacerbating the damage already caused by the blaster bolts that had sliced their way into the sensitive internals of the machine. Warnings regarding critical damage began flashing into the machine's HUD, indicating systems that had ceased functioning, or which would soon be too damaged to continue functioning. Among these was the cooling system. Glowing cyan coolant dribbled out of the perforations caused by Vector's blaster, seeping out of hoses and pumps that had been crushed by the supersonic flying kick. Vector didn't have time to notice however, as he sprung into a backflip after hitting EV-700, landed on his feet and sped away, looping around again in a similar maneuver, this time behind the robotic yoshi, before launching himself into another flying kick. But this time the yoshi had gotten sloppy and predictable. EV-700 ignored the warnings of its own impending demise, its circuits filled with the digital equivalent of hatred, and wheeled around, swinging its left arm over in a wide arc, striking Vector as he sailed in for the next kick, the blue yoshi hitting the ground and bouncing once before rolling to a stop, lying on his back, arms and legs curled in pain.

EV-700 took the moment after striking Vector to run a rapid diagnostic. Its cooling system had been compromised, communications system destroyed, left optical sensor destroyed, and its reactor was beginning to suffer a containment breach. Considering its state, and the threat that this blue yoshi presented to the Tairez operations, EV-700 made a decision at that moment. It was going to meet its end, but it could make sure that Vector did also. And so EV-700 turned to face the prone and writhing Vector, and fired the small rocket engines in its backpack, propelling itself towards the blue yoshi, beginning the process of overloading its reactor. There would be no dramatic countdown, no tense moment. In only a scant few moments, its reactor's pressure would overcome its failing containment and it would detonate. But Vector was, despite his pain, more aware than EV-700 assumed. Seeing the robot begin to loom and fill his vision, Vector's implants slowed his perception, and in the split second that EV-700 began to loom over him, he pulled his knees to his chest, and kicked up at the robot's chestplate as hard as he possibly could, the lit elements of his shoes flashing as he went so far as to add their power to the impulse of his kick. The soles of Vector's shoes hit EV-700's chestplate, and the robot was flung upwards, vaulting into the air in an arc away from Vector. Its plans were foiled. It would never reach the yoshi, never grab him and squeeze the life out of him as it detonated. Instead, it arced away from Vector and at the apex of its ascent, its reactor breached, sun-hot plasma erupting from its power plant, consuming the robot in a blue-violet fireball, tearing it apart and lighting the darkened plain as brightly as the noonday sun for a brief moment, before the light flickered out, the reactor dying as it lost containment, the fusion reaction within it ceasing, leaving the remains of the robot without any power or agency. EV-700's charred remains fell back to the ground in three large chunks; its legs, its head, neck and left shoulder, and its torso and right arm. After the thunderous boom of the reactor losing containment, the plain was left silent save for the crackling of the burning hover truck, and the sounds of the nearby nocturnal insects and distant amorous frogs.

As the plains fell into silence, Jean-Renaud, Ciara and Lorel looked upon the now silent and once again dark battlefield, all suffering from sensory overload after watching Vector and EV-700 have their fight to the death. Jean-Renaud was the first to react, having had the training to overcome such sensory overload. He leapt out of the hover truck and sprinted to where Vector lay in the grass, dimly illuminated by the dying flames of the burning hover truck that had been sent by Bijou as her gambit to destroy Safin Village. He slid to a stop on the grass, damp with dew and trampled by the fight, and crouched to check on the blue yoshi, who was laying on his back, an expression of pain painted on his face, though he managed to crack a pained smile when he saw his friend.

"Vector," Jean said as he reached down to try to help Vector up into a sitting position, "are you alright? Anything broken?" Vector grunted as he started to sit up. Ciara and Lorel had also made their way out of the hover truck and come to the hare's side, standing on either side of him as they looked down at Vector. The blue yoshi looked up at Jean and the other two yoshies, then flashed a smile, his teeth stained with blood.

“Holy crap,” Vector said finally, “that was radical.” Jean rolled his eyes at Vector evading the questions to exclaim his amusement, something the yoshi picked up on. “I’m okay,” Vector added, “I feel like I want to sleep for a week though. Holy crap that thing’s fists were hard.” He started trying to climb to his feet, Ciara and Lorel reaching down to help him up and give him something to steady himself on. Vector winced as he stood, blood smeared and drying under his nostrils after having been hit by EV-700 on top of his earlier run-in with the SWAT-bots at Facility Fifteen. Once on his feet however, Vector started towards the hover truck that Jean, Lorel and Ciara had arrived in. “C’mon we need to go back.” Jean seemed taken aback by Vector’s statement, with Ciara and Lorel looking at one another, and then back to Vector.

“Go back,” Jean said, “you just escaped, and you want to go back? Are you mental?” This caused Vector to stop and turn to face Jean.

“No,” Vector replied, “They had me in a holding area before they took me in for questioning. There were hundreds of other yoshies there, just being warehoused. Held for some reason, I don’t know what they have planned. But we gotta go back, we gotta get ‘em.” Jean signed and shook his head.

“We do,” he said to Vector, “But look at yourself. You’ve been beaten to a pulp, you’re walking with a limp. That machine worked you over and good. And I heard you on the radio when some other machine also worked you over. You need at least a once-over in the White Bird’s medical bay. At the very least, put some food in yourself. Since I imagine they didn’t feed you.” Vector paused and rested a hand on his stomach, realizing that he hadn’t eaten since he had embarked on his ill-fated mission, realizing just how much energy he had spent in his multiple supersonic sprints and the fight with the yoshi-bot. He let out a defeated sigh, then replied.

“You’re right. I hate it but you’re right,” Vector said, “I just feel awful though, knowing those other yoshies are in those tiny cages, warehoused like some kind of goods.” Jean nodded, and Ciara spoke up.

“I know you feel awful,” she said, “but you can’t help anyone if you won’t help yourself. Get checked, make sure you don’t have anything broken, and we can go back, with more people to help with the recovery efforts.” Lorel nodded emphatically and interjected as well.

“I know you’re not abandoning them, like you didn’t abandon me,” Lorel said enthusiastically, “but this is bigger than just a truck full of ‘bots, we’re going to need more people in case Ciara and I missed any of their machines!” Jean moved towards Vector and clapped him on the shoulder, leading the yoshi to wince in pain.

“And I think our Mini-Merlin met his end. He told me not to worry, but I still feel bad. I can only hope Merlin will be willing to make another copy so we can explore the Tairez systems and find out what they are planning on doing, what they have been doing. But knowing there’s hundreds of others there, this explains why we have met so few people since being here. I think

Lorel is the first person we have met that was from outside of Safin Village.” Vector paused, thinking of that then nodded.

“Okay,” he said, “We’ll go back to Safin, rest up a little, then take a whole posse back to Facility Fifteen and liberate everyone.” He turned and continued to the hover truck, limping to it before climbing in and flopping into the back seat. “Ugh, can you drive though Jean? I’m just realizing how worn out I am.” Jean nodded. He, Ciara and Lorel made their way to the hover truck, mounted up, and Jean piloted the vehicle back towards the dim lights of Safin Village, leaving the remains of EV-700 behind and the smoldering wreck of the other hover truck to burn itself out.

Chapter Fourteen

The ride back into the village was quiet and uneventful. Vector leaned back into the seat and while not passed out, he listened to the antigrav whine softly, and looked up at the stars, washed out by the moon and occasionally blotted out by a passing cloud. Jean, Ciara and Lorel were also mostly silent, still coming down from the adrenaline of watching Vector fight EV-700, until Jean spoke, breaking the silence.

“Vec, how are you holding up,” the hare asked. Vector remained reclined in the seat for a moment, staying silent as he considered the question. Then he sat up and looked at Jean-Renaud, giving his reply.

“I’m sore as hell,” Vector said, “still amped up on adrenaline. Just realizing what I did. I did it man, supersonic. I heard the bang, felt the speed. That’s what was holding me back, and I didn’t even realize it.” Jean nodded, before he added to the conversation.

“You destroyed that Tairez robot too. EV-700 I think Bijou called it,” Jean said as he recalled the earlier events. “They must have had high hopes that it would destroy the village. You’re going to have to be careful from here out. They’re going to know you’re a threat now.” Vector looked at Jean-Renaud for a long moment, then shrugged and leaned back in the seat again, looking back up at the sky.

“Good,” Vector said, “I want them to be afraid of me. I want them to know my name. I don’t want the Tairez to be able to take a leak without wondering if Vector Sprint’s lurking behind

the next door. I want every crack of thunder on a stormy summer evening to have them spooked.” Ciara looked back at Vector from the front seat where she sat next to Jean-Renaud.

“That attitude is going to bring more danger to the village,” Ciara said, “If you’re going to stay with us, you need to lose that kind of attitude.” Vector sat back up, and shot Ciara a scowl as he did.

“You just don’t get it do you,” Vector asked, his voice tinged with annoyance. “Whether I’m here or not, you’re in danger. They won’t ignore you. They won’t let you go about your business. Your existence is offensive to the Tairez. You’re going to need a good defense.” He laid back in the seat, and let out a sigh. “And the best defense is an unstoppable offense.” Jean-Renaud looked back at Lorel, sitting next to Vector, then at Ciara.

“He’s right,” the hare said, “We’ve been fighting the Tairez our whole lives. We know how they work and how they think. They would never let you be, there was always going to be conflict.” Ciara crossed her arms and stared straight ahead as Jean drove.

“I don’t wish to discuss this further. But I will be addressing this with my father,” Ciara said, before she fell silent. The rest of the ride was quiet and uneventful. Arriving in the village, Jean dropped Ciara and Lorel off, then made his way to the White Bird. Parking next to the bulky freighter, he looked back at Vector, finding he had fallen asleep. The hare reached back and shook the yoshi, waking him.

“Come on, we need to get you checked,” Jean said, getting out of the hover truck. Vector did likewise, and they both climbed the ramp into the White Bird, making their way directly to the infirmary. Vector looked at the autodoc and started taking his shoes and belts off, letting his belts and pistol drop to the floor before he lay on the slab under the scanner head. Jean watched, then remarked, “Did they have things like this where you came from?” Vector nodded.

“Yeah,” he said, “Autodoc. Automatically scans you and can do basic medical procedures. I don’t like ‘em. Tairez used ‘em a lot. But that’s just bad memories talking.” Jean nodded as he listened, then looked at the output screen as the machine scanned Vector.

“Understandable,” the hare said, “But outside of that, I do have some good news. Looks like you have no broken bones. But your poor nose is going to be sore for a while.” Vector chuckled, and shut his eyes, relaxing on the slab.

“I sure hope I don’t have any broke bones,” the yoshi said, “The confederation paid a lot of good credits to make sure I never would. Of course it also means I can’t swim now, but I never learned how so, it’s a wash?” He looked up at the scanner head for a moment then sat up. “Thanks for coming after me. I don’t know how I was gonna get out of that jam. And it’s saddening to see any of us working for them willingly.” Jean nodded and moved closer, resting a hand on Vector’s shoulder.

“There’s no telling what lies they used to get her cooperation,” Jean said, “or what her circumstances are. I’m sure in time we’ll liberate her too but, for now she’s our enemy.” Vector nodded, and stood up from the slab.

“Yeah,” he said, “I get it. But I’ve had a hell of a day. I’d like to lie down and check for light leaks for a couple of hours before we head back to the facility if that’s okay.” Jean nodded, and motioned to the entryway to the infirmary.

“I have a spare stateroom that was going to be the other you’s place,” Jean said, “make yourself at home and I’ll see you in a few hours. We’ll free everyone.” Vector flashed the hare a smile and started on his way to take a well-earned rest.

At that same time, far to the east of the Archipelago, there was a ring of islands known by the locals as the Kakureta Atoll. A ring of small islands surrounding a calm lagoon. A year before, the islands had been green oases of plant and animal life though now, the islands were mostly barren of trees, most animal life was gone, replaced by construction towers, gantries, fuel tanks and processing centers. The Tairez ship Pentastar hovered low over the lagoon, a large hemisphere rising out of it, connected to the tanks and refineries by a maze of pipes and hoses, catwalks and scaffolding surrounding the hemisphere. Aboard the starship, Richter DeLeon stood on the bridge, watching his robots buzz around his construction project, moving materials and equipment. He flipped between holo-displays, one showing his robots, another showing a feed from an open-pit mine, yoshies prodded by robots to load carts and trucks with ore. He leaned back in his seat and smiled, watching the progress of his construction project. His communicator beeped, and he reached onto the arm of his seat to activate the holo-communicator. He glanced up at the shimmering image as it faded into visibility, and his expression immediately dropped. Before him stood Bijou, standing in the control room of his command center, her uniform peppered with blaster burns and looking haggard.

“Bijou,” Richter said, “What happened to you? What is going on?” He didn’t give her a chance to greet him before breaking into his questioning. She answered however, once she was sure he was not going to ask anything further.

“There has been an incident at Facility Fifteen,” she said. “A small strike team infiltrated the facility. The yoshisaur we captured, Vector Sprint, has been liberated. I did find out that he has been staying in Safin Village and sent the EV-700 Project to deal with it but..” She trailed off, and Richter narrowed his eyes, looking squarely at her.

“But what,” he said, “Out with it. I want to know what happened.” Bijou hesitated a moment before continuing.

“The blue yoshisaur was able to catch up with it,” Bijou said, “despite it having a considerable head start and being sent in a fast attack transport. There was a confrontation and.. The yoshisaur destroyed the unit.” Richter sat in silence for a moment, staring off into

space, not looking at Bijou directly. She recognized that expression. He was in thought. Finally, Richter spoke.

“Send me all the telemetry you have,” he said, “I want to see what EV-700 saw and know what all of its sensors detected from the moment you activated it to the moment you lost telemetry data.” Bijou nodded, and motioned out of frame.

“It is transmitting now, you should receive it momentarily,” Bijou said, “Oh, additionally, they seemed to have an advanced AI that logjammed the central controller. I had to annihilate it to assume control and launch EV-700. There will be nothing to direct defenses at Facility Fifteen, I think we can assume that facility to be lost.” Richter fell quiet again, contemplating the thought, then waved a hand dismissively.

“A setback,” Richter said, “but nothing more. It was a warehouse for potential labor assets. I currently have all the labor I need, and the Neptunus Project is on track even without any yoshisaur labor. Most of what is left is sensitive systems that I do not want those grubby lizard hands touching, and potentially sabotaging.” Bijou nodded, and gave a salute.

“Understood. I will mark it as lost,” Bijou said, “Is there anything you wish me to do in the meantime?” Richter had already opened a second holo screen and was looking at the data coming in from EV-700 when he answered her.

“Send more patrols out,” he said, “Keep the lizard busy. Keep him local. I do not want him wandering the archipelago and discovering what I am doing at the construction site. This is a delicate time for Neptunus. She would be defenseless at this moment.” Bijou nodded, and shut the holo-communicator off, her image flickering then vanishing into the aether. Richter turned his attention away from the construction, and leaned back in his command chair, crossing his right ankle over his left knee, and steeping his fingers, watching the video link feed and the sensor data coming in from the EV-700 robot, Bijou’s project to make an intimidation weapon. It was a project that Richter had endorsed, as he liked the idea of the yoshisaur being dragged out of their homes and into his camps and prisons by a machine that looked like they did. He leaned back in his seat and steeped his hands as Bijou watched.

“Sir,” Bijou said, only to be shushed by Richter’s hand going up, holding his index finger skyward.

“Silence,” Richter said, though not in an angry manner. It was something Bijou had seen before. “I am having a moment of brilliance.” He sat in thought a moment longer, then turned back to the holo-image of his assistant. “Send me all of the data regarding EV-700. Complete system specifications. And send me every piece of data we have on this..” He paused then nearly spat the name, “Vector Sprint. Bijou, repair yourself. And then prepare an analysis. I want to analyze what went wrong. So that we can get this rapid little lizard in the palm of our hands and then squeeze the life out of him.” Bijou nodded, and offered a salute, then her image faded from existence. Richter turned his attention back to the final data transmitted from the destroyed

EV-700, and leaned forward in his chair as he watched the altercation between it and Vector. He paused the feed on a frame that interested him, then tapped at the keyboard on the arm of his chair. Data popped up on the robot's heads up display, and Richter singled out Vector. He tapped at the keyboard again, and advanced the footage further. Finally he stopped on a frame just before Vector's flying kick impacted EV-700, and pulled up yet more data, including a velocity for Vector. The number "1,481" was displayed under the box that the robot's targeting system had used to lock onto the yoshi. Richter frowned, and tapped at the keyboard again, and the number changed. "1.2 MACH" replaced the previous number.

"My god," Richter said to himself as he looked at the velocity data for Vector. "Such superb speed. The Confederation has really outdone themselves with this one. A shame they wasted such phenomenal technology on a yoshisaur of all creatures. But it doesn't matter. Now I know what I am facing, what my adversary can do. I simply must design a weapon system that can exceed these capabilities." Richter stood from his chair, and walked forward to stand before the viewscreen that afforded him a panoramic view of the Atoll. He called out to the XM-units serving as the bridge crew, throwing his right arm out dramatically. "Set course for Facility One," he exclaimed, "low atmosphere cruising speed! I have work to do and I do not wish to be disturbed!" As the Pentastar started rising on its antigrav cushion, and turning in the direction of Nettai Island, Richter turned and walked across the bridge, making his way to the turbolift leading to other sections of the ship. As the door shut and started ferrying him to the lower decks, he clasped his hands behind his back, and took a deep breath. He held it for a long moment, then let it out, centering himself. A moment later, the door to the lift opened, and he stepped out into a deck dedicated to his work, his laboratory. As he entered the work space, the lights began coming on automatically. Richter stepped to a workbench and waved an arm, the computer's holo-display coming up and floating in front of him.

"Computer," Richter said to the room, "Begin playing playlist number three." The computer beeped in response, then music started playing, a classical orchestra playing music from the Tairez homeworld. He pulled and swiped at the hologram, loading the EV-700 data, then loading the data it had gathered on Vector. He pulled a chair closer and sat down, moving to a keyboard, typing in commands, moving data from one column to another, collating the information that he had. He then sat back and looked at the combined data, folding his hands in his lap and crossing his legs, resting an ankle on a knee. He looked at the holodisplay for a long moment, then a smile began to creep over his lips.

"A maximum speed," Richter said to himself, "Of mach one point two. Impressive. Far above anything we field. But not for long." He stood again and opened a second holo display, pulling up the EV-700 schematics. He started pulling and moving parts, removing them here, adding them there. "So I will make something that can keep up with and destroy the lizard. This momentary swell of hope shall be just that. Temporary. I have changed my mind, I will watch this new machine kill you, and as you die, so will hope." He fell silent with that thought, and began diving into his work, focusing on building a newer, faster robot.

Chapter Fifteen

The next morning in Safin Village was bright and warm. Vector made his way down the ramp of the White Bird to find Jean-Renaud already up and active, performing a calisthenics routine under the nose of the ship and listening to music the yoshi could only assume was something Arvandorian. As Vector came around the landing gear and into view of the hare, Jean's expression soured.

"Vector, you look a sight," Jean remarked. Vector's snout was purple and darker blue in many places where it had been abused the day before, his cheek and neck showing purple bruising under the white portions of his hide, and Jean could only assume that continued under his shirt and down his side. The yoshi walked with a slight limp but seemed otherwise spry and in good spirits. Vector shrugged as he moved to stand before the hare.

"Yeah," Vector said, "I've felt better, I won't lie. I kinda feel like I've been hit by a truck. But I'm too excited to rest. We're going back to that facility uhh.. Whatever they called it, fifteen was it?" Jean-Renaud nodded in affirmation and Vector continued, "Yeah, we're gonna jam back over there and bust everyone out. I'm amped." Jean nodded, then spoke up.

"We need to be careful however," Jean said, "We don't know what might be waiting for us. We left in a hurry and it's been more than twelve hours since we did. The Tairez could have anything waiting for us." Vector took a moment to think, then replied.

"Yeah, that's true," he said, "But we don't got a lot of folks here in the village, and even fewer who could be considered fighters. But I guess you have an idea for that?" Jean-Renaud nodded and replied.

"I do," the hare said, "I think we should take the White Bird. It has shields, weapons, and can come in from the air, a direction that would not be expected. As well, it can carry a lot of people if needed, both in the passenger cabin and in the cargo container." Vector looked at the ungainly freighter, then looked back at his friend.

"That makes sense to me," the yoshi replied, "Plus it can bug out fast if it needs to. Hyperdrive fast." Jean winced at the suggestion of jumping to hyperspace from the planet's surface.

"A possibility in an extreme situation," Jean said, "But one I would like to avoid. Would you like to fly it, or would you like me to?" Vector thought about that for a moment then gave his answer.

"Maybe you fly," he said, "I think I'd like to take the overland route. After learning what I can do, I'm pretty hyped. I kinda wanna run out there. And also, a little bit of psychological warfare." He tapped the side of his head and smiled, "They see me coming up on foot to liberate

the place, I'm just gonna go that much further in burning the name Vector Sprint right into the front of their brains." Jean clicked his tongue as he thought about what Vector said, then replied to the yoshi.

"Maybe Ciara is right, Vector," the hare said, "Maybe you should tone that down to a dull roar." Vector rested his hands on his hips but Jean continued, "You don't want to get them too obsessed with you too early. It's better to work at a slow burn and get things done than to attract all of the negative attention." Vector huffed, then nodded.

"I guess that makes sense," Vector said, "I'll settle down a little then, but I still wanna spring everyone from the facility today." Jean nodded, and then spoke.

"That is what the plan is," the hare said, "once everyone is ready to go, we're going. It'll be myself, Ciara and Lorel again. We made a fairly effective team before. And of course, now you are here." Vector grinned at the idea.

"Yep, I am," Vector said, "Thanks to you guys." Jean nodded to Vector as Ciara and Lorel walked towards the ship from the center of the village. Vector gave them a wave, and Lorel waved back, Ciara simply giving a curt nod.

"Kaz heard you last night," Lorel said, smiling broadly, "You're going to have to give him a sonic boom soon. He's beside himself with excitement." Ciara flashed a glare at the pink yoshi then spoke up.

"Be careful," she said, "We don't need any broken windows or deafened kids. Or a beacon telling the invaders exactly where you are." Vector rolled his eyes at the suggestion, then rested his hands on his hips.

"Babe," Vector started, "If I make a sonic boom, it means I'm burnin' some serious rubber. I'll be kilometers away, they won't be able to catch me." Ciara sneered at being called babe, and pointed at Vector, her temper obviously starting to rise.

"And yet they did," she snarled, "And we had to risk life and limb to liberate you." Jean-Renaud sighed and put his hands up, stepping between Vector and Ciara, shooting a glance at both of them.

"Please," he said, "We have enough foes as it is. We don't need to start going at each other's throats as well. We need to work together." He paused, took a breath, then motioned to the White Bird. "Now, we have some dinosaurs to free. If the two of you are ready to go, we can begin." Ciara looked at Jean for a long moment, then relented. She turned towards the freighter, and began moving towards the ramp.

"We are. I put our things aboard this morning while you were taking your walk," Ciara said to Jean. "I suppose I should assume he is running and not riding with us?" Jean glanced at

Vector, who had adopted the best heroic pose he could muster and was all smiles, then back at Ciara.

"He has opted to," Jean said, "How did you guess?" Ciara rolled her eyes at Vector's behavior, then regarded Jean.

"I was hatched in the dark," she said, "But it wasn't last night. I can tell he enjoys it. Very well, if we're all ready, we should mount up. Do you have everything you need?" Jean nodded and started towards the White Bird himself.

"I do. Weapons, food, medical supplies, another Mini-Merlin, as well as some blankets and bedding that Dai suggested we bring. I think we are ready." Jean paused, then looked back at Vector. "Are you ready?" Vector gave him a broad grin and a thumbs-up.

"Ready, willing and able," Vector said. "Let's do it to it." Ciara rolled her eyes as she went up the ramp with Lorel, and Jean chuckled at the phrase. This Vector was a lot like the one he knew so well. Even down to the cheesy fighter pilot lingo. He went up the ramp as well, and made his way to the bridge. Ciara and Lorel were settling into a pair of seats as Jean slipped into his own. He flipped a number of the switches, bringing the ship out of its hibernation and bringing the systems online with a steady thrum of the reactor and the whine of engines. Outside, he could see Vector stretching, before turning to flash a thumbs-up at the ship.

"Alright," Jean said, "Here we go." He lifted the ship off of the ground, letting it hover on its antigrav cushion, before engaging the engines, propelling it forward and up, flying over Vector, and towards the facility, flying low but above the treetops. Coming to the desired altitude, Jean pushed the throttle, speeding the ship towards the Tairez facility. Vector watched the ship lift off and fly overhead before it started accelerating. Vector adopted a ready pose, and the conduits along the outsides of his shoes lit up as they responded to his implant's signals.

"Pedal to the metal," Vector said to himself, before he peeled out, charging after the White Bird, watching the starship first stop receding, then begin approaching as he started to catch up to it. Jean was keeping the ship barely subsonic, flirting with the transonic realm, but Vector had no intention of staying as slow. He passed under the White Bird, then felt the resistance as he approached the sound barrier. He pushed into it, and felt the sudden decrease in resistance as he accelerated past the speed of sound.

Aboard the White Bird, Jean-Renaud moved his hands across the controls, watching the gauges, bringing the ship to a cruising speed just under the speed of sound. Through the panoramic windows on the bridge, he could see Vector below, moving ahead of the ship, slowly accelerating. Suddenly, a white cone of vapor formed around the yoshi before it dissipated, and a V-shaped shockwave started forming in the grass behind him, trailing ever further behind as the dull thud of his sonic boom rattled the cockpit of the freighter, dulled by the hull and insulation that kept it spaceworthy. Vector started accelerating more rapidly now, charging ahead of the ship, and blasted past the burned remains of the hover truck that had crashed the

night before. Vector made a note that the remains of EV-700 were gone, likely having been picked up in the night. He reached up and tapped his headset, then started speaking.

“Yo Jean,” Vector said. His voice came over the White Bird’s comm, distorted and nearly overpowered by buffeting and wind noise. “That robot from last night is gone. I think the Imps came out and picked it up.” Jean quirked an ear at the transmission, then furrowed a brow. He keyed up the comm and replied.

“I read you Vector,” Jean replied, “Keep on the lookout. Though I doubt it could have been fixed in a night.” Jean tapped a few buttons on the control panel of the ship, and the HUD highlighted a shape in the distance. He glanced back at Ciara and Lorel, speaking to them, “The facility is coming up. We don’t know what kind of defenses are there so buckle up, we may need to take evasive maneuvers.” Lorel began buckling her seatbelt, and Ciara nodded in response. Jean toggled a switch on the controls, and a holo-display popped up, zoomed in on the highlighted facility. Several more rectangles appeared in red, indicating Tairez XM-units that were patrolling the grounds after the prison break the night before.

On the ground, much closer to the facility now, Vector could see the patrolling robots. He looked between them and counted six. He leaned forward and accelerated, approaching the closest one, pulling his blaster from its holster as he sprinted towards the first machine. The first XM-unit was mostly unaware of the blue yoshi approaching, until it turned its head his way, and picked him up visually. As it raised its arms and started charging its blasters, it sounded the alarm to its fellow patrols, which started moving towards the one that raised the alarm. Before its blasters could charge however, Vector pushed off the ground and took to the air, approaching the first XM-unit at supersonic speed, lifting both feet to act as a battering ram. The soles of his shoes impacted the machine’s white painted metal chest and tore through it. The robot blew apart as Vector ripped through it, instantly destroying it. As he crashed through the machine, Vector lifted his blaster and fired several shots at the next patrolling XM-unit. Two of the red-orange bolts flew wide and impacted the ground near it, making it turn to face the yoshi, turning into the third bolt which hit it squarely in the chest, piercing its power cell, and causing it to collapse as it lost power. As he touched down and put his feet back on the ground, Vector turned and positioned himself to face the third XM-unit, firing several shots at it as he flashed past, the robot taking hits in the head and chest, collapsing in a heap. By now, Vector’s sonic boom had reached the next group of patrolling robots, and they had lined up their weapons, opening fire, sending their own red-orange bolts of energy streaking across the plains outside the facility, attempting to hit the blue yoshi. Vector jinked and sidestepped, his implants and augmentations slowing his perception, letting him watch the blaster bolts streak towards him, giving him the opportunity to move away from where they were going to strike.

Aboard the White Bird, Jean-Renaud watched Vector streak across the plains, attacking the first group of XM-units, dispatching them with an ease and rapidity that frankly stunned him. The Tairez in his own reality had a similar machine, but they typically took more effort to dispatch. They were just as vulnerable to blaster bolts of course, but were typically harder to hit. Vector’s speed was giving him a tremendous advantage over the comparatively slow and

dim-witted XM-units. As Vector danced around the fire incoming from the second group, Jean keyed up his comm again, and spoke into the microphone.

“Vector,” the hare said, “stay back and keep dodging. I’ll give you a hand.” Jean brought up a targeting reticle, which locked onto the second group, which was comparatively bunched up. The reticle went red, and he squeezed the triggers on the flight yoke. On the ground, Vector kept dancing around the incoming blaster bolts as the White Bird drew closer, its forward cannons erupting in a flash of blue-purple light, letting loose a thunderous “thoom” sound as they lanced a beam of hot plasma into the second group of robots, scattering and slagging them as the space between them was excavated into a crater by the expanding cloud of vapor the dirt had become at the point of impact.

“Woah,” Vector said, his voice coming over the comm in a filtered and compressed manner, “That was rad. Thanks for the fire support.” With the two groups of XM-units dispatched, Vector let his implants wind down, and watched the White Bird come in close to the building that comprised Facility Fifteen, then approached the freighter as it settled down onto the grass, the antigrav kicking up dust and loose blades of grass as its field compressed between the ship and the ground, before the engines shut off, whining quietly as they spun down and cooled off. The loading ramp opened, and extended, Ciara, Lorel and Jean-Renaud appearing at the top of the ramp from the darkened cargo bay a moment later. Vector stood at the bottom of the ramp looking up at the three with a goofy grin, hands on his hips. He raised both arms and pointed at Jean with both index fingers, thumbs lifted.

“Yo, Jean,” Vector said as the three walked down the ramp, “We make a pretty rad team. I wish I had someone like you on my wing back in the day, uh, future, er, uh..” He huffed and rubbed his nose, “Time travel makes my brain hurt.” Jean grinned at the yoshi as he stepped off of the ramp, and replied.

“Is that all that makes your brain hurt,” Jean asked, eliciting a chuckle from Lorel, and an amused snort from Ciara. Vector’s grin disappeared, replaced with a scowl and an irritated huff, his nostrils flaring as he exhaled in displeasure.

“Hey,” Vector said, “That’s not fair! What does that even mean anyway! What just because I..” He trailed off, thinking back to the last time he was here, how running in half-cocked got him walloped and captured, needing the assistance of his friends to gain his freedom once more. He shuffled his feet awkwardly for a moment before changing the subject, “So, how do we get in? Just go through the front door? That didn’t go so hot last time.” Jean reached into his shoulder bag, and picked another storage device from it, showing it to Vector.

“Mini-Merlin,” Jean said, “Or at least that’s what I have come to call it. Merlin made a small copy of himself to attack the local network.” As Jean showed the device to Vector, Ciara spoke up in kind.

“As well,” she said, “Lorel and I gained some experience in using the Tairez ray-guns on the immobilized machines inside. I don’t think we left any standing.” Lorel nodded, and brought her hands up, balled into fists as she hopped on her toes, then interjected.

“Yeah,” she said, “We roasted all of them I think! I think the ones you uhh.. What did you say, oh yeah, the ones you unloaded, were just a patrol I think?”

“That would be a safe assumption,” Merlin said, the voice coming over Vector and Jean’s comm units. “But for the moment, please plug me in. Use the same communication port you plugged the last one into. Please retrieve the other storage device as well. There may be data on it that would be useful.” Jean nodded, and glanced back at Ciara and Lorel.

“I know you can’t hear him,” Jean said to them, “But Vector’s AI, Merlin, is speaking to us. He wants us to plug him into the data port. So be prepared for anything.” He walked up to the data port, with the old storage device still plugged into it. He grabbed the device, pulled it from the data port, then plugged the new device in. He reached up to his comm in his ear, tapped it, then spoke aloud, “What do you see, Merlin?”

“There’s nothing,” Merlin said, “The central controller seems to be gone. Nothing is connected to the system. Give me a moment.” Merlin fell silent on Jean and Vector’s comms for a few seconds, before he came back. “No Tairez battle units or guardian units are on the local subnet. I suspect Jean’s yoshi friends were successful in their wanton destruction last night. I am detecting massive life sign readings on the local sensor net, which makes sense if this is a prison. The doors should be open now and the lift should work.” Jean looked back at Vector, Ciara and Lorel.

“Merlin says things inside are clear,” Jean said to them, “but be on your guard. There may be autonomous units inside. And Vector, I’m sure you don’t need to hear this, but you two,” he regarded Lorel and Ciara, “be prepared to see things that may be disturbing to you.” Ciara nodded, and Lorel responded to Jean.

“Alright, Mister Jean-Renaud,” she said. She un-slung her blaster rifle, and glanced at Ciara, who rested her hand on the grip of the blaster pistol she had taken for herself. Vector walked up to the main door, and Merlin opened for him, letting him walk into the staging bay that he had been captured in previously. Inside, there was robotic carnage. Ciara and Lorel had been quite thorough in their destruction of the robots, with most of them peppered with multiple blast points, the metal heaped up around the holes where the bolts entered, the rings having long since cooled off, though the air still smelled of burned components and ozone.

“Well,” Vector said, “Looks like these two know how to use a blaster after all.” He flashed a grin at Jean, who had followed him in and was surveying the handiwork of the two yoshies. He made his way towards the lift in the back and replied to Vector.

"It would seem so," Jean commented, "They're effective, if crude weapons. They suit you." Vector scowled as he followed Jean.

"What's that mean," Vector said, "Actually, nevermind. Let's get this over with, this place creeps me out." Jean nodded, and opened the lift, and held the door for Vector, Ciara and Lorel. Jean pressed the button for the level he found Vector on, the first basement level. The lift shut, and started moving down. As it moved. Vector took a deep breath, and let it out. Jean glanced over his shoulder at the yoshi.

"Are you going to be okay," he asked, giving Vector a look of concern. "I know you had a rough time here." Vector shook his head, and rested his hands on his hips.

"Nah," the yoshi replied, "I'm going to be fine. Just, not sure what we're going to find down here." As Vector finished, the lift chimed and opened to the corridor that Jean had dueled Bijou in the night before. The walls were pock-marked with charred blast points where Ciara and Lorel had missed the Tairez woman. The four exited the lift, and Vector made a beeline for the interrogation room he had been held in. On the table where his things had been placed, was the jacket he had been in too much of a rush to grab. He smiled, and picked it up, shrugging it on as he came out of the small room. Jean shot him a glance as he came back into the hallway.

"Ah, did you forget something," Jean asked. Vector pushed the sleeves up and popped the collar up the way he tended to wear it. He flashed a grin back to the hare.

"Left, but not forgotten. I was in a hurry," Vector said, "Anyway, I know I was kept on this floor. They came and got me and I never got on a lift. I think it was this way." Vector led the other three further into the facility, the sterile sanitary scent overlaid by the hanging scent of burned plastics and charred wallboard from the blaster fire. He walked through one door, around a corner, then came to another door where he stopped. He glanced at Jean first, then Ciara and Lorel, before he reached out to tap the control panel next to the door, causing it to slide open. The next room was dark, but the light coming in through the door told Vector all he needed to know. This was the room he had been kept in.

"Merlin, bring the lights up," Jean called out, and Merlin complied. The lights came on, and the four were presented with hundreds of small cages, each of them housing a yoshi with only enough room to lie in a fetal position. Vector balled his fists up and surveyed the room, while Lorel and Ciara looked at the sight in horror. Vector brought a hand up to his headset and gave the transmit button a tap.

"Merlin," he called out, "See if you can unlock everything remotely." He looked to Jean, then back at Ciara and Lorel. "Time to get busy."

Chapter Sixteen

Over the next few hours, Vector, Jean-Renaud, Ciara and Lorel made their way through the underground prison attached to the Tairez facility. As they methodically moved through the facility, they opened gates, unlocked cells, and opened cages, freeing the occupants, gathering them in a makeshift staging area Jean-Renaud had picked out. The prison had been much larger than Vector initially suggested, being three levels deep, each level housing several hundred yoshies. Doing one last walkthrough, Vector and Jean walked through the lowest level of the prison. After moving through the levels several times, the pair had become calm and relaxed. As the pair walked through the grim setting, they talked.

"The Tairez really hate your kind, don't they," Jean-Renaud asked as he walked through the now empty complex with Vector. The yoshi shrugged and looked around at the complex that so much time and so many resources had been poured into.

"I mean," Vector began, "They do. They seem to hate us a little more than everyone else. But this is about par for the course in the 33rd century. I wonder if my folks ended up someplace like this." Jean frowned at the suggestion, then splayed his ears and spoke.

"One can hope otherwise," he said, "You mentioned being held by the Tairez before. This isn't bringing up too many harsh memories is it? You weren't someplace like this were you?" Vector glanced around again, then motioned towards a room off to the side of the main chamber before he spoke.

"Like this," Vector said, "no, this would have been pretty nice comparatively. I was sent to a mining colony on Arua. So imagine a layout like this, only it's dirty, wet and loud." Jean's ears drooped further and he was about to express his sympathies to Vector when he continued, "But I got out of there. And now I'm gettin' these folks out of here. I can't dwell on that and let it defeat me, I gotta keep it in mind and let it drive me. This is why I'm here, you know? So nobody else has to go through this crap." Jean's ears perked up again at Vector's attitude towards the whole situation.

"That's a good attitude to have," the hare said, "I imagine it could be easy to fall into hopelessness and despair." Vector nodded as they walked, arriving at the small antechamber, the yoshi poking his head in to look around.

"Yeah," he said, "I guess it could. But the doctors upgraded me. Now I got the juice. And there ain't no force in the 'verse that could stop Vector Sprint." He looked back at Jean and flashed him a lopsided grin, then moved into the small room. It was filled with equipment that Jean guessed was used to treat a yoshi like a beast of burden. Harnesses, straps, bridles and saddles. Vector picked up one of the saddles that seemed higher quality than the others. It was

made of red leather, with broad white piping around its edges and clips that seemed like it was meant to be clipped onto a harness of some kind. Jean lowered his ears at the sight of the thing.

"That looks like it belonged to Bijou," the hare commented. Vector nodded as he turned it over in his hands, then took his jacket off. He reached behind himself, and clipped the saddle onto his utility belt, pulling and tugging to make sure it was secure. Jean watched, a frown coming over his lips. "Vector, what are you doing," he asked, as the yoshi pulled his jacket back on, then flashed a grin, and thumbed at himself.

"Strategic acquisition," Vector said, "Now hop on." Jean made a distasteful expression, but did as his friend asked, grabbing the epaulets on Vector's jacket and pulling himself onto the saddle.

"Vector," Jean-Renaud commented, "This feels wrong, this is a tool of oppression, what are you doing?" Before Jean could get any more of his protestations out, Vector turned, the lit elements on his shoes gave a blue flash and he sprinted out of the small room, zig-zagging between the rows of cages in the main chamber, his shoes squeaking and chirping on the smooth surface as he abruptly changed directions. He skidded to a stop, then twisted his neck and back to flash a glance at Jean.

"All aboard the past-cool express," Vector said, smiling broadly. "Lots of old stories of us being like, ridden into battle back in the old days. We're honestly kinda built for it but, you know, society's kinda repulsed by the idea. But hey, now someone like you can go with me if I need to bail at warp seven." Jean's expression was a strange mixture of fear, surprise, and exhilaration. Vector hadn't really moved that quickly, but it was faster than the hare could hope to move on his own. He sucked in a breath, then let it out, before hopping off of the blue yoshi.

"Repurposing an instrument of oppression into a tactical advantage," Jean remarked, "I like it. And it matches your jacket." Vector glanced back at the dark red leather, then adjusted his jacket.

"Yeah," Vector exclaimed, "Man, I bet Bijou's gonna blow a gasket when she sees me sporting this. Now we're gonna be an unstoppable team." Jean twitched his nose and whiskers, noting Vector's overwhelming enthusiasm and positivity. He let himself smile in kind, and nodded in agreement.

"Your sort of speed will take some getting used to," Jean said, "but you're right. Now both of us can rain on the Tairez parade at the same time." Vector hopped from foot to foot, like a runner limbering up. He came to a rest, then looked around once again.

"I think we got everyone and everything worth getting," Vector said, "Ciara and Lorel got some volunteers to raid the infirmary, last they told me, they were going to load them onto the White Bird. There's too many people to fit on the ship though." Jean nodded in response.

“Yes,” he replied, “And most of the villages they are from have been destroyed. Or in the case of this island’s one large city, Minakoro, it’s been turned into the Tairez base of operation.” Vector crossed his arms and huffed, something Jean had noticed he did when he was in thought.

“Yeah,” Vector said, “That’s a problem. We’re gonna have to liberate that place. And as much as I wanna streak in there guns blazing, I know we can’t. We’d get steamrolled. But I know there’s probably more there and they need saving too.” Jean stepped forward and put a hand on Vector’s shoulder.

“Vector,” the hare said, “look how many we have liberated so far. And in such a short time? You have only been here a few days. You need to take some time to rest, to heal. Look at yourself. You put on a bravado, but you have to be in agony, those bruises cannot be comfortable.” Vector looked at Jean, then sighed, his shoulders slumping a bit.

“Yeah,” Vector said, “I know. I’m sore. I’m tired. I’m..” He trailed off and held his stomach and sighed. “I’m hungry. Holy crap am I hungry. I lost track of how much energy I’ve been using and I haven’t really had anything like a full big meal or anything. I might need to eat soon.” Jean nodded, and motioned, moving towards the lift and beckoning Vector to follow.

“Then let’s start getting these people back to Safin Village,” Jean said, “And see if we can’t get some food into you and get you rested up. You can’t help anyone if you don’t help yourself.” Vector nodded in reply and walked along with Jean.

“Yeah,” he said, “That’s true. Man, this is gonna be a mess. We got no room for all these people at Safin. I’m not even sure where we’ll begin.” Jean made a dismissive gesture as they stepped up to the lift and he called it.

“You rest,” the hare said, “And leave the logistics to me. I have dealt with refugees before. You’ve done enough, more than your fair share. It’s time to learn how to work on a team.” Vector huffed, and stepped into the lift car when it arrived.

“Yeah,” he said, sounding dejected, “I guess you’re right. I just don’t like feeling useless, I don’t wanna shove stuff off onto other people.” Jean followed him into the car, and pressed the button for the ground level.

“You’re not,” Jean replied, “You said you were a fighter pilot, yes? Then you should be no stranger to this idea.” The car started moving and Vector gave Jean a quizzical look. Jean made a motion with his hand. “You were a fighter pilot. Your fighter was maintained by a ground crew, you were guided by traffic controllers, roles were assigned by the squadron commander. Everyone on the ship had a specialized role” He motioned to himself, and continued, “I did intelligence and logistics. And that is what I am going to do now. And you,” He motioned to Vector, “Are a living wrecking ball, and that is what your specialization will be. You have been crafted into a living weapon against the Tairez. And you’re very good at it. But you need to let

your support group, well, support you. Or else you'll end up captured again, or worse." Vector sighed, wrinkled his snout, then straightened himself.

"You know," the yoshi said, "You're right. I'm here on a mission and so are you. We're a team, but we're on different parts of the team. But for now, we've won a battle. We don't need to win the war in a day. Let's get these guys back to the village, get some food in us, I dunno, maybe have a party or something, then we'll plan our next steps to take down the Tairez." Jean smiled at Vector's assessment. The lift chimed and opened to the vehicle bay that had been the scene of Vector's prior capture, and the former prisoners of the facility, gathered and milling about. As the lift opened, the group turned to see who was coming through, and on seeing Jean and Vector, erupted into cheers. Jean glanced down at Vector as they walked through the crowded bay, then spoke, raising his voice to be heard over the crowd.

"You're allowed to be proud of this," Jean said, "And you're right. We're still fighting the war but we won this battle. It's okay to feel good about that and celebrate it. Gods know, these people are going to be celebrating." Vector looked around the bay at everyone that had gathered. The prison had been more full than he thought. He had been more focused on letting people out of their confinement than taking down numbers or anything of that nature. He looked back at Jean, who motioned out to the White Bird, landed in front of the facility. "Like I said," the hare continued, "Let me handle the logistics. You can handle what you're good at. I want you to fly the White Bird, start taking loads of people to the village. It'll take me some time to get the first group loaded, so go aboard, grab yourself a ration pack, and relax until I give you the signal." Vector nodded, and gave Jean a thumbs up, more easily understood over the noise than a vocal reply, then trotted out to the freighter, to get it and himself ready for the task ahead.

Vector jogged up the ramp, waving and giving the thumbs-up to yoshies waving and calling for attention, hoping to give their thanks and gratitude. Once aboard the ship, the blue yoshi heaved a heavy sigh, and let his shoulders slump. He wandered first to the galley, and opened a cabinet, finding an assortment of ready to eat meals packed away. They were from a different reality than his, but were nonetheless familiar; vacuum-packed and stabilized food, ready to be eaten hot or cold, and bland enough to appeal to any palette. Vector grabbed one of the plastic pouches, then shut the cabinet, making his way up the small ladder to the bridge and living area. He had not spent much time on the White Bird and this was his first time on the bridge. He rested a hand on the seat that had his name on it, and gave the vinyl seat cover a squeeze, making it creak softly under his fingers. He moved around the seat and settled down, reclining into the high back. He pulled open the meal pouch and examined what he got. It was emblazoned with a corporate logo he had never seen before, a so-called "Bucket o' Weenies" and was indicated to be barbecue flavored. He pulled the inner pouch open, revealing the contents to be small sausages in a sweet, tangy sauce. At first he started to push his tongue down into the pouch, but paused, before checking the larger pouch and finding a spoon. After shoveling two spoonfuls of the small sausages into his maw, not bothering to chew before swallowing, he started searching the area around the seat that a version of him from another reality would have called their home. He opened a compartment, and found a stack of data crystals inside. This was met with a smile, and he pulled one out, looking at it, then searched for

a matching slot on the console. Finding a slot that would fit the crystal, he pushed it in, and worked his jacket off, draping it over the back of the high-backed seat before continuing to eat the packet of small sausages, while alien, yet somehow familiar music started to play over the bridge's speakers, a cacophony of drums and screaming guitars, exactly the sort of music he preferred.

Outside, in front of the White Bird, Jean was combing the mass of newly freed yoshies for local leaders, elders, anyone who had experience with directing large groups, and started delegating his plan to them. It was not long before he had a small cadre of yoshies directing other yoshies, forming them into groups, and started loading them into the White Bird, telling them where they were going, trying to be as transparent as possible. In time, the White Bird was full, filled to capacity with refugees and even a bit further, the cargo bay and galley filled to standing room. Jean made his way onto the White Bird as well, and moved up to the bridge, finding Vector watching the proceedings and preparing the ship for flight.

"Dai doesn't know we're coming," Jean admitted, "I should have had you run back and tell him what was happening. I hope he won't mind too awfully that we're bringing most of the island into his village." Vector looked over his shoulder at Jean, and gave a shrug in response.

"Well," Vector replied, "It's too late to worry about it now. We got a whole shipload of refugees and we're going to be coming in hot. I hope his hospitality muscles are stretched and ready for a workout." Jean chuckled at the metaphor, then slid into the copilot seat from where he usually piloted the craft.

"Hopefully," Jean said, "Let's get going. Take off easy and fly carefully. We have them packed in like commuters on a tram. It shouldn't take more than a few trips to get everyone, the White Bird is not a small ship." Vector nodded and ran the startup sequence. This was his first time flying the ship but to Jean's eye, he worked like he was an old ace, hands flying over the controls and getting the ship prepared for flight. As the systems came up, Vector feathered the controls, throttling up, lifting the ship off on its antigrav cushion, and starting a quick but gentle turn before starting the ship gliding towards Safin Village. Vector flew the ship low and quickly, through always gently, across the plains and foothills between the Tairez facility and Safin Village, and a few minutes later, was slowing the ship and bringing it in to land outside the village.

"Smooth," Jean said, "You fly just like my Vector." He let his ears droop a bit as he thought of his selven friend, and a sudden wave of self consciousness from comparing this yoshi to the selven he had known for so long.

"I know," Vector said, as he started idling the ship and opening the cargo doors. "It's 'cause I'm Vector. I'm pretty sure however many of us there are across the universes, if it's got wings and an engine, we can fly it." The yoshi glanced at the hare, and flashed a smile, "And hey, don't be down. I might look different, but still Vector. Now come on, let's get these people unloaded and go get some more. That place is a drag, I wanna get everyone here in the

village.” Jean nodded, and got up, moving out of the bridge and to help direct the liberated yoshies to their new temporary home.

As Jean-Renaud started directing the refugees off of the ship, Vector made his way into the village, and sought out Dai. He found the aged red yoshi sitting outside of his home, enjoying the midday sun, and approached. Vector raised a hand to wave, and Dai replied in his gravelly voice and strange cadence.

“Ahh, young Vector,” Dai said, looking up at the blue yoshi from his position, seated cross-legged in the grass, his usual kimono draped around him. “You have found time out of your mission to visit an old yoshi I see. How can I help you?” Vector bit his lip and took a breath, then spoke.

“Well, uh,” he began, “We forgot to ask earlier, we didn’t know at the time but uh, we liberated that Tairez facility.” Dai nodded as Vector spoke, and then interjected himself.

“The one where so many of our people were taken, yes,” Dai chimed in. Vector nodded, and continued.

“Yeah, that one,” Vector said, “Well, it was bigger than we expected. And had a lot more people in it than we expected.” Dai nodded and rubbed his chin with his right hand, resting his left in his lap.

“Yes,” Dai said, his tone thoughtful, “And the villages around the island are all either destroyed, occupied, or damaged beyond use. Giving them nowhere else to go.” Dai’s assessment took Vector by surprise, whose confusion was evident in his expression. Dai laughed at the reaction he got and continued, “Vector Sprint, I may be an old fool, but I am not a blind fool. I have seen the damage done to our home by the invaders. You have come to ask forgiveness for bringing these people to the village. It is given. They will need a place to stay while we reclaim their homes. And many will have been from this village in the first place. I will find those who belong here, and we will make preparations for the others to stay here.” Vector looked down at Dai, then got down, settling into the grass near him, also cross-legged.

“Man,” Vector said, “So just like that you’re going to let them in? I dunno how we can thank you.” Dai raised a hand and shook his head.

“It is we who should be thanking you,” Dai retorted, “you have put your life and freedom in peril for us, and we are grateful. None of this is your fault. You are simply cleaning up a mess that should not have been yours to clean up.” Vector thought about that for a moment, then nodded in understanding.

“Yeah,” Vector said, “I get it. This is the work of the Tairez, of that Richter guy. Man, I’d love to just punch his lights out.” Vector huffed in exasperation, at the constant issues the Tairez

seemed to have caused him through his whole life, and now spilling into the past, and affecting other lives.

“Be careful what you wish for,” Dai said, “it just may come true. But for now, continue. Bring those you have rescued here. I will seek out my villagers among them, and we will prepare the village for guests.” Vector took a breath, then stood up, dusting the legs of his pants off.

“Sure thing,” Vector said, “We’re gonna do it. We’re gonna shake this guy out of our hair and then the island, and Yamauchi will be free.” Finishing that thought, Vector turned and trotted back to the ship to help Jean-Renaud and give him the good news. As the blue yoshi left, Dai turned his attention back to enjoying his time in the midday sun, shutting his eyes and taking in the sea air.

Chapter Seventeen

While Vector, Jean and the others worked to transport the liberated yoshies from facility fifteen back to Safin Village, a starship lifted off of the Kakureta Atoll, rising on the cushion of its antigrav, the device emitting a pulsing electronic sound as it lifted the bulk of the starship, nearly a kilometer long, against the world’s gravitational field. Dagger-shaped and black, its prow was taken up by two large cannons, with dozens of smaller guns bristling over its surface. To its rear, its engines glowed a bright incandescent indigo as they pushed the vessel over the calm seas between the Atoll and the Archipelago. It was the Imperial Tairez starship Pentastar, the ship Richter DeLeon had arrived on Yamauchi with, and what he was using as his mobile base of operations. Deep within the gargantuan ship, Richter worked within his personal laboratory, schematics opened in holograms that hung over the bench he worked on. On the bench, in pieces, were the components of a copy of the ill-fated EV-700 robot that had been destroyed outside of Safin Village. As he tinkered on the machine, making the modifications and upgrades to match the data he’d gathered from the machine’s encounter with the yoshi Vector Sprint, his communicator chimed, and a holographic image appeared over his schematics. It was his android assistant, Bijou Gaulin, still in the Tairez city, Facility One, formerly the yoshi city of Minakoro. As Richter answered, her holographic image appeared in the room before him.

"As requested," Bijou stated, "I have created a failure analysis. What happened when the blue lizard entered the facility up to his capture, how his companions broke into the facility, their actions once inside," she paused a moment, hesitating then continued, "my own actions, and the blue lizard's actions as he dismantled EV-700." Richter watched the hologram before he settled into a chair, and waved a hand dismissively.

"Don't be so hard on yourself," Richter retorted, "Clearly, we have both underestimated the lizards. Most especially this blue reptile and his rodent friend. Let's take a step back and consider what went wrong. There's a thread here." Bijou gave Richter a quizzical look before she replied.

"There is?" she asked. Richter nodded and folded his hands in his lap and crossed his right leg over his left knee.

"There is," Richter confirmed. "Every time we have encountered the lizard or his hare friend, they have either stumbled upon our operations while we were not ready, or have been aware of our operations. And I do not feel you were at any fault with the failure of EV-700." Bijou looked taken aback by this revelation. She was sure Richter would be furious with the android's destruction.

"If I may ask," Bijou inquired, "how do you come to that conclusion?" Richter motioned, and his holodisplays activated, showing EV-700's specifications, the physical capabilities of an average yoshisaur, and the biometric data that had been gathered from Vector by the forces guarding Facility Fifteen and by EV-700.

"It is a simple calculus," Richter said, "EV-700 was designed before the blue lizard appeared. It is more than capable of handling even multiple normal yoshisaurs, but its targeting systems, tracking systems, and signature acquisition systems were not up to the task of tracking a supersonic target. Put simply, EV-700 was being asked to perform a task outside of its design specifications." Richter leveled his gaze at the holo-projection of Bijou and continued, "I have been thinking about the data we gathered from the lizard. And I have begun laying out the design of a machine specifically to counter the lizard." Richter made a gesture, and the computer displayed an engineering drawing of what looked like a highly-modified EV-700, with a list of specifications scrolling past.

"Impressive," Bijou said, "Have you begun construction?" Richter nodded as Bijou asked her question and the display fizzled out before he spoke up.

"I have not. I am in the design stage now," Richter replied, "But I am calling it the MV-00. Since it is meant to copy his abilities.. Mecha Vector. A bit of poetic irony." Richter gestured again and a flight plan displayed. "I am coming back to Facility One. My work at the construction site is finished and so I will be coming back to begin construction on this new machine. As soon as that construction is finished, we will be departing for Safin Village. For you see, I have a stratagem." Bijou nodded along as she listened, then spoke up.

"A stratagem, sir?" she asked, "What may that be if I may ask?" Richter looked back at her image, and on her side of the connection, a holodisplay flickered into life with a battle plan laid out on it.

"Quite simple," Richter said, "we will meet him on our terms. Attack them. I plan on descending upon Safin Village. We bombard the village from the air. Nothing serious, no intention to destroy the place, yet. And then we leave." Bijou tipped her head as she tried to understand Richter's line of thinking on this

"Why not simply destroy the village," Bijou asked, "It has been a source of consternation even before the arrival of the blue lizard. And now it is being used as his base of operations." Richter smiled, and motioned to the battle plan.

"The purpose is to lure him out. We bombard the village, and then we leave," Richter said, "We make a path back to Facility One. Faced with a direct attack and with us so tantalizingly close, he won't be able to resist giving chase. We separate him from his allies. And when he is alone, and full of misplaced confidence, we strike. We set the MV-00 upon him and let it destroy him. We then return to the village and set our troops upon it to capture the rebels and burn their little village to the ground. With this band of rebels in our custody, we'll be free to launch Neptunus and conquer the rest of this pathetic planet." Bijou listened as Richter detailed his plans, before she chimed in.

"This seems like a solid plan," she said, "But it also seems to make a lot of assumptions about his behavior and his willingness to engage us on our terms. Having analyzed his behavior at Facility Fifteen, and the failure analysis of EV-700, I would say he is unpredictable at best."

"Noted," Richter said, as he stood, "However, his behavior at Facility Fifteen and his behavior in reaction to EV-700 are what make me confident that he can be manipulated. Recall, Bijou, he rushed into a heavily defended facility alone. And then rushed after EV-700 on his own, with his allies arriving only later, unable to keep up with him. He is impulsive, and confident. As one would expect from a starfighter pilot. And it makes him naive." He moved back to the bench where the replica of EV-700 lay, and made a motion, the computer generating a holographic schematic of the machine, which began changing to the new schematic of the MV-00 he had spoken of.

"We arrive," Richter continued, "And present a large threat. And we leave. Faster than the lizards or their stolen vehicles. But not faster than the blue one. Or their own ships. But I have a suspicion that he wouldn't take the time to prepare a ship to give chase. He'll give chase on foot. Alone." He moved the schematic so that Bijou could see it, replicating it on her end. "And then when he catches us, here, we present a mockery of him. We insult him. And when he engages a machine designed as a hard counter to him, he will be defeated. Either destroyed, or worn down to the point we can capture him, and make him watch us annihilate his allies." Bijou looked at the schematics presented to her, then looked back at the projection of Richter.

"Very well," Bijou said, "However, I suggest we slow our timetable. I will suggest you return to Facility One, build your MV-00, but remain inactive for some days afterwards." Richter glanced back at the projection of his assistant. She could sense his questioning of her logic, and she continued, "Right now, the entire village would be primed to give chase. Your strategy relies on the lizard following alone. I am proposing you give them time for emotions to lower." Richter smiled, and gave a nod as he looked back to his work.

"Yes, I suspect you may be onto something," Richter said in reply to Bijou. "allowing the lizard and his allies to fall into a sense of security. Allow them to feel that they have won, to grow complacent. And then when they do not suspect an attack, launch one. It will help to rattle them more, and as you have pointed out, increase the chances that the lizard will be drawn out on his own, without the assistance of his allies, leaving him vulnerable. Very good observation, Bijou. I will be arriving at Facility One soon, and you can help me run the simulations on this new weapon."

"Very good sir," Bijou stated, "I will prepare for your arrival. Have a good journey." She stepped back from the holocamera, and the transmission cut off, leaving Richter to his work. Putting some music on as he worked on his new creation, the hours passed as the Pentastar flew leisurely to its destination.

The ship flew low over the sea late into the night, until it came to the Eastern shore of Nettare Island, and the former city of Touyama. As the Pentastar slid through the air over Touyama Harbor, the water churned and rippled, disturbed by the anti-gravity field the massive ship floated on, ships forgotten and left abandoned since the Tairez invasion battering against the harbor walls, scattered like toys by the tremendous starship. Moving inland past the harbor, the ship slid over the city, the buildings mostly dark, apartments and offices unlit now, the sounds of motors and fans filling the air with a mechanical whine, the red lights atop buildings glowing in the darkness, illuminating smoke and steam from the newly installed industry, the factories and foundries that had been installed where yoshies once lived and worked. Gliding over what used to be a park, the ship positioned itself over a large cradle that had been constructed to hold it as it landed. The Pentastar settled into the cradle, its engines going dark, its antigravity system going silent, and a gantry connecting to the main airlock of the gargantuan ship.

Bijou waited for the door before her to open, and when it did, she started walking across the gantry, her companion, the yoshisair she called 2095, in lockstep, staying close to her. The airlock on the Pentastar opened, and the two entered, walking for some minutes before coming to the turbolift. The car whisked the pair down to the lab where Richter worked on the schematics for his new weapon. As 2095, the yoshi formerly known as Clex began preparing refreshments for the human and the android, they began working to perfect the schematics and begin fabrication.

Chapter Eighteen

As Vector and Jean ferried the last few shiploads of refugees from facility fifteen to Safin Village, a festival atmosphere began to take hold in the village. By the time the last load of yoshies were unloaded, the village had been overtaken by dancing, music and a feast being prepared as friends and family members were reunited, neighbors welcomed home, and the liberation of so many imprisoned yoshies was celebrated. Soon after landing, Vector and Jean were pulled into the festivities, dancing, socializing, being fed all manner of local food and drink. The festivities lasted long into the night, until eventually, fatigue took the last revelers as the sun started to rise above the sea in the East.

As the sun came up and shone through the windows of his hut, Vector woke and blinked the sleep out of his eyes as he started coming to, having ate and drank far too much the night before. Yoshies of various colors and genders were asleep on the meager furniture he had, having partied until they exhausted themselves the night before. Vector pulled his shoes on, the straps automatically tightening around his feet, then buckled his belt on, adjusting his holster so his blaster hung on his thigh with its grip at his fingertips. Shrugging on his jacket, he pushed the sleeves up where they usually sat on his forearms, and he went out into the bright morning sun.

The village was still sleepy, most of the residents having stayed up too late, indulged in too much food, and imbibed too much drink. But some were up and about. One such yoshi caught his eye; Aurora, the yoshi woman he saw the day he arrived in the village. She was in a cage on the back of the Tairez hover truck, as was her daughter, Rael. He met her son, Kaz, under one of the village huts as he dodged the XM-units before he destroyed them. She was outside her own home, hanging up laundry while Kaz and Rael played with other children nearby. Vector approached, and raised a hand in a wave.

"Heya," Vector said. "You doing okay? It's been a wild few days and I haven't had time to hang around much." Aurora looked in Vector's direction and gave him a warm smile.

"Oh," she said, "Doing wonderful. Certainly much better than if you hadn't arrived when you did. All Kaz can do is talk about you and how you uh, what did he say, 'unloaded those bots'. Things could be better of course but now, at least, we have hope." Vector gave a smile, but seemed a bit taken aback by her reaction, and didn't seem to know how to react.

"Oh yeah," Vector replied, "I guess I did kinda just cruise in and start sending bots to the scrapyards. But I'm glad you guys are doing okay." Aurora finished hanging up her laundry, then looked at Vector, giving him a glance from head to toe. He was certainly dressed in an unusual manner, with his jacket, his chunky sneakers with conduits and cables, and of course, the big firearm on his hip. Though she had thought she'd be unnerved by someone armed wandering the village, she found his presence comforting in a way. He'd never drawn it or brandished it in

any way except to deal with the invading robots that had once wandered the village freely.

"We're doing okay," Aurora said, "But what about you? You arrived and have just been going nonstop. Ciara had mentioned you were even held by the invaders for a time, at their prison." Vector gave a sheepish grin, and rubbed the back of his head as she mentioned his captivity at facility fifteen. He still had the wounds from it, his nose still purple and tender, side and shoulder shades of greenish-purple under his shirt and jacket, and at least one of his eyes, he was sure was darkened by the assault by the Tairez SWAT-bots in the vehicle bay at the prison facility.

"I'm fine," Vector said, "I'm literally built to shrug off the hits. The docs in the future are pretty good at armoring yoshies like me up, yeah?" Aurora chuckled, then sighed.

"You sound just like my husband did," she said, "No matter how sore or tired he was, he'd shrug it off, claim he was fine. But you're not. I know you're not. I know you're worried about the other yoshies out there. The way you've treated us, how could it be otherwise? But you need to remember, if you don't take care of yourself, you can't take care of anyone." Vector's smile faded and he sighed in response.

"I mean," he started, "You're not wrong. I've been going full throttle since I got here. I guess I just thought if I did that, if I won quickly, I could just kick back and relax here where there's none of the problems I left behind in my future". Aurora picked up her basket, and motioned for Vector to follow.

"Come with me," she said, moving back towards her home. "I'll show you something." Vector fell in line behind Aurora, following her into the hut, moving out of the bright morning sunshine and into the shade of the structure. The hut was open and airy, designed to remain cool through the heat of the tropical day, guiding the coastal breeze through the rooms strategically. The items of daily life were scattered around the open rooms, toys, dishes, a radio, a computer, a television with a games machine plugged into it. Aurora moved directly to a bookcase set into a wall, and pulled a large book from it, moving to the table in the kitchen, where she sat it down, and opened it to a page it had been opened to many times before. The book turned out to be an atlas, and she opened it to the two pages showing the islands of the Archipelago.

"A map," Vector asked, looking down at the atlas, "What's this for?" Aurora pointed at one of the islands on the map, then looked at Vector.

"I noticed you wandered around a bit," Aurora said, "I'd heard some talk that you stumbled on the prison. I think you don't know your way around very much." Vector huffed again as he looked down at the atlas, then glanced away, before replying sheepishly.

"Yeah," he said, "I guess I don't. I've just been juicing around, finding my way, seeing what I can see." Aurora moved her hand across the page and tapped on one of the islands, the third biggest.

"This is Nettare," she said, "We're here," she pointed at the southwest coast, "Safin Village. Nettare has one big city." She moved her finger to the east coast, to a natural harbor then continued, "Minakoro. When the invaders came, they landed there. It's under their control right now." Vector looked down at the page, making note of the city and its name.

"That's where I need to go next," Vector said. Aurora looked up from the page at Vector, lifted her hand and jabbed a finger into Vector's snout, causing him to yelp in pain as the tender flesh was prodded.

"Not for a few days at least," Aurora said, "Kaz has busted his nose enough times, I can tell you, you're in no condition to go running off on another adventure again. You need to slow down and let yourself heal. Remember what I said." Vector sighed then rested his hands on his hips, shoving his thumbs behind his belt, a tick he had when he was frustrated but grudgingly doing as told.

"Yeah," Vector said, "I guess you're right." Aurora smiled at the blue yoshi, then looked back down at the page, and pointed to the island to the west of Nettare. It was the largest in the archipelago, and it had one labeled dot on it.

"Kyoryu," Aurora said, "The largest island in the Yoshi Archipelago, and this is Meitōshi, the biggest of our cities. The Tribal Council convenes here. I don't think any of us have been able to go to Kyoryu since the invasion. I don't know if the Council knows what is happening here." Vector leaned in closer, then spoke in reply to Aurora.

"Meitōshi," Vector said, "The tribal council? I've never heard of that," the blue yoshi admitted. "Where I come from, we no longer have any tribes." Aurora tipped her head slightly as Vector explained the state of the yoshi tribes, or lack thereof, in his own timeline.

"We don't really either," Aurora said, "Long ago, we yoshies were very tribal, very warlike," she explained. "At some point, we unified. Or tried to. Some tribes did not wish to unify, and their disagreement led them fleeing to Yoshin, at the other end of the warp zone in Meitōshi. At least one was said to have struck off on their own and disappeared." Vector's attention was immediately piqued at the mention of Yoshin.

"Wait," Vector said, "You guys have already colonized Yoshin? I was told you guys didn't have any space flight yet." Aurora chuckled at Vector's question, then answered.

"We've launched a few rockets," Aurora said, "Nothing like what you and your friend came in. But we have a gateway in Meitōshi. The Warp Zone. There's another on the mainland. They've been there as long as anyone can remember. I'm from Yoshin myself," Aurora

explained, "My husband, Renji, was from here. I came here when he asked me to marry him." Vector took a breath, then spoke.

"Was," Vector said, "Was he.. Did something happen to him because of this invasion?" Aurora gave a nod in reply, then let out a heavy breath.

"He did," Aurora replied, "He helped defend the village. The machines were.. Not as willing to take those who resisted alive." Vector's expression instantly began to darken, his features hardening. Aurora reached out and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Vector," she said, "it's all right. It was before you arrived. I have made peace with what happened. And you have done more than anyone could have hoped for us. Please. Do not lead yourself to disaster on Renji's account." Vector looked as if he was about to say something, then smiled and gave a nod.

"Okay," Vector said, "But I won't let that happen to anyone else here. Not again." He took a breath, then continued, "Listen, Aurora, I gotta jet. I need to go check on Jean and see how he's doing. He's a little less hearty than us yoshies, and he partied pretty hard last night." Aurora chuckled and nodded, taking her hand off of Vector's shoulder.

"Go and check on your friend," she said, "And thank you again for being here for us. For showing us we can fight back and have a chance." Vector smiled and turned away, walking towards the door. His smile faded as his back turned to Aurora. He waited until he was out of the hut, then he let out a heavy sigh, his nostrils flaring. He looked to the White Bird, parked near his own hut, and started making his way towards it, and the familiar-feeling setting inside.

Reaching the White Bird, Vector keyed in the code to open the ramp, and walked into the airlock. Letting it close behind him, it began cycling. Through the hull of the ship, Vector could hear music, muffled sounds coming through the heavy plating. As the inner door opened, the small chamber was filled with the sounds of guitars and utterly ancient-sounding electronic instruments. The blue yoshi made his way into the ship and climbed the ladder to the wardroom area where he found Jean-Renaud sitting at the table, looking at figures on a datapad, writing things down, while grazing on a spread of vegetables and fruits, some local to the island, introduced to him by the yoshies of the village, some that looked utterly alien, only because they were. Jean's ears perked up and swiveled to and fro, before he looked up from his work at Vector.

"Vector," Jean said, "You're awake and alert. I'm surprised. You joined the festivities heartily last night. A little too heartily for my tastes. I had to retreat back to the ship. Too much meat and alcohol for my system." Vector flashed Jean a grin then replied.

"Jean," Vector said, "I used to hang out with Confed sailors and other fighter pilots. I know how to party and still be up in time for muster." Jean looked at the yoshi, before he shook his head, chuckling and cracked a smile.

"I suppose that's true," Jean said, "But come here, I'd like to look at some information Merlin gave me, and my own observations. About that thing you fought, the facility we liberated. The things Mini-Merlin found and reported back to his complete self." Vector moved toward the small galley in the wardroom, and poured himself a drink, then sat down at the table across from Jean. He looked towards the bridge, out the main window at the sky. It was blue and bright, though in the distance, the fluffy white clouds were growing higher in the day's heat.

"So whatcha got," Vector asked, "Has Merlin been telling you anything interesting?" Jean-Renaud passed the datapad across the table to Vector.

"Read for yourself," the hare said, "We figured out why he had so many people locked up. Merlin discovered the Tairez building something. Something big, that's needed a lot of manual labor. Starship scale at least." Vector looked at the datapad, his expression darkening as he read what Merlin had compiled. "Additionally," Jean said, "It seems like they're looking for something. It may be Ancient Tairez related. Merlin found something that suggested that the construction project is stalled until they find whatever they're looking for."

"Which means they haven't found it," Vector said. "Do we know what they're looking for?" Jean shook his head in response and replied in the negative.

"No," he said, "But based on their behavior in your timeline, according to Merlin, they tend to prioritize finding ancient Tairez structures and artifacts. Merlin suspects it may be an energy source. But he's not sure and neither am I. The Tairez from my timeline were subtly different in their motivations and methods." Vector sat the tablet down and looked out the main windscreen again. The clouds were still rising and gathering. He looked back at Jean then spoke.

"Whatever it is," Vector said, "It ain't good. And we can't let them get their hands on it." The yoshi stood up, and grabbed an apple from the table. He tossed it up, lashed his tongue out, and snapped it out of the air. Without so much as a crunch, the fruit was gone, leaving Jean blinking at Vector in surprise.

"You didn't even bother chewing," Jean said, "So uncouth. But regardless, I agree. We need to find out what they are looking for and keep them from obtaining it." Vector flashed a grin at Jean, and replied in kind.

"Yeah," Vector said, "It was pretty cool. But agreed, we gotta find out what they want, then find it ourselves and either get our hands on it, or destroy it. I don't want the Tairez to have any cool toys." Jean shook his head at Vector, then picked up the data pad.

"I agree, at least on the part of the Tairez," Jean said, "Your table manners, less so. But a change of subject. Have you spent any time familiarizing yourself with the population and the

area?" Vector nodded, and rested on the back of the chair he had been sitting in a moment before.

"Yeah," Vector said, "Aurora, that violet lady, showed me an atlas and told me about some of the places around here. I wanna go to the big island soon. Kyoryu. There's a city there, Meitōshi, it's got some kind of gateway there to Yoshin. That's gonna be about forty lightyears away or so. So it's gotta be a hypergate." Jean perked his ears up and seemed taken aback by that statement.

"A hypergate," Jean asked, "I've heard of those. Some of the archaeological teams found some, I heard. Can link two static gates at displacement factors exceeding one hundred. Starships struggle to get past displacement factor five." Vector gave a nod, and looked at the spread of fruits and vegetables again.

"Yep," the yoshi said, "In my timeline we've made some limited use of them. Maybe they've always been in use. I never actually came to Yamauchi. I pretty much just lived in space." Jean tilted his head inquisitively, then spoke up.

"Surely you would have heard of them," the hare spoke, "A gateway between worlds would be a big deal." Vector shrugged.

"Maybe 'cause they were just always here," Vector said. "And I also didn't care much. I was more focused on flying and fighting. Remember, man. The war went very differently for you than it did for me." He paused a moment, then lashed his tongue out again, grabbing a native fruit from the table, causing Jean to jump in surprise. In a flash, the fruit was gone, and Vector's expression of distaste indicated that he did not like what he had eaten. Jean's expression soured and he scowled at Vector.

"That serves you right, you rotten reptile," Jean said to Vector. "I'll never be used to the way you and your kind eat things like that. It's terrifying." Vector huffed, then smirked at Jean, pushing himself off the chair.

"I know," Vector said, "It really terrifies the Tairez. They're always scared that we're going to devour them. We can't, but it's good to know our resistance against them has terrified them so much." Jean's ears drooped at Vector's words.

"I know," Jean said, "I saw. When we were liberating the facility. I saw what they do to your kind. I'm sorry." Vector waved a hand dismissively, and shook his head.

"Don't get too hung up on it," Vector said, "They're monsters, yeah. But monsters we can beat. Ain't nothin' for you to be sorry about. I mean, you're here helpin' me fight 'em, right? That's enough for me." Jean looked at Vector for a long moment, almost as if studying him, lit from the back by the blue sky and white clouds, then chuckled and shook his head.

"You really just don't let anything get to you, do you," Jean said to the yoshi. "If I'd been through half the things you've been through, I'd be a mess. I'd just want to lie in bed all day and mope." Vector shook his head and started moving towards the ladder down to the lower levels.

"Nah," Vector said, "People are stronger than you think. You can shrug most stuff off if you're sure you can win. And I'm sure I can win. Anyway, I've done my fair share of moping. I got bored of it, and now I just wanna kick ass." He paused at the doorway then looked back at Jean. "We're gonna win this bud. But for now, I think I'm gonna get a little rest and recuperation. I'm still sore all over. It might be time to get a nice hot bath." He flashed Jean a smile, then started down the ladder, leaving the hare with his datapad and meal.

Chapter Nineteen

On the other side of the island, in the former city of Minakoro, once a bustling port city, now a fortress prison and smog-choked hive of industry, deep within the Tairez starship *Pentastar*, Richter DeLeon and his android assistant Bijou Gaulin worked through the night, and into the new day to design and fabricate their new mechanical monstrosity. Richter motioned, poked, and waved at the holographic interface of his computer, designing circuits, armor, and linkages, assembling them in the computer's interface into a robot built around the engine he had selected during his previous conversation with Bijou. As he worked, the android woman double-checked his designs, fine-tuned the layout, and worked on the artificial intelligence that would direct the machine's programmed hatred. In the back of the lab, several nano-printers ran, their lasers suspending nano-assemblers in the beam, assembling the skeleton of the machine they were building layer by layer in one, the armor plates that would clad the skeleton being printed in several others. The pair worked through the day, the skeleton nano-assembler finishing its job, rising from the deck on its own antigrav and being pulled to a staging area by Richter. As armor plates finished their printing, they were gathered by Bijou, inspected, and handed to Richter for assembly onto the skeleton, propellant tanks, servos and cables being clad by blue metallic plating that shone in the artificial light. The pair didn't speak much as they worked, simply putting music on and embarking on their task.

The day dragged on as the yoshies in Safin Village relaxed, the clouds over the island grew, gathering heat from the day, gaining energy and growing in height; A thunderstorm was building, not uncommon on a tropical island like Nettare. As the sun began to set, the lightning began, flashing in the darkness followed by a clap of thunder. The air cooled over the village, and the yoshies who had been outside migrated inside as the cool air was quickly followed by rain, more lightning and more thunder. Vector and Jean-Renaud were, by this point, in Vector's hut, the hare reclining on the sofa and drinking tea while Vector sat on the edge of the sofa, staring intently at a video game he had been given by one of the other yoshies in the village, fingers dancing over the controller. As Vector played his game, Jean's attention wandered from the action on the screen, to a book he'd brought off of the White bird. The hare stretched his legs and splayed his toes, ears twitching as the sounds of rain hitting the tin roof of the hut intensified. He looked down at the page, and took a sip from the warm cup.

At that same moment, while the hare and yoshi were having their moment of bliss, across the island, the Tairez starship Pentastar shuddered as its docking clamps released. The mammoth ship hummed and seethed as its antigrav drive spun up, lifting it on a cushion of energy, lofting the inky black monolith against the rain, silhouetted periodically by the lightning strikes illuminating the sky. Its violet engines burned brightly against the storm-darkened sky, as they lit up and started propelling the Pentastar to the East, over the remains of Minakoro, and towards the central mountains of the island. Aboard the bridge, Richter sat in his command chair, watching the rain streak across the viewport, the terrain illuminated by the occasional lightning flash. Bijou stood at the helm, guiding the black ship through the darkened skies, watching her scopes and readouts to keep the ship clear of terrain and obstacles. As the ship moved, and the sounds of its engines reverberated through the structure, Richter tapped at his console and started some music, an ancient Terran piece which he felt suited his foreboding approach to the village and what he was sure was going to be his impending victory.

"I think," Richter started as the ship slid through the sky, "I will install him here. In front of my command chair. I will give him a view of the main viewport, so he can watch as his pathetic lizard friends fall under my control and begin to focus their efforts on building the Empire which will rule their worthless planet for a millenia" Bijou glanced over her shoulder at Richter as she guided the ship over the mountain, then looked back at her instruments and spoke.

"You have not beaten him yet," she said, "You may perhaps be wise to avoid counting the chickens before they have hatched.. Commander," adding the final word to emphasize that she meant no disrespect to Richter. He waved dismissively at her admonition.

"We have studied his data," Richter said, "And constructed a machine to match his capabilities, and then exceed them. It is stronger, faster and smarter than the lizard is. In twenty four hours, the island's champion shall be in our power, and the island shall be at my mercy."

"As you command," Bijou said as she focused on piloting the ship, falling quiet and letting Richter's line of conversation idle and grow stale. She remained silent for several minutes, and Richter seemed to take her hint, growing quiet himself, leaning back in his command seat, propping his head up on a fist, elbow resting on the armrest, one leg crossing over the other. He sat with a faint smile on his lips. After some time in silence except for the thrum of the engines, Bijou spoke again.

"We are approaching Safin Village," she said, "Atmospheric ionization is at eighty percent. The thunderstorm is concealing our approach from the sensor suite of the lizard's fighter and their freighter. No sensor lock detected, apollyon system reports that we remain electronically undetected. Darkness and the weather are concealing us from visual confirmation. Orders, sir?" Richter sat up in his seat and leaned forwards, sliding to the edge, a manic smile spreading across his lips.

“Begin charging hyper beam,” Richter said, his voice wavering with excitement, “One percent charge. Target the sea just beyond the village. We want their attention, and I want them alive.” He leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers. “Let me know when the cannon is charged. Hold fire until my command.”

At the same time, while the Penastar made its way towards the village, the yoshies and hare relaxed, taking refuge in the comfort of their homes, enjoying the sounds of a thunderstorm which most found calming. But some were fascinated by the storm itself. Ciara, the daughter of the village elder Dai, was among those, watching the clouds and the lightning. And then, as one bolt lanced down to meet the ground in the distance, the sky lit up, silhouetting the Pentastar’s monolithic shape. Another flash did the same, before the doors on the bow-mounted main cannons opened, exposing the ethereal green light within. But by the time they had opened, Ciara had sprinted off of the porch of her father’s hut, and moved towards the village square. Once there, she grabbed the warning bell that had been erected when the invasion began, and started pulling the rope, making the large bell ring out its warning.

As the bell started to ring out in its warning tone, Vector looked to Jean, and the hare looked to Vector in turn. Vector leapt off of the sofa, dropping his controller to the floor, and ran to the door, bursting his way through onto the porch, the cold wet air hitting him as he left the safety and comfort of the hut. As he came out of the door, the windows of the other huts in the village started lighting up, and then Vector noticed the green light hanging in the sky above the village. His eyes went wide, jaw clenching as he made the terrible recognition of the Tairez weapon. Jean made his way out the door shortly after Vector did, in time for the yoshi to turn and push him back into the hut.

“Tairez hyper beam,” Vector shouted as he muscled the hare back into the building, Jean’s expression first flaring to indignant anger, then widening to alarm as Vector recognized the threat that the bell was alerting everyone of.

“What,” Jean asked incredulously, “Here, now?!” His question was answered in short order by the Pentastar itself. The weapon emitted a deep bass hum, one the hare could feel in his chest more than hear as it began to gather energy.

The Pentastar’s weapon spent barely a moment charging, before it fired. The bright green beam, an otherworldly lance of energy, shot out of the bow of the Tairez ship, streaking over the village, the light emitted by the beam casting the village in a stark contrast of pure green light and inky black shadows. The beam hit the water at the beach, and upon impact with water and sand, erupted into a brilliant blue-white ball that lit the village up brighter than the noonday sun, instantly evaporating seawater and rendering beach sand into glass before the impact zone was excavated into a crater, throwing hot sand outwards in a red-hot ring with the column of steam rising from its center. The beam lanced through the sky above the village before an oppressive electronic sound drowned everything out, followed by the concussive rumble of the explosion at the beach just outside the village.

Vector turned back to the door as soon as the weapon fired, and watched as the Pentastar started to retreat, backing away and turning away from the village, the lavender flare of its engines glowing against the darkened stormclouds. The engines flared, and the ship began to leave, gliding away across the plains outside the village. Watching this, Vector clenched his jaw, balling his hands into fists. He said nothing as he glared at the retreating ship. He turned and moved back into his hut, frantically grabbing his gunbelt, pulling it around his waist and buckling it, then pulling his jacket on.

"Vector wait," Jean said, his pleas falling on deaf ears, "We need to regroup, figure out what they're doing here." But Vector wasn't listening. He stepped out the door onto the wooden porch, and the conduits along the outsides of his shoes lit up, flaring to a brilliant blue-white just as he peeled out with an ear-piercing screech, then rocketed off with a sonic boom, giving chase to the Tairez ship. Jean watched the supersonic yoshi streak off after the starship, looked in the direction he went in for a moment, then hurried inside to gather his things. Getting his sword and his pistol, Jean pulled his coat on, then tapped his communicator.

"Merlin," Jean said, "Can you track Vector? He just ran off after a Tairez vessel. He's alone and I'm afraid he's running into a trap." As he spoke into his com, the hare made his way out of Vector's hut and into the village square. Assembled there were the yoshies who were roused by the bell, now dressed and alert. Among them, Jean found Ciara and Lorel. He approached the two of them, then spoke, "I think they're luring Vector into a trap, will you come with me?" As Jean spoke, Merlin finally replied.

"I can track him," Merlin said over Jean's communicator. "He's currently headed due west at mach one point six. He's following something. I cannot identify it due to the ionnization but it is large, I would assume it to be the Tairez mothership."

"Lead the way," Lorel said in response to Jean. Ciara nodded in mind, then replied as well.

"Yes, let's go," Ciara said, "He's moving rapidly and almost certainly falling into a trap. Why else would they run when they could have destroyed the village easily?" Jean nodded, and led the two yoshies towards the captured Tairez hover truck. He jogged to the driver's seat, and Lorel climbed into the passenger seat, while Ciara manned the gun mounted in the back. As the yoshies got settled, Jean started the engine, and began driving, pushing the truck as fast as it would go through the rain and wind of the storm.

Far ahead, Vector dashed across the plain, the rain spattering against the bioelectric field his implants projected, watching the glow of the engines ahead of him grow slowly closer. He slowed slightly, staying near the ship but not overtaking it. He watched it intently, following it to its destination where he'd be able to strike.