



Toriko Tales
Toriko vs. The Crowned Paw

By

Michael J. Zummo





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TORIKO TALES: TORIKO VS. THE CROWNED PAW

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This book is dedicated to Matthew Zummo.

You are my love. You are my muse. Thank you for your incredible support, constant encouragement, numerous reads, and endless inspiration! This work exists because of you.

Author's Note

Toriko Tales! This book is focused on one of my favorite characters, techno-wiz and catgal Toriko Purg! Her incredible and ongoing transformation is so fascinating and amazing to me. I loved learning more about her with each new line.

I first *met* Toriko when Rhysus Mencari was looking for an engineer to help repair the asteroid base (Osuto Station) back in book one of D'mok Revival. She was vulnerable, awkward, and very self-doubting.

Through the first trilogy, the start of the New Eden trilogy, and later in the Weun Academy books, she blossomed into this strong, capable, self-assured individual. Despite everything that had happened, and despite being an extraordinarily flawed person, she found a way to continuously evolve and drive forward. Those are admirable qualities and demonstrate incredible spirit.

Of course, I know her full destiny. This book, in particular, is important because it reveals deeper layers to Toriko and her budding clan, and unveils events that will literally change the balance of power in the D'mok literary universe. More importantly, readers get a glimpse of who she will become.

This work also affords me a chance to provide commentary on the role of artificial intelligence in our society as we grapple with its benefits, risks, approaches, and mindsets.

It's been a joy capturing the adventures of Toriko and her family. I hope you enjoy this book as much as I have writing it.

Without further ado, allow me to take you on a journey.

Table of Contents

PROLOGUE	7
CHAPTER 1: Invictus.....	11
CHAPTER 2: Spilled Milk	23
CHAPTER 3: The EEE	35
CHAPTER 4: Phrenicide	41
CHAPTER 5: The Ardent Syndrome	49
CHAPTER 6: The Prodigal Kitten.....	55
CHAPTER 7: The Catadel.....	61
CHAPTER 8: Punitive Cogitation.....	71
CHAPTER 9: Mini-T v2	79
CHAPTER 10: Creature Comforts.....	85
CHAPTER 11: The Mind Hack.....	91
CHAPTER 12: Team Purg	97
CHAPTER 13: Catfight.....	105
CHAPTER 14: The Evidence Vault.....	115
CHAPTER 15: Army of the Broken	125
CHAPTER 16: The Catress's Lair	133
CHAPTER 17: Level One	145
CHAPTER 18: Sirra AI.....	149
CHAPTER 19: The First Lie	155
CHAPTER 20: The Past is Present	163
CHAPTER 21: Old Wounds	169
CHAPTER 22: PvE	177
CHAPTER 23: The Alternative	187
CHAPTER 24: The Closet.....	193
CHAPTER 25: Clara Mortem	201
CHAPTER 26: The Crowned Paw.....	207
CHAPTER 27: The “Do Different”	219
CHAPTER 28: Uncrating	223
CHAPTER 29: Bansa.....	233

CHAPTER 30: A Forbidden Legacy	239
CHAPTER 31: Eudorian Sanctuary	251
CHAPTER 32: Hacker Royale	263
CHAPTER 33: The First Meridian	269
CHAPTER 34: Destination Known	277
CHAPTER 35: T-Town	285
CHAPTER 36: The Manufactory	293
CHAPTER 37: Fallout	305
 EPILOGUE	 313
 SPARK TRANSLATIONS	 318
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	322
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	324



PROLOGUE

350 years ago, Murai Dome, version five

Sirra purred in delight. Everything she had worked for paid off. Her victory was at hand.

“You brought this upon yourself!” Sirra hissed as she gripped a massive mallet. Despite its heft, the weapon felt light in her cybernetically enhanced paws. The sound of blood pounded in her pointy ears. Exhilaration tingled across the short, tabby-colored hairs of her body. Heaving the mallet high, she shifted her weight and swung. A meaty, satisfying crunch split the air, followed by a beautiful shriek of agony. The abomination’s knee was visibly shattered, its lower leg hanging by tatters of artificial muscle and silvery skin.

“This is the end of you and your kind!” Sirra couldn’t help but shake in ecstasy. One more swing and it would all be over. The neck! All she had to do was hit it squarely. Maybe its head would rip clean off. She met its gaze, its deep purple eyes beaded in a mix of terror and rage. Disgusting, fake tears streamed down its hairless cheeks. It only made her want to cleave its head off twice.

She’d raised the mallet again when a paw gripped her shoulder. “Great Cat Mother!” a deep voice boomed. “Leave it to suffer—like this—for eternity!”

Her mind rejected the idea. *No! This was the plan. It must end like*

this. Why allow them to ...

A cruel smile crossed her pursed lips. Then again, that sounded like a purr-fect idea. How fitting that its unnatural life would come to eternal damnation. Let it dwell in its ultimate defeat until the very stars snuffed out.

“Very well,” Sirra said, triumphant. Standing back, she admired her handiwork. Her lashings held well. It looked like a puppet with broken strings. For a moment, she imagined it splayed across the ground, limbs shattered, an unwanted toy.

Its cohorts, the “people” it heretically claimed to represent, remained motionless behind it. Contentment filled her as she looked across the stacks of fractured and dismembered androids. Her own followers had shown true creativity in both the way they positioned the bodies and the methods used to cleanse their world of those corruptions.

“Eudora’s holy will has triumphed!” she hissed. But there was yet one last thing to do. An angry energy gathered at the tip of her paw. She reached forward and touched the android’s forehead. “Most holy Eudora, keeper of our nine lives, by your majesty, I bind this perversion. May your watchful eye deny its freedom and protect your chosen people.” An unholy cry rose from the broken android as a sizzle filled the air. The satisfying stench of charred alloys filled her nostrils. Withdrawing her paw, a blackened Cat’s Eye, the symbol of Eudora, branded its silvery skin.

She turned away, elated by the sound of its sobs. A giddy snicker escaped her companion while the pair headed to the security arch. With a wave of her paw, the ground rumbled as massive metal doors emerged from the walls. In moments, all Terconian kind would be free of this mistake. Pride swelled within her as she sauntered through the exit. After so many failed to correct this threat, she had led her people back to the path of righteousness.

Her companion hailed, “Sirra, Great Cat Mother, today all of Tericn can celebrate! The root of corruption has been gored from our world. You will be heralded for generations!”

Glancing back a last time, Sirra watched the massive doors clamp

shut, then fuse together. The deed was done. The story of the Metallica was over.



CHAPTER 1

Invictus

Toriko stood frozen, eyes locked on the thermal grenade bouncing toward her feet.

“Get back, get back!” a digital voice squealed.

Before she could react, an explosion mushroomed before her. With a yelp, she watched the blast ripple outward. A tingle washed over her fur an instant before the explosion batted her into the air.

Her sister’s cry rang in her helmet. “Toriko!”

The daze lasted only an instant before her feline instincts took over. Moving with the shock wave and leveraging the augmentations of her tech suit, she balled in the air, tumbled through a storm of debris, then skidded to a near-perfect landing behind a concrete barrier. Luckily, the broken-down factory was full of such things.

The digital voice of her AI companion blurted, “Armor: seventy-four percent.”

Black, sizzling marks blighted her gauntlets and chest plate, but the defenses held. Using the environment to soak up more damage served her well; it could have turned out much worse. “I’m good.”

Looking at the blast site, an overlay of lines and calculations appeared on her helmet’s augmented reality visor. Her short whiskers twitched as she assessed the threat zone.

The voice of her AI assistant reported, “The attack came through

the second-story window. RPG in nature. Three hundred meters per second. Three seconds from burst to blast.”

Gazing out the window, Toriko visually scanned across the cliffs towering above them. Their enemy was close.

With a blooming motion of her paw, a secondary display of the factory and surrounding grounds appeared. Little red dots swarmed on the outskirts, headed toward the side and rear walls. “They’re headed to the breaches!” she said into her headset. In an instant there’d be more than rocket fire coming through the holes in the rotting walls.

“We need to break their flanking!” Ujaku yelled. Toriko noticed him peering through a hole on the far side. He needed to be careful. Even sheltered within his bulky Tempest Armor with its dazzling blue and silver alloys and tribal engravings, taking too many hits would still end the same way.

“Fall back!” she yelled to him. If sexy was a weapon, her tall, red-bearded hunk of a catman would level the field. But it did nothing here.

“Agreed. To the cove!” Ujaku yelled, pointing with his oversized sledgehammer to the shallow dome a few meters away. Maro was already there, hunched over, working on something.

The cove? Not somewhere she’d risk going, but Ujaku must have a plan.

“Toriko!” Maro yelled. “Help me with this ...”

Toriko saw the sleek, artificial musculature of Maro’s nanosuit flexing as she tried and failed to pry open the hatch to the cove. Toriko lost herself in admiration of her sister’s inventiveness. No one had made a suit like hers before. Though, how Maro fit those long raven locks into the formfitting helmet, she still couldn’t figure out. Twin gleams drew her gaze to Maro’s sides. Fastened to her upper thighs were the equally impressive, and newly patented, C-blades. When wielded, the half-moons of eviscerating metal extended claws of hard light from her sister’s paws. The winged barbs along the weapon’s hilt would end anyone attempting an attack from the sides.

She knew someday she’d make something just as cool for herself. But for now, her old tech suit enhanced her speed and agility while providing some nice firepower. She dashed to Maro’s side. Toriko’s

augmented reality visor highlighted the hatch in red a moment before her AI companion reported, “I’ve detected a category three digital seal. Hacking now ...”

“I’ll buy us time,” Ujaku said as he formed up behind the girls. The bloodstained barbs of his sledgehammer caught her attention. Deadly or not, if they were swarmed here, he wouldn’t be enough.

A toothy smile crossed her lips. She could even the odds. “Let’s add some defense.” With a tossing gesture, a hacking cube bloomed into a set of holographic displays. With blurring paws, she went to work. The robotics in the factory began to glow with a purple aura. All around them, the machines came to life. Anything stepping into the factory that wasn’t them was in for a nasty surprise.

“Brill!” Ujaku said. “That’s my girl.”

With a forced laugh, Toriko shot him a disapproving glance and playful wag of her finger. “*Ano* ... you’re *my* guy.” No sooner had she completed the phrase than enemy gunfire sprayed through the holes in the walls.

Her AI companion cried, “Yatta! Hacked!” as the locks of the hatch clinked open. Toriko grinned at the expression of surprise she too still used.

Maro and Toriko grabbed the massive handles and pulled. A hiss of air escaped as the heavy hatch moaned open. It was pitch-black inside. Concerned, Toriko said, “No telling how far this drops—”

“Go-go-go!” Ujaku yelled, jumping in blindly. Maro was quick to follow.

As Toriko grabbed the hatch, she saw the first wave of enemies rush inside. Cries of surprise filled the air as the warehouse itself assailed the invaders. Machines once made to create were flinging pieces and parts at their enemies. A metal disk zipped past and embedded in a pillar nearby. Her heads-up display traced its trajectory back to a factory machine. Wide-eyed, she hadn’t thought through the danger her factory hack could have posed to them.

Regardless, the cries of her enemies filled her ears, flooding her with a sense of menacing satisfaction. After another moment, Toriko threw her weight forward, slamming the lid closed as she fell into

darkness.

The darkness made the four-meter drop feel like an eternity for Toriko. Despite the blind jump, they landed together in tight formation. As her eyes adjusted, a long, narrow cavern came into view.

“Tail’s up!” Toriko cried, taking the lead.

They scampered on all fours over uneven rock, their breaths echoing off the damp walls. Every step pounded with urgency—they had to make their lead count. Toriko surged forward as faint rays of light filtered through cracks and the sea’s low thunder murmured just ahead.

“Nearly there!” Ujaku said, passing Toriko. The cavern yawned open into a sweeping, horseshoe-shaped beach. Towering stone walls cradled the shoreline, streaked with moss and mineral stains.

Toriko rose on her hind feet and surveyed the area. High above, a dense forest hugged the cliff edges. Its canopy swayed gently in the breeze, dappling the rock with shifting shadows. The ocean stretched out to the horizon, deep blue waves crashing against the pebbled shore in a steady, rhythmic pulse. Mist lingered where water met rock, catching sunlight from above. Cool, briny air filled her nostrils, tinged with the faint tang of seaweed. If not for the murderous hordes, it would have been the perfect spot to spend a day.

Maro continued toward the water, tossing down a smooth disk a meter before the waterline. “The HomeDome is ready. Our fallback’s in place.”

Toriko knew if they needed the protection, the HomeDome energy field would snap around them, giving them time to regroup. Now she had to do her part. She pressed into her gauntlets, popping the mini cannons from her suit. “Strategy Required: Cove defense,” she said as her visor recommended the perfect locations to place the makeshift turrets down. Without time to do her own more thorough assessment, she placed them as suggested. It certainly reduced her suit’s offensive capabilities, but, strategically, doing this would thin the attackers coming through and allow the three of them to attack from more positions at once.

“Configure,” Toriko said, calling up the holographic interface to

specify the turrets' behaviors. "Activating the auto-targeting and high-speed projectiles." Toriko smiled. "Glad I got those upgrades! The second anyone tries to come through here, they'll get shredded."

"Clifftops look clear," Ujaku said, reviewing scans of the rocky, cliff-like walls surrounding the cove. "I tossed some sensors and traps up there too," he said, walking up to Toriko. "Defensive posture. If we keep cool, we got this."

An alarm rang in their ears, followed by a warning from the AI assistant. "Motion detected in the tunnel. Seconds to incursion!"

Maro and Toriko took positions behind Ujaku. A high-pitched whine filled the air as their weapons warmed up. Heavy stomping echoed from the tunnel. Only one set, but whatever it was, it was coming fast and sounded big.

"One enemy?" Maro asked. "Where's the horde?"

A rush of wind followed a roar from the tunnel. A hulking blur of yellow light emerged, streaking into the air above them. Toriko gasped; it moved so fast her turrets didn't even activate. There was a gleam, then it dove toward Ujaku. He let out a grunt as his body folded from the impact. His mighty sledgehammer dropped from his hand, clanging against stony ground. Her eyes fixated on the silver spear that impaled Ujaku's body. She shook in horror as the golden beast holding it looked toward her, its blazing orange eyes burning with rage. The metal of its face mask twisted into a ghastly smile. She wanted to scream, but knew if they were going to survive, she had to keep it together. This was an enemy she knew all too well. *Invictus!*

He taunted with a demonic growl. "Did you think you escaped me?"

"Ujaku!" Maro yelled, slipping her paws into the C-blades, extending radiant claws of blue light.

Something about the way *Invictus* remained prone felt wrong. With his speed, he should have turned and defended his flank. But he didn't. His burning eyes turned manic, filled with a cruel glee. It was a trap! Maro moved to pounce as Toriko screamed, "Don't engage!"

But it was too late. Maro leapt into the air, positioned to strike. The world seemed to fall into slow motion as the spear, still plunged

into Ujaku's chest, gleamed. With a slinging sound, the hilt split, revealing a sleeker blade concealed within. Maro was unable to avoid the instantaneous swipe that followed, and Invictus slashed through Maro's midsection. Her mouth opened in a silent scream as she crashed down in two lifeless pieces.

Toriko shuddered then shrieked, "Maro!"

"Aww bummer," the beast chided. "I guess they weren't much help after all."

"Invictus!" she snarled. Everything Toriko did, everywhere she went, this monster followed. Now he was *here* too?

"Somebody sounds mad. But I'm so honored you remember my name," he said, lunging at her.

Bounding away, her feline reflexes kept her a hairsbreadth ahead of his blade. There was no way she'd win a straight-out assault, not with her armor reduced and half her weaponry rigged up as turrets. There was a strategy here somewhere. She just needed time to think.

Maro's HomeDome! All she had to do was survive long enough to reach it. Carefully timing her jumps, she dodged her way toward the platform by the water.

"Where are you going?" Invictus said, lunging at her. "I'm pretty sure you'd sink out there."

She felt the thuds of his weapon starting to hit its mark.

Her AI assistant called out, "Armor: fifty percent."

"Those nine lives are dropping, little kitty!"

Toriko could hear the sneer in his voice. She'd love to wipe it right off his face. But allowing him to get into her head was a surefire way for him to win.

Focus. Focus. Focus!

She braced for his next swipe, then sprang up to evade a killing blow. What she didn't account for was his backswing, which hit—hard.

"Armor at ten percent!" her AI assistant squealed. "You won't survive another hit."

The AI was likely right. However, the hit had knocked her just inside the perimeter Maro set up. A protective yellow dome of light snapped around her. "Ha!" she chided.

"A HomeDome! How quaint," Invictus scoffed, looking back at the pieces lying motionless on the ground. "So, Maro was useful after all ... somewhat. Hurray for preparation. But what are you going to do now? Stay in there all day? I mean, delay all you want. But you're making this far too easy."

Maybe she could reach Ujaku's sledgehammer, or Maro's blades? Her mind spun in simulations of various strategies. None of them projected out well.

"Ugh. Bored already," Invictus said as a hellish red aura radiated around him. The ground began to rumble. Moments later, the blasters at the tunnel's mouth roared to life. Explosions filled the air as a shower of droid parts rained down. An army was coming through the tunnel, too many for her blasters-turned-turrets to stop. Movement atop the cove walls drew her attention. Before her eyes, the rocky walls disappeared behind a waterfall of similar droids.

Where are they coming from?

"I can feel your panic oozing through your armor!" Invictus cackled. "Yes! Worry! Fear! See your inevitable end coming by my hand! This makes everything worth it!"

Obnoxious as ever. She nibbled her lip, frustrated by his cunning, unsure how to outsmart him this time.

A golden flash filled the sky moments before crashing down in a bolt of lightning. The power arced across the ground, striking the protective dome around her. Penetrating unhindered, the zaps swirled into a ball at her feet. As if gifted by the light, a steel box marked with a cat's paw and a crown coalesced before her eyes. She'd never seen anything like it.

"Don't just stand there," the AI assistant cried. "Take the power-up!"

"No!" Invictus shrieked, throwing down his sword and pounding with his oversized claws on the protective energy dome.

An evil satisfaction filled her at seeing Invictus shake with rage. As she reached for the box, it clicked, then opened. A blinding light exploded from inside. She shielded her eyes as warmth wrapped around her body. The very air around her vibrated with energy and a

whooshing sound filled her pointed ears. As the light faded, she found herself inside a mechanized suit. She gasped, taking stock of the heads-up display. The suit was similar to Ujaku's, just bigger, badder, and armed to the fangs.

"Aww yeah!" the AI assistant hollered. "Devastator Armor: one hundred and fifty percent."

"Kitty's got her claws on!" Toriko called out and reached forward. Long, serrated barbs emerged from the mechanized paws. She watched with glee as Invictus's orange eyes widened in fear.

He staggered back as he shrieked to his droid army, "Get her!"

"This thing has something called Cataclysm Mode," her AI assistant said.

"Let's see what it can do!" Toriko replied.

The armor around her hummed with power. As the protective dome popped, she felt the suit begin to spin. Like a hurricane, death beams blasted in every direction, accompanied by a storm of metal clawlike projectiles, shredding the droid army around her.

It only took seconds. When it was over, Invictus twitched one last time at her feet before falling silent. Heart pounding in her chest, she took up a defensive position in the event Invictus had faked his demise.

He didn't get up.

It's really over! Looking about, the destruction caused by the Devastator Armor stunned her.

"You did it!" the AI assistant hollered.

Toriko looked back at Ujaku and Maro's bodies. "But we were supposed to do it together."

Ujaku's voice echoed inside her helmet. "Lighten up already! You won!"

Her suit gleamed then disappeared. She couldn't help but smile. After all this time, no one could beat her at Super Carnage Royale, even in a tournament of thousands.

Maro and Ujaku rematerialized beside her as the sky exploded with fireworks. Her portrait appeared in the sky along with **"Congratulations, Grand Champion: MastraTecra!"** made from the falling sparkles. A momentary embarrassment over her outdated

InterWeb handle gave way to an electric flutter in her chest. The bodies around them dissolved into balls of light, and, in a rainbow flash, the damage to the surrounding area melted away, restoring the land to its former glory. Lining the top of the cove walls, hundreds of ghostly avatars appeared, cheering. She recognized them as the gamers she'd defeated during the tournament. There were so many.

"I might be a little impressed," Maro said. "You actually did it."

"Like there was any doubt." Ujaku wrapped his huge arms around Toriko to give her a squeeze.

A projection of Toriko's face appeared in the sky along with the words **"Super Carnage Royale Victor Supreme!"**

It had a nice ring to it. Sure, she'd played the game obsessively for years, but she knew going in how rusty her skills were. She was a little surprised herself, but she had done it. Winner of the Super Carnage Royale! The InterWeb would go crazy. Hisses'n'Yowls and MeMeMee were going to explode with posts.

Winning made today even more special. "Best birthday ever!" Toriko cheered. Though, she wasn't prepared for how graphic the game had become. Maro and Ujaku's defeats replayed in her mind. That was something she never cared to see ever again.

"You weren't a little worried with that droid attack?" Maro said, suspicious.

"Oh, no, I totally was," Toriko said with a laugh. "Yeah, how did Invictus even do that? I didn't know 'killer droid army' was a thing here."

With a nasally snort, Maro said, "Guessing he's not going to tell you."

Moments from the match replayed in the sky.

"Well," the AI assistant began, "while some failed, I was there until the end." A swirl of holographic cherry blossoms gushed in a plume beside Toriko. From the dramatic light burst a pint-sized projection of a foxgirl. Long, sandy-blond locks draped behind tall, perky ears. Big bushy tails waved happily behind her as she added, "I really don't care for having my body abolished during the game though. It's kinda violating."

Toriko admired the high-tech armor she'd designed for her digital protégé. "Thanks for having my back, Minea. Did you have fun?"

"Oh yeah!" Minea said, her face bunched up with pure joy.

Toriko looked back to the top of the cove. Something about the ghostly onlookers unsettled her. So many defeated. It wasn't the first time she'd won against unbeatable odds. Flashbacks from the Nukari War invaded her mind. But that wasn't a virtual reality game; that really happened, and people—good people, people she cared about—died. No do-overs. No respawns. No next game.

A happy chime pulled her from her thoughts.

"Your reward is here!" Minea said. Two treasure boxes materialized before her. The first radiated with a golden light before springing open. A thick leather trench coat tricked out with an assortment of blinking devices and a face-covering, tactical gas mask hung in the air before her.

"The Apocalypse Gear!" Toriko shouted. Her eyes scoured every centimeter. "It's one of a kind!"

"People are gonna be so jealous," Minea jeered. "Especially Invictus."

Invictus. What a thorn in her side. He was always trying to show her up.

"What's his problem anyway?" Maro said.

"Just a hater with an agenda," Toriko said. *But what did he mean when he said, "This makes everything worth it?"* Whatever that meant, maybe she didn't want to know. She distracted herself by turning to the second box. This one glowed with a purple light. The mark of the crown and cat's paw made her pause. It matched the emblem on the chest that gave her the armor at the end of the game. "What's this?"

Minea inspected the box close-up, then shrugged. "Honestly, I don't know. I thought it was from the game, but it has no digital signature."

"So that's not your emblem on it?" Toriko asked.

"What? Why would you think it's my emblem?"

"Because it matches the power-up that won me the game," Toriko said. Minea's face scrunched up, confused. "You didn't call

down the Devastator Armor for me?”

“No, I thought you did. But ... you didn’t?”

Toriko shook her head, then looked to Ujaku and Maro. “And you didn’t?” Both shook their heads as well.

Something about the situation unnerved her. Who helped her? And what was inside this box?

“Maybe you shouldn’t open it,” Maro said. “What if it’s a special gift from Invictus? He can’t be too happy right now.”

Possibly, but not likely. “Minea, erect a containment field around me and the box. If it is a virus, I want you and everyone else protected.”

“You could just leave it alone and not accept it,” Maro said. “Let it go back to wherever it came from.”

I could. But her sister knew she wouldn’t. A dome of yellow light shrouded her and the box. Toriko reached out cautiously, touching the paw symbol. The box shuddered then opened. Shadow spewed out and engulfed her. The muffled cries of the others stifled as Toriko found herself in a dark abyss, transported far from the digital bluffs.

Eyes of bloodred light gleamed in the distance, and an ominous voice rippled over her body. “They’re coming for you, and there’s nothing more I can do.”

“Who’s coming for me?”

“Protect yourself, Toriko Purg, and don’t believe their lies.”

“Who are you?”

Cracks of amber light fractured the darkness. The red eyes looked frantically about, then faded away moments before amber light shattered the void. In place of the box was a palm-sized token with the crown-and-paw emblem.

“I got her back!” Minea cried.

“Are you okay?” Ujaku said.

Toriko looked about and saw the protective field still around her. “Yeah.” She leaned down and looked at the token, keeping her distance from it.

“What was that?” Maro yelled.

“I have no idea,” Toriko said. “Were there any readings?”

“It took you to some other server. It took me longer to trace than

it should have,” Minea said, regretful.

“You did fine. You pulled me out.” Toriko reached for the token.

“Don’t touch it!” Maro yelled.

“I’m not getting any readings off it,” Toriko said, curious.

“Me either. I don’t think it’s trapped. But it should be broadcasting a digital signature ... and it’s not.”

“Weird, I know.” Toriko wondered what to do. Biting her lip, she poked it with her paw.

“Wait!” Maro yelled.

Nothing happened, though. It just felt cold and solid, like old metal money. Picking it up, she looked at it more closely. Still no digital signature and no additional markings. Just a weird token. She closed her paw around it. The object vibrated, then disappeared in a shower of white light. “I can add it to my inventory, whatever it is.”

“Maybe the InterWeb will know what it is?” Ujaku said.

She could post about it on the InterWeb. Sometimes responses were sketchy, but there were enough people out there that someone could have the answer. “I can try.”

“For now, we have a birthday cake to eat and a deployment to prep,” Maro said. “I think we’ve all had enough Super Carnage Royale for the day. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Cake! Yes!” Toriko’s own exuberance surprised her. “Last one back is a mangy cat!” With a wave of her paw, color bled from the world, and it extruded away.



CHAPTER 2

Spilled Milk

It was coming, and she knew it—her least favorite part. She felt her teeth grind as the virtual reality rig powered down. A bright flash accompanied a pop as the virtual systems gave way to her bodily senses. For a moment she was left in darkness, ears ringing, body numb.

Isn't there an easier way to transition out of the virtual realm? She wondered how, despite all their advancements, a better way had yet to be discovered.

The smell of dank and decay filled her nostrils, an unwelcomed return to reality. Her whole face wrinkled in reflex.

Lost in all the fun, she'd forgotten where she had jacked in from. Most of the cables easily popped off her sleek tech suit. A few connections had knotted up during play. While untangling her ears and long tail from the virtual reality rig, her entire body buzzed with excitement. As her blurry vision came into focus, so too did the sad state of Osuto Station. Even in its condition it served her well, but this place needed so much work.

Her eyes fell upon two other rigs in the room, already abandoned. The exit door was left open, revealing the hallway's dodgy lighting.

"Maro? Ujaku?" she called out.

No one answered. No way they beat her back. Not unless they

were already spectating from somewhere else after they died in the game.

A familiar tingle danced across her mind. D'mok energies transformed into Maro's voice, "*Meet us in the old war room.*"

Toriko shook her head as if trying to get the words out. Despite their abilities, she still preferred the old-fashioned methods of communication—like talking. The dull headache that ensued from each use didn't encourage her either. Touching her communicator, she said, "I'll be right there."

On her way, the final moments of her victory replayed in her mind.

I won ... that really happened. Super Carnage Royale! Invictus is probably still screaming. Having never met him in person, she pictured some sore loser smashing his rig to bits.

Sensing her approach, the door to the old war room opened. Toriko noticed a dancing glow moments before walking through. After a single step inside, instinct made her lurch back. An imposing shadow loomed in the darkness, its smiling face made demonic by flickering light. Her instinct to strike gave way to her love for a form she would recognize anywhere.

Ujaku.

She was about to scold him when she noticed the flickering came from a ceremonial candle attached to a bowl-shaped cake in his paws. "Ujaku!"

"Happy birthday," Minea said, her foxy form appearing from a bloom of holographic cherry blossoms above Toriko. Minea tossed a handful of holographic glitter her way.

"Surprise, kitten!" Maro purred, peeking out from behind Ujaku's broad shoulders.

"Is that ...?" Toriko said, her mouth already watering.

"You know it," Ujaku said, triumphant.

While he set it down, Maro emerged from behind him with the cutlery, saying, "Try to make a wish first."

Toriko recognized her sister's attempt to shame her love of sweets. Without another thought, she puckered her lips and blew. As

soon as the flame went out, she began to jitter in anticipation. Like a flea, she clung to Maro as she sliced up the cake. The first piece barely had time to settle on the plate before Toriko snatched it up and plunged her fork into the lush, decadent layers soaked in condensed milk.

She yowled in delight between bites. The smooth cream and tangy tingle of the red berry purr-ee danced on her tongue. “Eudora! Where did you get this kitten’s milk cake?” One forkful after another packed her tiny mouth. She couldn’t get enough.

Minea laughed. “Is it safe for you to eat that fast?” Longing eyes belied her jesting tone. Toriko could see how badly her holographic creation wanted a taste of her own, but of course that wasn’t possible.

“Actually, I made it,” Ujaku said, passing out glasses of milk to wash down the cake.

Toriko paused only long enough to spout, “What? Shut up. You did not!”

“I did,” he said with a smile. “Glad you like it.”

“Like it?” Toriko said, mouth full. “I wish you’d made two!”

“There will be two of you if you keep going,” Maro said.

That buzzkill of a comment earned a stern glance for her sister.

“Really?” Minea floated above them, her expression pinched with judgment at Maro’s comment, a sentiment Toriko shared. At least someone was on her side.

Toriko took a drink of cool milk to wash it down. Holding eye contact with Maro, she lifted another forkful to her mouth.

“I’m just looking out for you,” Maro said.

In the warmest of ways, too. “You know, I’m going to enjoy my birthday however I want. And right now, it’s all about the big two-five! I’m a quarter-century kitty!” The words rang in her ears.

Twenty-five years.

So much had already happened—the deaths of her parents, the rough time in college, the years looking for a job, meeting Rhysus Mencari, becoming a D’mok Warrior, saving her sister but losing the professor, and the Nukari War. Looking about, she remembered how an important chunk of that happened right here in Osuto Station.

Returning here had inflicted an unexpected toll on her psyche. As she glanced around, memories of those lost in the war appeared like ghosts before her. For an instant, old friends sat around the table once more: the matriarch of crystal, Seigie Weun; the turncoat Beast Warrior, Katen; the silver-skinned and ancient D'mar leader, Osuto; and, of course, Rhysus Mencari. She held the memory for a moment before letting it go. Life and death were literally decided here. Cringing, she recalled how she, Maro, and Ujaku nearly met their demise when the station was overrun by the Beast Warrior known as Jask. But in the end, they won the Nukari War.

This asteroid base, left unstable and nearly demolished, was set adrift in the belt. Lifeless. Cast off. The cracks in the walls, the dust and ding across the ceilings and floors, showed that time hadn't been kind to the place that once kept them alive. Yet, even in its decrepit state, something about its ancient walls comforted her. She could have picked anywhere to celebrate this quarter-century milestone. But Osuto Station was the obvious choice. Not only from its sentimental value, but also because she needed somewhere far out, hidden away. Few would even remember its existence. The barriers once erected in the airlocks and docking bay to keep scavengers out were still intact when they arrived. Not a soul had discovered the derelict station.

Which meant this place couldn't be more purr-fect. Without distractions, or anyone abusing her borderline overly altruistic tendencies to provide help to everyone who asked, she could conduct the final tests on her latest invention. Seeing her creation fully functional would be the best birthday gift ever.

"Hello?" Minea said, waving her holographic paw in front of Toriko. "Anyone home?"

Toriko shook off the memories. "Yeah?"

Minea floated back, aghast. "Um, *yeah*. Where were you, miss quarter-century space cadet? Senility doesn't set in for another one hundred years."

Toriko waved her off. "Here."

"Um, no," Minea said with a finger wag.

"Thinking about the deployment?" Ujaku asked.

“It’s really more a beta test than a deployment—”

The room flooded with a bloodred light, followed by a blaring alarm. The shock sent Toriko springing out of her seat. Her paw hit her glass of milk, sending it crashing off the table to shatter on the stone floor. Her pang of guilt was replaced by the comfort that she could recycle the crystal. Not true for the expensive milk, as rare a treat as her birthday cake.

“What’s going on?” Maro yelled, interrupting her thoughts.

Multiple holographic displays flashed up beside Minea. Toriko recognized one as a perimeter scan around the asteroid base, showing a curious red blip closing in fast. Minea blurted, “We have company!”

“What?” Toriko said. “No one should be out here.”

“Weapons!” Minea yelled. “I’m detecting energy weapons.”

“Can you bring up the station’s defenses?” Ujaku asked.

Minea snorted. “What defenses? There’s nothing to bring up!”

“When we lived here, the D’mok Warriors were the defenses,” Toriko said, concerned.

“Well, there’s three of us here now!” Maro said, running into the hall.

She had a point. All three of them were D’mok Warriors. Perhaps the lot of them were no longer there, but they were far from defenseless.

“Where are you going?” Ujaku yelled.

“To an airlock!” Maro hissed. “Whoever’s messing up my sis’s birthday is going to be sorry.”

Toriko’s heart pounded as she and Ujaku chased after Maro. It had been a while since she’d jumped out into space and became a living weapon. *Eudora, will I even remember how to do everything?* She wished for her horde of defense-bots—or at least her ship.

Her ship. “The *Prowler*!”

“What?” Ujaku said, still lagging, trying to keep up with the girls.

“Spark’s back on New Eden, but he can bring my ship—the *Prowler*.” She’d left him behind to receive an important delivery. Once secured, Spark would bring it to Osuto Station using the *Prowler*.

“Won’t that take a while to get here?” Ujaku panted.

“Not if he tunnel travels here! My pup can do it,” Toriko crooned. Spark, her canine creation, would do it easily. He’d done it before. But what if the inbound ship was just a scout? Could more enemies be on their way? “Minea, anything else on the long-range scanners?”

“I don’t think so, but these systems need some serious updating and recalibration. I’ve got dead spots all over and mottled readings everywhere else.”

Toriko skidded to a stop and summoned her abilities. A golden aura washed over her as a pure white light gleamed from her necklace. “Keep going! I’m going to reach out to Spark.” She felt a tingle, then a surge of power. Using her necklace to broadcast her energies, she reached out through the digital networks to connect with Spark. She winced in confusion as the signals seemed to boomerang back toward the asteroid base. “Where are you, Spark?”

Maro’s voice echoed in Toriko’s mind, *“We’re at the airlock. Going out!”*

“Be careful!” Toriko mind-spoke back.

A tingling filled her as she connected with her robotic companion. She could sense his surroundings. He was already in her ship, flying with someone. No, with two others. But why? And where? She was about to access the ship’s systems when Spark noticed her presence.

01001101 01100001 01110011 01110100 01110010 01100001
01010100 01100101 01100011 01110010 01100001

“Spark, where are you?” she transmitted in return.

01000001 01110000 01110000 01110010 01101111 01100001
01100011 01101000 01101001 01101110 01100111 00100000
01001111 01110011 01110101 01110100 01101111 00100000
01010011 01110100 01100001 01110100 01101001 01101111
01101110

As he responded, she also heard a child’s laugh. Like an elastic band, her mind snapped back into her body. “They’re ... here?” she said, befuddled.

Maro’s voice filled Toriko’s mind. *“You’re never going to believe this.”*

But Toriko already knew what Maro was going to say.



“Happy birthday, Toriko!” Allia yelled as she burst from the hatch of Toriko’s hot pink kitty fighter ship. She was only sixteen, but the doe-eyed little girl she originally met already looked like a young lady. Even Allia’s crazy mane of hair appeared tamed, pulled back in a bun of braided locks. A knee-high robotic dog bounded out a few paces behind her.

“Are you kidding me?” Toriko said with glee and frustration.

“I love your ship!” Allia’s face beamed. “Can you make me one too?”

“One would think Osuto Station would be familiar with the *Prowler*!” Maro said, glaring at Minea.

“I told you its sensors were bad!” Minea snarled in defense.

“Regardless,” Maro scolded, turning to Allia. “If there were weapons, we could have blown you to dust.”

“It’s the Osuto Station. It doesn’t have weapons,” Allia said, glib. Toriko’s face pruned. “Oh, don’t be mad!”

Whatever frustration Toriko felt vaporized when Allia’s arms wrapped around her and squeezed in the biggest birthday hug she’d ever had. The hug tightened so much Toriko had to dodge the hilts of Allia’s signature weapon, the Flower Blades, which were strapped to her back.

Spark ran to his master’s side, jumping up and down before running elated rings around the pair.

“I didn’t want to miss your birthday,” Allia said, releasing the hug. “When I found Spark, I just knew he could take me to you!”

Toriko laughed. “I felt bad leaving him back at New Eden anyway. He was going to transport a special package here once it arrived on New Eden.”

Movement from the ship’s hatch drew her attention. A beast two meters long and shimmering with white light stood on all fours at the entrance. Ichini, Allia’s companion. No matter how many times she

saw the creature, Ichini always made her catch her breath. Currently in its majestic feline form, the creature sported a mantle of ragged bone that protruded from the top of its strong, muzzled face and a toned body covered in ragged black and white stripes. Its long tail whipped the air in glee. A deep purr rumbled across the landing bay.

A tender warmth filled her chest. Allia and Ichini's arrival made being at Osuto Station even more nostalgic. Two more of her extended D'mok family were home. It felt good. All of it.

"Oh hey!" Allia pulled something small from her pocket. "I have something for you."

"What's this?" Toriko said, taking the amethyst orb and studying it. "Wait! Is this a memory crystal? I haven't seen one of these in years!" She laughed. "Hey, I think I still have a reader on my suit." Clenching her fist, a small hatch opened from her wrist guard. A three-pronged claw emerged. As she placed the orb in the center, the claws closed over the crystal. A beam of amethyst light shot through then out the top. The light scattered like glitter in the air. An image formed, causing Toriko to catch her breath. It was the rest of her family—the D'mok Warriors, her friends from Weun Academy, and even the command staff from New Eden itself.

The collection of friends shouted, "Happy birthday, Toriko!"

"Wherever you are," a silver-skinned woman with short-cropped, light-blue hair added.

Una. A lifetime of memories flashed through Toriko's mind. At least it felt like a lifetime of memories. Being comrades-in-arms during the Nukari War would do that. Without Una's piloting skills, Toriko knew she wouldn't be around today.

"Naijen!" From off-camera, Allia's recorded voice yelled the name moments before her image appeared on the screen, dragging a hulking, tattooed brute into view. "Come on!"

"Yeah, yeah," Naijen growled into the camera. "Happy birthday, geek."

Toriko looked at the real Allia standing beside her and laughed. *Naijen. Begrudging to the end.*

"I got as many as I could together," Allia said. "Everyone I

could.”

There were a few missing. Some no longer alive, and others who were now far away. “Thank you,” Toriko said past the swell of emotion that rushed within her. “This is amazing.” It was all she could say before choking up.

“Soooo ...” Allia said cheerily, deflecting the growing awkwardness. “How are we celebrating?”

Ujaku laughed. “Right to business?”

“You know me,” Allia said, shaking her head. “All business!”

“Well,” Toriko began, “first you have to try some of Ujaku’s kitten’s milk cake.”

Snide, Maro added, “If there’s any left.”

“And then,” Toriko said with a side glance toward her sister, “after a final simulation, we top it off with the trial run for my latest invention: D’mok Power Armor!”