# Immigrant Song

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**Summary:** Pt. 4 of Persona non Grata. Robotnik's cyborg slavemasters are embarked to become the world's overlords. In their way stands a ragtag band of Freedom Fighters led by a single hedgehog. A tale of the tides of war and ships sailing to new lands.

## \*Chapter 1\*: Great Forest, 25 Vendemaire 3239

Author's Note. This story is designed to examine what Sonic's fight against Robotnik would be like if it more closely resembled a conflict on Earth. Further details should be obtained by reading the story. Thanks very much for your readership and any reviews you provide! The story is still being written, and your input can only help to make the story better.

**Persona non Grata**

a story of Mobius in four parts

Part One: Gardenia

Part Two: Burning Beard

Part Three: Search and Destroy

Part Four: Immigrant Song

(All things are in shadow. Sally Acorn and Sonic Hedgehog lie on the ground, seeming to look up at a sky filled with stars and the milky stripe of a spiral galaxy as seen from the inside. A two tailed fox stands at their feet, seeming to look down at them.)

(1) Imperial Silviculture Base Alpha, Great Forest, 25 Vendemaire 3239. Subject Julianne of Rats struggles with unsought promotions; subject Snively Kolensky plays out the line on subject Renee of Pine Martens.

(2) Robotropolis, 26 Vendemaire 3239. Subjects Sonic Hedgehog and Sally Acorn visit a factory dormitory; subject Miles of Foxes is reassigned.

(3) "Knothole Village" South, Great Forest, 27 Vendemaire 3239. Subjects Antoine D'Coolette retains his solitude; Subjects Lupe of Wolves, Amanda of Skunks, and Julian Robotnik investigate the nature of robots.

(4) "Knothole Village" South, Great Forest, 28 Vendemaire 3239. Subjects Sonic Hedgehog, Sally Acorn, Antoine D'Coolette and May Rabbit prepare for battle.

(5) Robotropolis, 29 Vendemaire 3239. Subject Amanda of Skunks speeks freely with Subject Snively Kolensky.

(6) Robotropolis, 30 Vendemaire 3239. The Battle of Robotropolis begins.

(7) The Egg, Robotropolis, 30 Vendemaire 3239. Subjects Sonic Hedgehog and Julian Robotnik have a conversation.

(8) Imperial Spaceport, Northwest of Robotropolis, 1 Brumaire 3239. Subjects Antoine D'Coolette, May Rabbit, Miles of Foxes and Sally Acorn press onward.

(9) One Hundred Kilometers Off Angel Island, 3 Messidor 3686. Subject Dareth of Foxes learns things about humans, mobians, gods and his Lady.

(10) Citadel of Sarah, Lady Winstone, Winstone, Robian Empire, 28 Messidor 3686. Subject Sarah, Lady Winstone, feels out Subject Miles, Lord Fortune.

(11) Near Range Comet Belt, 12 Nivose 3757. Subject Tails Prower leaves home.

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**Imperial Silviculture Base Alpha, Great Forest, 25 Vendemaire 3239**

It took Julianne of Rats half an hour to dress. Five minutes for forest-camouflaged cotton-polystyrene uniform of the Imperial Army, five minutes to walk to the auxiliary barracks armory, and twenty to install herself in the heavy exoskeleton of a Swatbot's combat servant. By the time she powered up and checked the boot of the command and control relays and the targeting assistance systems, she was sweating in the stifling breath of the computers that hummed all around her, monitoring the ammo and weapons lock-up. All the bruises had woken up beneath her wheat fur, and she had less than two minutes to 0200 hours.

Her aching muscles called the stronger servos in the exoskeleton to life. She trudged to the door, which opened automatically at silent request from her armor. Instantly she was almost blinded by the blue glare of the xenon arclights mounted on stalks along the five meter perimeter wall. If you looked at them, the light burnt your retinas like bare skin under the sun. If you didn't look, you just felt the eyes watching you, mechanical and biological, from the wall and from the corners of every structure in the base.

Miles is watching, she thought.

Julianne walked with soft whines from the exoskeleton's motors, looking down at the cement through the HUD overlay the suit held in front of her left eye.

The food stockpile was two hundred meters away across the core of the camp in the quartermaster complex and she moved quickly with long steps half her own, half-dictated by the steel and composite that caged her body. Her tail whipped awkwardly, trying instinctively and hopelessly to counterbalance the mass of the exoskeleton. When she reached her station, the door to the provisions shed, she was going too fast and had a moment of terror that she would fall forward onto the Swatbot and scratch its armor, but the onboard laser gyros in the exoskeleton pulled her back upright to attention.

The bot looked out at the starkly lit parade ground, ignoring her. "Excuse me—" She stifled a groan, wondering how tired she had to be to forget to how to address a robot. "I am Private Julianne of Rats, Sir. I am assigned to assist you."

The Swatbot silently lifted its right fist and pressed the datalinks at its knuckles to the ports on her exoskeleton's shoulder. The servos responded by changing her posture, sinking her from attention into a combat stance. Clicks and a brief flash of targeting laser on the ground as her systems rechecked themselves to the Swatbot's satisfaction. A quick message in her HUD and the green outline it superimposed on the contours of the bot in front of her let her know that her systems were married to the bot's. "Form flank left and perform targeting duties."

"Yes, Sir," she replied, her path already laid out for her by the HUD. Flank left meant that the bot would hold its position to the right of the security door leading into the provision shed, and she would be stationed on its left, to provide a triangulation point for its sensors. Already her calves had begun to complain. A digitigrade robot could maintain the ready stance the exoskeleton required indefinitely without pain. She was going to have to make it eight hours, on three hours sleep and a handful of kibble. And only Miles knew what task would be assigned her then, instead of permitting her a full rest cycle.

In position, she raised her head and squeezed her eyes shut against the arclight glare.

Make this stop. The plea didn't come from her muscles, but another part of her, deep in her chest. This has to stop.

Shut up, Julianne thought back, forcing her eyes open. A mobian stood before her. She and her exoskeleton recognized him at the same time, the HUD painting him green as she jerked hard to attention, pulled a salute.

"Lieutenant Colonel," the Swatbot said, unmoving. Even that was an astonishing amount of deference for a robot to pay an organic.

"Lieutenant Colonel, Sir!" Julianne shouted.

"At ease," Miles ordered. The rat's exoskeleton squeezed a breathy whine from her chest as she spread her legs and forced the suit's arm-actuators as close to permitting her hands to clasp behind her back as they would allow. Swallowing, she forced her arms to remain in place.

Miles of Foxes smiled. As almost always, he was dressed below his rank in loose-fitting dun shorts and a black vest lined with pockets and ablative armor. If Julianne didn't know better she'd think that the commander liked the feel of the forest air in his fur. She knew better: he liked to show his arms. Scarification that cruel and precise marked him as the chosen of a Robian far better than the steel collar around his neck.

"You look tired, rat," he declared.

Julianne forced herself to keep meeting his gaze as she weighed the risk of telling him that her duty schedule hadn't left her desperately exhausted—Miles might reward a mobian eager to serve the Empress with the opportunity to forgo her next shift in bunk in favor of target practice or polishing the Swatbot next to her to a shine—and the risk of saying something that Miles might take as insubordination. "I . . . It's standing ready in the exoskeleton," she said. "Sir. My legs are not used to it, Sir."

Miles kept smiling. Julianne forced herself to stay still as Miles reached out his hand and rubbed his thumb in the fur beside her left eye, feeling the puffy softness of the bruise he had given her two days ago. "Swatbots don't have as much need of targeting servants in the capital, do they?"

"No, Sir."

"How many times have you worn the rig now, Julianne?"

Forever—a week—when had she slept . . . . ". . . six . . . I don't—do not know, Sir."

"You don't remember."

"No, Sir. Not exactly. Five or six times."

"Good," he said. "Forget how many."

"Yes, Sir," she replied without hesitation. Miles sometimes gave her commands that could not be obeyed, like an order to stop feeling a pain she was suffering, to fail to understand words she heard, or to forget something she had just seen. Protesting was unwise.

"Does the Swatbot care how many shifts it has served?" Miles asked.

"No, Sir."

"Does it feel tired?"

"No, Sir."

Miles folded his own hands behind his back—actually folded them, with no metal cage to keep his wrists apart—and lifted his ears with an inquisitive air. "Do you want to be like the Swatbot?"

"Yes, Sir."

He scrutinized her face. After a moment he gave a slight nod. "Good. Aid Sierra-Bravo-Null-Four-Seven with your life. Ambrosia came with the supply run this morning."

Ambrosia. Food of the Robians. The Lady was paying them another visit soon. "Yes, Sir."

Miles turned briefly to the Swatbot beside her. "Carry on," he said, before striding quickly off towards his command quarters.

Once she could no longer hear his steps Julianne realized she was holding her breath and let it go. The ambrosia was a weapon the rebels couldn't make themselves, and they would want it, badly.

And that wasn't a safe thought to have, implying as it did not only that not all Robians obeyed the empress, but that the freedom fighters had ears in the Empire itself. If Miles had been watching her for it, she would have been punished. The fox had an ability to detect dishonesty or disloyalty in her that would have been uncanny if it avoided false positives as easily as it did false negatives. Miles would beat her if she so much as failed to tell the truth hard enough. But he hadn't freshened her swollen eye tonight.

Make this stop. The thing in Julianne reached up out of her belly and pooled the start of tears on her lower eyelids. Make it stop.

The first time Julianne could remember hearing that phrase was over a year ago. She had been on the bottom bunk, on a damp, thin mattress that stank of multiple bodies, an old wire frame beneath it that let her sink into a clammy, close pit. Above her had been the wire outline of the creature in the upper bunk, a fragile pure-white mouse. Julianne tried not to look at the mouse on the assembly line during the day, and closed her eyes at night even before she lay down. But on the bad nights, she wouldn't be able to let the mouse become meaningless noise, like the rattling of the air vents or the buzz of the always burning red lights. Julianne would hear the muttered words over and over, until exhaustion let her sleep.

". . . . . . ."

It felt like her earliest memory, the beginning of her life. There had been other things before, data entry and odd jobs one or two years at a stretch, staying out of the death traps of Mobius's twisted politics, not growing attached to anyone within reach of the army or the front—but that had been someone else, before Lord Robotnik and his Empress crashed down on the world and erased everything that had gone before, like a wave washing over the sand of a beach. The soldiers and bots took her with the others doing day labor on a carrot farm northwest of Fortune Station, took them into the city called Robotropolis again, a strange, unfamiliar place of smoke and cratered roads and shattered windows, cameras and fences and black steel faces.

But the strangeness and size of it were soon beyond her. Julianne's world was the factory and the overstuffed dormitory beside it, with its frigid showers and constantly occupied bunks. She adapted, because she had to. Worked and ate and slept. Slowly learned to ignore the stink of octane exhaust, to rip the hem of her socks and stuff her ears to save herself from the shriek of the presses and the hiss of the spot-welders, to fall asleep without pause or hesitation and make full use of the six hours bunk time she was allotted. Learned all the different tasks of the factory: cleaning, intake, stock, quality check, servicing the assembly robots that welded and formed the Swatbots from the raw materials and prefabricated parts. Learned not to complain and not to hesitate and not to ask questions.

But she had glimpses of another world. A world that seemed . . . not gentler, but better. Many of the her tasks didn't require full attention—in a way, that was the worst part, the constant understimulation, a mobian forced to perform as simply, unerringly, and endlessly as a machine—and as Julianne worked she watched the soldiers as they watched her and the others. She picked up on the chain of command on the factory floor, starting with the lowest-ranked minders, armed only with their stunsticks for anyone who fouled up, up through the reserve troops with their rifles, the rare tech-infantry servants lost in their cages of metal and wire, all the way up to the rulers of the plant: the finished Swatbots themselves, and the rarely-glimpsed supervisor, the steel collar on his neck flashing back the showers of sparks from the assembly line.

The soldiers carried themselves differently from the workers. The workers looked lost, confused, ashamed. Some, the workers that lasted the longest, or that were moved in from other factories, just seemed blank, empty. The warriors were blank, but they weren't empty; they had a simplicity of purpose that somehow suggested pride without showing it. She caught snatches of their conversation when minders settled behind her, or when she got to move away from the arc-welders for piss and kibble. The blank workers the warriors liked, but when they began to make mistakes—and they always did, the warriors said, always—they called them junk. When a worker couldn't stop thinking on the line, made mistakes, became nervous, they were haywire.

By listening to the warriors, Julianne learned not to make friends with the other workers. In her bunk during off-shift, eyes closed in the red-light dimness, she could hear them talking, muttering. Whispering about the freedom fighters. Plotting escape. Plotting suicide.

And that mouse. On the fritz. Ready to blow.

When the mouse shrieked and turned to rush the minders with a wrench and be shot by the reserve guards, Julianne broke position on the line and tackled her to the ground. In a moment she was writhing in agony under the stunsticks, a screaming ball of fur being soaked with pepper spray and kicked. In fifteen minutes the mouse was dead and Julianne was kneeling with burnt eyes watering at the sharp glint of the overseer's collar. The overseer was a weasel with ice blue eyes that carried no hint of compassion. "Do you want to die, rat?" he asked.

Julianne spat a dribble of blood onto her lower lip and chinfur. "I want to die for the Empress," she croaked. It was better than dying in the factory.

They took her to barracks, for training. She got less sleep, more injuries—after six months as a private, her tail had became as kinky as a wharf brawler's from breaking and rebreaking. But the kibble was different, didn't leave her hungry even after she ate it, and she felt strong, real. She felt like someone again. She slowly stepped up her hand-to-hand combat to match the bluster that was expected of her, accepted the cautious combat style natural to rats even though it meant she would never have the prestige that came to canines and ursines.

After six months she was given the rank of Sergeant, a command of five mobians, and a prestigious post in the chief imperial military base in the Great Forest, hunting the rebels that no one could speak openly about—the unmentioned cause of the "accidental" gas leaks and "negligent" octane tank ruptures that sent factories up in sparks and shrapnel, that on one unspeakable occasion dropped the Empress herself to her knees during a public address, screaming in pain as the EMP ravaged her thoughts.

Julianne's squad and two others were flown in by transport pod to build up the projectable forces for forest sweeps. The pod lurched as the landing stalks hit the cement and sunlight blasted through the rim of the rear combat deployment hatch. "Out! Move, move, move!" she screamed, driving her squad hard into line on the parade ground. They were the first to assemble and when she snapped to attention she had a smile on her snout.

The collared commander, a bright orange-furred dog fox in a combat vest, walked the line, strangely decorated arms clasped behind his back and eyes squinting against the bright, clean sky as he silently inspected his new weapons. When he reached Julianne he stopped and turned and she felt her tail stiffen. He looked her from boots to buzzed headfur and then, ignoring the patch on her vest pocket bearing her name, ordered, "Name, Sergeant."

Unconsciously she slapped her tail sharply against the dry cement. "Julianne of Rats, Sergeant, Robian Imperial Army, Sir!"

He nodded sharply and without emotion. "You're demoted to Private First Class, rat." She didn't have time to react as he turned to her XO. "Mongoose, you're promoted to Sergeant First Class. You have command of the squad."

"Yes Sir!"

"I am Miles, fox of Lady Renee," the commander said loudly, resuming his pacing while Julianne struggled to keep from collapsing, screaming. "Everything in this forest belongs to her. As soon as you entered it, you belonged to her. Outside those walls," he shouted, pointing across rows of hangars and parked aerial stealthbots at tall green oaks rearing behind the perimeter, "are other animals that belong to the Lady. I will use you to remind them of that. All squads report to barracks. The rat will report to the command shed," he added without looking at her. "Dismissed."

The Swatbots stopped her at the entrance of the command shed, which wasn't a shed but a black steel bunker that made her think of the Egg rising at the center of Robotropolis. They walked her to a room with dark composite paneling. A broad desk with sleeping computers and comm linkups. No windows, but a wall filled with video feeds that rotated through the security cameras that blanketed the camp. Across from them, as though watching, a large photograph of a pine marten with bark-brown fur and a cold eyes. At the center of the room a holographic map of the Great Forest showed the deployment of expeditionary forces around the base, ghosts of blue where overflights had found traces of possible rebel encampments.

Julianne dutifully turned a blind eye to all of it, faced the door through which she had been ushered, and waited. Tried to blank her mind, with some success; it was a knack she'd begun to acquire in the factory and polished in training. She didn't know where the cameras were, but there were always cameras.

The doors sliding open called her back awake. Miles didn't even look at her as she snapped to attention, and walked past her to the table. After he said nothing for half a minute she turned about face. He was sitting on the edge of the desk, half-obscured by the translucent map, quietly tapping a stylus on a minicomp tablet. What looked like a tactical radio was curled around the base of his right ear, pressing the tiny black nub of the speaker inside. He didn't appear to be hearing anything disturbing.

After two minutes, she cleared her throat, softly enough that it could have been an accident. After ten, she stamped her boot and fixed her eyes blindly forward. "Ser—Private First Class Julianne of Rats, reporting for—"

The blunt corner of the minicomp caught her in the forehead. Next she was on the floor and the fox was screaming down at her, his upper lip pulled back from his canines. "I didn't give you permission to speak! If this is how Lord Pierre's animals trained you, Milady will have harsh words with him, and you will labor alongside the workers. You will report to minder Antoinette of Lions and—"

"I've done nothing wrong," Julianne said.

As Miles kicked her side she rolled and grabbed his ankle, clutched it to her belly to try to keep it from hurting her, squealing so loud it hurt her own ears.

"I've earned this!" she shouted. "I'm a warrior!"

He didn't care.

After he was done with her she felt the cold hands of Swatbots drag her to the infirmary. After she was cleaned and bandaged, she reported to the chief minder. For the rest of the day she cleaned toilets, until she was ordered to Miles's quarters, to polish his stained boots.

The next day, she had to clean on hands and knees in the command bunker while Miles discussed aerial reconnaissance photos. The next, minder Antoinette relayed her praise for Julianne's tireless work cleaning the galley, which excused the maintenance robots from performing the menial task. The next, while she was washing uniforms by hand, Miles summoned her to the command shed and ordered her to stand at attention until her limbs began shaking, at which point he began punching her in the belly. At the end of the week, she woke screaming from a dream that she couldn't remember clearly, but in which Miles had been watching her. She was punished with a double shift for waking the workers.

After a month, Miles's Lady paid her camp a visit. News of her imminence circulated in advance as Miles ordered napalm knockback and inspection of every perimeter treeline, twenty-four hour maintenance shifts on Swatbots and all remotely malfunctioning camp systems. In the mass sleep deprivation every organic seemed to sense her coming, like a storm. By the time her transport pod set down on the tarmac Julianne's chest was pounding, her tail flushed and prickly. When the marten strode down the hatch stairs into the burning sun with unsquinting eyes the whole assembled camp seemed to hold its breath.

Lady Renee walked to Lieutenant Colonel Miles, who waited two meters from the pod and did not salute, but stood with arms at his sides, his ears folded to his skull. She had a few millimeters on him and Miles seemed to shrink as she approached, until she was standing immediately before him, looking down at his lowered eyes and snout. After a silent moment she turned, left him standing there, and stepped forward to address her camp.

As Renee began to speak, Julianne looked at her smiling face, thought of the scars on the fox's arms, thought of the blood on his boots, and quietly prayed to the gods whose names she'd forgotten that she'd never attract a Robian's attention.

An hour after the parade assembly was dismissed, her former XO brought her an order to report to the Lady in Miles's command quarters. She went immediately.

The Lady was resting in a chair in the middle of the room, eyes unfocused as she thought. For a Robian, thinking meant striding a world that organics couldn't inhabit. Julianne came to attention and saluted, and the marten blinked her mind back into her body. "Rat Julianne," she said. "I've heard much about you."

Miles had been telling his Lady things about her. Julianne couldn't keep the terror from her face. "I don't—" she coughed haltingly, but she stopped as her eyes followed the robian's brown-furred arm down to where her fingers stroked the fur of Miles's head.

Miles was kneeling on the floor beside the chair, shoulders slumped and arms limp. The tactical radio was out of his ear. His eyes were almost closed. After Julianne watched him for a moment, she could see he was breathing.

"Yes, fox Miles thinks of you very much," Lady Renee said.

Julianne couldn't stop looking at the slivers of Miles's empty eyes. "What is he . . . what did you . . . ."

"I've taken away his power to think, for a little while," she said, rubbing his ears in a way that made his tails wag slowly over his heels, even as his face stayed empty. "It's good for him. Restful. He likes it very much."

"Can he hear . . . hear us?"

The Lady gave a polite but not pleasant grin. "You're thinking about him like an animal, not a robot," she said.

"I can do more than work," Julianne said. "I can. I'm a warrior, Lady. But Colonel Miles demoted me as soon as he saw me, and . . . he . . . ."

"I know. I know everything Miles knows, rat. Miles is mine. Would you like revenge?" she asked idly, as though she were offering coffee. "Come and hurt him."

". . . No," Julianne said. "No thank you, Lady."

"Don't be afraid. He can't resist, and I won't let him remember what you do to him, later. It will be our little secret."

"No thank you, Lady."

"Rat," the Lady said, as though she had not spoken of the subject before, "come and hurt Miles. Twist his ears. It causes him unusual pain and distress without injuring him."

"Please, Lady, I don't want to."

"I've ordered you to, animal," Lady Renee said, not needing to make her voice any colder. "Hurt him."

"Please, Lady."

"It does not please me. My order stands. Hurt him."

"I can't."

"You cannot obey, warrior?"

"I can—I just—I can't hurt Miles, Lady. I can't. I can't stop thinking about him."

"You can't stop—?"

"I can't," Julianne said, a knot in her chest unraveling and spilling out of her mouth as a rope of words. "He's in my mind. He's all I can think about, but even if I make him happy he'll still punish me. I haven't done anything wrong but he still hurts me and makes me crawl with the workers. He's watching me all the time—I dream about him . . . about . . . and I can't . . . ."

Lady Renee continued to watch her patiently, with mild interest.

"He's driving me mad," Julianne gasped.

The Lady smiled, silently, scratching behind Miles's ears. "Miles liked you from the moment he saw you," she said. "He's making you very loyal."

Julianne felt like she had been stabbed. " . . . Yes, Lady," she choked.

"I am very pleased with his work."

It took her a few seconds to realize what the Lady was asking for. "Thank you for my training, Lady."

"Good rat. Dismissed."

The Lady returned to the capital the next day, and Miles called Julianne to the command shed. She braced herself, tightened her abdominal muscles as she stamped and saluted. "You are demoted from Private First Class to Private, rat," he announced. "Your bunk shifts and rations are reduced by half. Report immediately to the armory. You are a targeting servant for swatbots on guard duty."

She held her stiff attention a moment. But then her lips blubbered thank you Sir, thank you Sir, she relaxed her shoulders, folded her ears, let him hold her, pet down the fur between her ears, a warrior again.

Make him stop! she shouted silently, thinking of Miles's slack, wet lips as he knelt beside his owner, his empty eyes and head.

Miles was watching her.

She didn't wait for an order; she knew what he wanted. She clenched her jaw and squeezed the voice down out of her head and into her gut, until she couldn't squeeze it any harder.

Shut up.

Please, make this—  
Shut up and obey, weakling.  
In the days since at the heels of several bot masters, her metal cage squeezed the voice down harder, helping her—if the voice wasn't her. Or if it was, then helping Miles, helping it, this thing that she was becoming.

REPORT STATUS, the HUD commanded. "Targeting unit is nominal," Julianne announced, proving she was awake. She shuffled slightly, the metal struts that held her legs reacting just a moment too late for her not to strain her aching muscles against them. Thank the rig for correcting your posture, animal.

She didn't feel the smirking, cruel pleasure of superiority at the thought. It wasn't her voice this time, this moment. She only felt tired.

Make it stop . . . .

CONTACT SOUTH 4, the HUD screamed in red, punctuating the warning with a buzz in her ear. MULTIPLE CONTACTS, it added, the names of perimeter posts scrolling down her vision while red outlines snapped to life over sections of the perimeter wall.

The order COMBAT STATUS FREEFIRE glared in her eyes and at that moment the fences came alive in a blaze of green and red and blue and flaming chunks of white-hot phosphorous arcing through the air. Julianne stopped her flinch before the rig did; she hadn't seen it in person before, but it was just fireworks—the spray of light confused bot optics worse than a mobian's. A moment later a symphony of echoing staccato rattle reached her as small arms came to life all along the wall.

It felt as though the rig tightened around her, though it didn't.

The HUD tracked her eye movements and kept the translucent targeting reticule at the center of her vision as she scanned the parade ground. It monitored the position of her fingers as she spread them over the virtual controls. All her senses tightened with a rush of adrenaline. Imperial troops ran to the hangers to get the standby stealthbots free of their resupply cables, instincts stopping her hands before she could mark them as targets.

Her rational mind slowly began to catch up. She had to be more careful. The supply sheds were at the center of the camp, behind layers of defense. No mobian would penetrate so far as—

Cement splashed like water as the mass slammed into the tarmac and blasted back into the air. Julianne slapped the invisible target marker and traced the bogey into the air with her eyes, the HUD shaping her plot-points into a parabolic arc as the swatbot's systems built the target profile, quicker than she could track it or even think about what it could be. Flashes burnt the corners of her vision as she automatically took a step forward to keep the bot's rising right arm out of her line of sight, finger still tapping the invisible button even though the bot's own systems could now track anything without its own midair thrust until it reached the ground, when it would already be torn apart by the force of its own plasma-hot evaporating flesh. Julianne's unnecessary systems began to catch up, recognized the target's long rabbit's ears swept back by her tremendous velocity—

A sudden shout from her right turned Julianne's eyes just in time to be blinded by a shower of sparks bursting from the elbow joint of the swat's firing arm. Her rig's arm-actuators didn't offer her enough motion to shield her face and she shrieked as chips of white-hot metal burnt out in her fur, peppering her snout with welts. Alarm chirps blared in her ear. Forcing her eyes open, her vision was filled with glaring red HUD-overlays screaming PROXIMITY WARNING and PRIMARY WEAPON FAILURE. A brown-furred canine had stolen on the swat's right flank and taken off its plasma caster with a combat knife—a sword. The rabbit impacted down into the cement, broad armor around her feet stomping out a shockwave of dust.

Rabbit and coyote shouted. Impact armor parted and collapsed as the coyote's sword drove into the bot's wasp-narrow belly and the rabbit's massive mailed fist crunched deep into its face. A deafening sawtooth tone announced a long scroll of flashing, hysterical text, OPTICS FAILURE, CRITICAL CAPACITOR FAILURE, EMERGENCY SHUTDOWN. The bot fell back against the door. Julianne reached instinctively for a sidearm, but it wasn't there, because targeting servants didn't carry their own guns; they were just a subsystem—

COMMS TO SWATBOT LOST, the HUD declared with the completion of the shutdown sequence. The tone in her ear changed to a needle-sharp sine wave, forcing a scream of pain through her clenched teeth.

The rabbit and coyote both looked at her.

Julianne knew who they were. Every soldier knew Antoine, the weakling king, the fatigues he wore in the field still royal blue, shoulders marked by mud-stained gold epaulettes. Every soldier despised him. He'd become what all of them dreamed of becoming, but his ascension had come without the submission and hard, loyal labor that was its price, and without honor. Even though he was strong enough to slice steel with a monofilament-sharpened blade, the awkward, nervous struggle he made to pull his sword from the fallen swatbot's armor shell belonged to a coward. If he was a Robian, then submitting to a Robian was shameful.

Hatred smothered the shame before she could feel it, locking into her brain like wires trailing back behind her to Colonel Miles, his Lady, the omnipotent Empress. She was their tool, and that made her better than any wild coyote.

"Merde," Antoine spat, took his right hand away from the blade and pulled a stolen, duct-taped plasma pistol from his belt, pointing the bulbous barrel at Julianne's chest.

Run. Get reinforcements. Julianne turned to—

She grunted as the rig fought her arms and hips, the power from the servo-assists almost entirely gone. Her eye instinctively refocused on the HUD overlay, looking for the errors.

COMMS TO SWATBOT LOST, it still read, and beneath that now: LOW-POWER MODE. HOLD POSITION. AWAIT ORDERS.

Behind the words, Antoine still held his gun on her. Beside him the false queen's pet, May, stood with her steel fist knotted and cocked beside her head, ready to fly forward and punch Julianne's head from her shoulders.

The rig held her in position, watching them with her arms at her sides.

Bunnie dropped her fist and grabbed the Swatbot's leg by the ankle, pulling it away from the entrance to the provisions shed. "Get your bot-sticker, sugaryote," she shouted over the blasts and small arms rattle from the south. "I'll take the door."

The coyote looked at Julianne a moment more before lowering his gun. He reholstered it and moved both hands back to the sword for a yank as the rabbit sank her fingers into the locked blast door, dug her feet into the ground and snapped the locking mechanisms and the automatic door servos, forcing half the entryway open.

Julianne swung her tail, swaying as she tried to at least shuffle away from the enemy, but she only managed to wriggle against her metal cage, defenseless. She winced at the sharp scrape as Antoine jerked his sword free of the hulk, looked behind him with splayed ears at another bulbous orange incendiary mushroom rising into the night at the treeline, and ducked into the food store after the rabbit.

An otherworldly hum arose from the direction of the hangars, the standby stealthbots finally getting on-line and airborne. In forty-five seconds the treeline would be a plasma firestorm, but the rebels would already be on their way with stolen ambrosia, enough to keep their robots strong for months. But Julianne could radio their position, and the stealthbots would deploy an HE warhead. It would erase a good part of the middle of the camp, but the two rogue robians would be dead.

And so would she.

Because the tech servant rig wouldn't let her move. She'd die for a design flaw.

"All forces, priority one orders," Colonel Miles shouted angrily onto general tactical channel. "Redeploy and sweep for hostiles in the camp. Possible augmented mobians; use of EMP is authorized."

Julianne opened her mouth to bark her position and the thing in her belly leapt up and grabbed her throat.

It wasn't a design flaw. It was incentive. Mobian targeting servants did not outlive their masters.

"Faster!" May Rabbit bounded out of food storage, a stainless steel crate slung on her back. "Tails knows we're here!"

Obey Miles, Julianne thought, but the thing in her belly wouldn't let her speak any more than the rig would let her flee. Antoine stumbled coming out of the door, dragging another crate behind him, eyes wide with terror. Julianne felt that thing in her belly pushing up hard into her pounding head, mind locking in terror.

"Help," Julianne called.

They both froze and looked back at her. The coyote's male-apple rose high in his throat. "We have to go," he told her, but however much he wanted it to be true, it was plain from his voice that he didn't believe it. It was like he was begging her.

"Please," Julianne squeaked. "Make it stop—"

The rabbit dropped the crate with a thud, sprinted to her. "You follow us," she said, grabbing the steel frame over her chest with both. "You run as fast as ya can and don't stop, hear?"

Julianne started to nod but clenched her teeth at the pain as the rabbit tensed her arms. Steel shrieked, the cage deforming. Julianne threw her arms back and her chest forward and she screamed as May Rabbit ripped her open, ripped her free.

Still hours to dawn. Julianne sat with her legs folded in the dirt, shivered with cold, straining her eyes at the darkness. Her eyes had acclimated to the camp lights and despite the stars above the tree canopy the night was pitch black to her. No one else seemed to mind. She heard hostiles—rebels, she heard rebels moving close by, sometimes thought she saw a curve of a shoulder or a reaching hand. Quiet voices. "I don't like it," Antoine said.

"I say dump her," hissed an unfamiliar voice. "It's too perfect. She's sitting right by the objective, waiting for you, and she doesn't so much as fire a shot? Tails probably—"

"Geoff, shut up," May said, raising her voice to what might have been a normal volume but sounded like one of the parade ground speakers. The rat winced and hunched down, clutching her sweat-soaked fatigues around her shoulders. She could feel eyes in the darkness. Lenses in the trees, lenses high above, all peering down at her. Watching.

Miles is watching. She grabbed the back of her head in her hands, felt an urge to scream.

"I don't like it either," the rabbit said, quiet again. "But that's how we're doing it. I stay with her and Antoine'll get you back safe and sound. Them's orders, if that's what you need to hear. Get the sweet stuff to Sonic. By now he'll be as hungry as a pothead on a Queensday night."

Julianne heard people moving off. Soft steps, leaves snapping—could leaves snap? The forest was so quiet. Chirping crickets and buzzing cicadas but nothing in the low register. It felt wrong.

She startled as she heard Antoine's voice again, closer than she expected. "Bunnie—"

"I'll be alright," the rabbit said. "I've got a good feeling. Have a drink for yourself, too, huh? All three of us're starvin'. I'll be back with ya in a day or two if the rat keeps quiet."

"Just be safe, Bunnie."

"You know it. Antoine?" she spoke again, stilling the sound of the coyote's footsteps. "Thanks for savin' my tail back there. You're shaping up a real fighter."

There weren't any further words. Julianne kept pulling at the fur on the back of her neck with her fingers, working the flesh raw. A sudden thump and her eyes just barely made out a shape sitting down close by her, about a meter away. "You okay, honey?" the rabbit asked.

Julianne didn't say anything, just breathed, deep and fast. The forest stunk. It smelled like rotting things, wet things.

"What's your name?" the rabbit said.

She straightened up, putting her hands on her legs. "Julianne of Rats," she declared, then bit her lip. Her voice was too loud. "Private," she whispered.

The rabbit was quiet for a very long moment, not moving. ". . . Your name?" she said again.

The pity in the rabbit's voice was terrible.

"Julie," she managed after a moment.

"Julie what, honey?"

" . . . Fairfield." The words fell out of her slowly. "Julie Fairfield."

"That's a pretty name," the rabbit said. "Mine's Bunnie. Last name Rabbit, but that's just a bit too much comin' after Bunnie, what I think. Where you from?"

Base Alpha, she thought automatically, before trying to answer, thinking about the farm, about the city. "I . . . . Nowhere. I don't know." She swallowed, her eyes hurting. "It's been a long time . . . ."

"That's okay," Bunnie said, leaping off the subject. "You hungry?"

"Hungry?" she replied, before something landed heavy in her lap. It was cold, softer than a rock, somehow papery and oily against her fingers.

"Sorry, but boiled taters is the only cooked stuff I got. We ain't makin' a fire; Tails'll have overflights going out."

The rat brought the thing to her face in both hands and . . . opened her mouth and bit into it, like . . . like an apple. In a moment she was eating like a wild beast, crumbs of the tuber falling out the side of her mouth—

"Fffwo—!" she coughed, spitting wet chunks onto her hands. "Overflights," she squeaked. "The stealthbots—their infrared—"

"We'll be alright," Bunnie said. There was a sharp crunch and a faint scent of carrot as she continued with her mouth full. "I'll hear radio chatter before they get a bird within a quarter-click of us, and I got these things in my backpack we rigged outta camo and these emergency blankets. Ain't cuddly, but it's the best way to hide from IR short of freezing to death."

Julie relaxed a little. But still: Miles was watching. Her stomach was sure of it.

And Bunnie could tell. "Seriously, hon, we'll be okay from the air. You should get some sleep if you can, we're gonna have to make some good klicks in a few hours, case Tails sends out some deep ground patrols to beat the bushes."

" Knothole Village?" she asked, forcing herself to say it. Of all the words that sometimes showed up in spraypaint on the walls of Robotropolis, those two were among the most forbidden.

"Not right away," Bunnie said, and her voice was far more strained than a moment before. "We're gonna take a long route, real long, to be safe."

"They can track us?"

". . . . I'm worried they can track you."

"Track me?"

"With a transmitter. It's happened to us before when we busted a crew out of a factory. We lost a camp and a lot of good people."

Miles is watching you.  
"We'll get rid of . . . ." Julie faltered. Miles knows what you did. "We'll get rid of . . . of everything." Miles will punish you until you're factory junk. She began to furiously unbutton her jacket. "I don't care. It's not cold—"

Bunnie reached out of the darkness and grabbed her by the wrist. "Not a transmitter you can get rid of," she said.

Julie said nothing.

"They wouldn't have told you," Bunnie said. "But if you got surgery—for anything, wisdom teeth, appendicitis—any time you lost a day you can't account for—they might have . . . put something inside you."

You are a very, very bad rat, the thing in her belly said.

Julie didn't remember any surgery or lost time. But she still started to cry.

All of the Robians had chambers with windows that gave them a view of the Egg. The Empress commanded it. The command was well-known, and was for the benefit of their animals rather than the Lords and Ladies themselves. They could observe whenever they wanted, wherever they were; if the Empress wished, she could force them to turn their minds' eyes to the cameras that watched the construction from inside and out once an hour, once a minute. But the command had led the ruling nobility to take or construct their domains in a ring around the city center, and workers and scientists and soldiers could feel the power radiating out and through them in the very geography of Robotropolis, binding them like iron filings in a magnetic field.

It was a wise choice, Snively thought, annoyed.

Behind him, the Lady Renee sat deep in a communication trance that had broken off their breakfast visit. Anyone with fur would have had to sit at the table, not touching the tray of honeydew and pineapple from her hydroponic gardens, and wait respectfully for her to return to her body and the room, but Snively had gotten up from his chair. Like her fellow Robians, Renee felt no need to decorate her chambers: black tile and black carbon fiber plated most surfaces, with white-veined black marble highlighting contours for the eye. Snively preferred to view the progress.

The Egg was still far from completion. Without the end in mind it would now be the Bowl or the Cup, a wide, slowly tapering steel shell cylinder coated with hardened concrete and ablative armor, rising above the surrounding buildings. Impossibly massive cranes rose out of the middle, laying hardened support struts and routing heavy tubes of special composite into molds for walls and braces. The palace had already been erased, but the Egg would surmount it in every possible way, an impregnable skull for the brain of the Empire, its softly tapering black walls built so hard as to save the bulk of the building even from the direct nuclear blast that Robotnik and the Empress were convinced the nations of the human alliance would soon lob in a frantic, total effort to stave off their extinction.

Snively doubted that Lachels would have the imagination or the will. Vorland, Grunsetz and Ostian had all gotten in line, but Lachels was the only nation with the resources for the project, and the Lakolska were still clinging with stubborn, childish post-revolutionary fervor to their democracy. Even with all its desperate emergency powers the government hit its limits every day trying to nationalize the economy for total war in the plains near Corukas and Kingsport, where the last of free mobians were trying to die rather than surrender—without much success, thanks to Lord Pierre's advances in nerve agents and other nonlethal combat techniques that brought the Empress more slaves by the day. The humans couldn't even properly censor their press, which gave the Empire such reliable strategic information that it was almost beside the point to web the nation with spies. Amanda had done so anyway, of course. Lady Lupe had a passion for controlling her animal's thoughts. Not only did her deep-cover agents not miss their collars, they actually believed their cover identities when not in the act of carrying out her will.

But even though it wasn't strictly necessary, Snively liked the Egg—the idea of it, what it would become. The black had an incredible gravity that was only increased by the morning light drizzling through the smog; it lurked at the center of the Empire like the supermassive collapsed star thought to reside at the center of the galaxy. It was a perfect fortress for a ruler. In it, Snively would be invincible.

His uncle was there now, in the already-functioning command center in its subterranean heart. Amanda, too, "ruling" "her" Empire as she waited slavishly on Julian's every word.

Snively continued to watch, silently. Thinking.

His wristcomp vibrated.

It wasn't actually a wristcomp so much as a part of a sophisticated system of electronic equipment woven throughout the fabric of his clothing, sensors and processors fitted along the heavy seams of his emerald uniform and smarttools hanging along his belt, that made engineering and mechanical work easy in any environment. But the wrist-display was basically a simple minicomp. The vibration meant a priority message, broad distribution to nobility and high-level military.

The vibration, along with Renee's long, deep communication trance, meant trouble. He held his arm before his chest at the ideal height for the holoprojector, and ordered the message to "display."

Renee's face popped up before him. Her electronic avatar, but the resemblance was uncannily perfect. "Early this morning, rebel forces attacked and raided Silviculture Base Alpha, in the process stealing a large supply of ambrosia."

Snively's face did not change.

"As all know, the long history of low production of workers and other forest products at Base Alpha is unacceptable. Therefore, at the command and by the permission of the almighty Robian Empress Amanda, I am surrendering control and command of her base to the Lady Lupe of Wolves, effective at 2400 hours today. All hail our Empress."

By the time the message finished and Snively turned, Renee was already back, and devastated. She was dressed in a tight black workout top and slacks, baring the armor implants on her arms. Her head hung over her balled fists on the black carbon-fiber tabletop. Her display of simple submission to the Empress in her communication was formal and involved no display of shame, but the humiliation at her loss of Base Alpha was implicit.

Snively put on a frown of concern, sat down across from her. The concern was real. He liked Renee. She was smart, fierce, dedicated, but that was expected of any Robian. It was her searching mind that intrigued him, a loyalty to the Empress that reached far beyond a simple desire for glory and to impress. "Will she give you part of the human front?" he asked.

"To hell with the human front!" she snarled. "I should have been there! I told her! Three robians!"

"I know," Snively said sadly, shaking his head, smoothly reaching out a hand for a slice of honeydew. Amanda had the continent well in hand, her position was very strong, but Robotnik still had her playing a defensive game. The west was being taken slowly, city by city; the capital was being reinforced, the Great Forest was being harassed and probed rather than burned down to the bedrock. From a strategic standpoint, it was not a bad idea.

But the Empress's soldiers looked at it from an ideological standpoint. Snively looked at it from the psychological standpoint—almost the same thing, but not quite.

"I could have had their heads on stakes," Renee spat. "If I'd lived there, led the patrols myself, Sonic the Hedgehog would be at her feet, in chains."

"But think of it Amanda's way, Renee," Snively replied, his tone one of resignation. "When the rodent killed Lord Anton, what could the mobians have thought? Robians, mortal? The first death is underhanded, a sneak attack, a crime that the omnipotent Empress will repay. But if the she loses another, just how omnipotent—"

"Just how omnipotent is she when she won't use her power? Three robians. I pitted Miles against three robians of my own strength. Who would have welcomed him if he betrayed me. And he did the impossible for me for eight months. Now I must punish him because he didn't do more. If I am chastised, he must be humiliated. Anything less would be an affront to the Empress."

Snively decided that he'd baited her enough. He gave a sad sigh, one which did not come easy as he thought back almost a decade to when the fox, merely a demonic runt of a child, had almost ruined his life. "How is Miles?" he asked.

Renee didn't answer. Nominally, a Robian's collared servants were equals, but one had only to see the effort she had put into sculpting the fox's body and mind to know that Miles was his Lady's favorite.

"Renee." The human leaned forward, widening his eyes as though he was opening his soul to her. "I understand how you feel. And your arguments make sense to me. But she is your Empress. What can you do?"

She shut her brown eyes, splayed her ears. "What can I do," she echoed with frustration.

Snively sighed slightly, grimacing so as not to smile.

Renee did not dislike Amanda, and her loyalty was strong. But Snively knew that, deep within her, Renee still chafed at her subjugation to the Empress. He understood how she felt, empathized with her deeply. He himself had never entirely gotten over Amanda betraying him. Betraying him, her creator, betraying him, giving him to his uncle to be tortured and degraded and reduced from the re-discoverer, almost the re-creator of the roboticizer to Robotnik's lackey, his troubleshooter. A slave to a thief, a thief and a whore who'd let herself be stolen. And he was expected to give thanks because he had been given a special exemption from the death sentence passed upon the rest of his species.

What could he do.

He had some ideas.

Kain Blackwood - 2012

## \*Chapter 2\*: Robotropolis, 26 Vendemaire 3239

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**Robotropolis, 26 Vendemaire 3239**

Sally held her breath as she felt her shoulders start to slip against the walls of the ventilation duct. Her fingers reached out, but she didn't touch them to the walls and kept the pads of her bare toes away; a squeak of flesh on metal and she might not make it back as far as the highest-level utility conduit before the bots were on her. She pushed her chest out, slowly squeezing her arms down to the elbows into the cool metal.

Her fur continued to bunch up as she slid down.

The squirrel's eyes darted upwards as she stole a quick, silent breath and locked it in her chest. The grate, oozing red light so deep it was barely illumination at all, slid a little further away.

She was already late. Slowly, Sally began to wriggle up the shaft again, worming silently in the tunnel. Right shoulder, left shoulder, right shoulder . . . .

With the faintest sound, her fur lost its friction and she fell into the darkness.

Two decimeters and she landed with a sharp shock against her ass, flattened quills brushing her tail. Sonic remained completely silent, his bare shoulders holding against the steel.

"Sorry," she whispered, genuinely. He'd always been too proud to tell her, and she hadn't known before the fall of Mobotropolis, but Sonic was claustrophobic.

"You need a softer butt," the hedgehog whispered back.

Sally smiled in spite of herself.

A tired groan from a meter above. Sally looked up at the smear of crimson and felt Sonic try to move his head too. Then the very faint, nervous-sounding, inquisitive animal whine. Sign for countersign.

She moved her legs away from Sonic's face, tightened her muscles. They worked their way back up, millimeter by millimeter. It was five minutes, two more tiny whines, before Sally got her eyes above the lower edge of the grate, Sonic planting his limbs more strongly against the galvanized steel walls to let her rest her feet on his shoulders.

Her nose got the scent before her eyes adjusted. Mobians, the mass noun. In the forest there were few occasions to wash and little stolen and homemade soap, and Sally had accepted that her scent had become as much a part of her appearance as her fur or her voice, that she could walk into a hut with her eyes closed and know who lived there, press a fallen scarf or glove to her nose and know whose it was. Life had been like that, when people had built fortresses of stone and poured their baths from a jug.

But it was different here, with the scents layered over one another, sinking into each other and mixing like a stew. This was a stink.

After hours in the layers of sewers and tunnels beneath the foundations of the city, the dim red LED light of the dormitory was bright enough. The bottom half of Sally's vision was filled with a rough bedsheet folded like desert dunes. Above that she could see the the frames of the upper bunks stretching across the basement room like shelves in a library, holding the eyes of half-sleeping slaves centimeters from the glow of the ceiling lights. Right before her, a gloved ear was half-folded under the sheet.

Sally clicked her tongue against her teeth. A sound that was just some bug or vermin unless the right person was in the bunk. Black-furred fingers tugged the edge of the sheet, and a dark eye widened in a mask of black fur. "You," Molly Lotor hissed.

You again, the raccoon meant. Normally they rotated recon missions to the city to check the dead-drops and see their contacts. Sally had been to this dormitory under what used to be the corner of Oak and Winslow in Molineaux only a week before. It was unusual for her to make the same trip again herself so soon.

These were unusual times. Things were moving very, very fast.

"How are you holding up," Sally whispered.

"We're . . . ." Molly trailed off. She faked a sleepless squirm and she moved her lips close enough to touch the grill, spoke still more quietly. "We're not being hurt as much." Sally tried not to ask the factories they were in contact with to slow down production too much, too reliably with screwups on the line. Even if Robotnik didn't suspect sabotage, it was very rough on their people. The armor factory where Molly worked had been on full production for more than a month. "Kind of tired, though. And there's a problem. The files."

"Tell me."

"You listen to them on earbuds, while you sleep. Starts out just music, but then it tells you things. Subliminally, I don't know. I spent a night awake listening to it. Relax. Listen. Obey."

"Gods," Sally whispered. She thought of Bunnie, her pretty lights. If this was real, if it worked . . . . "Can you pretend?" she asked. "Put in fake earbuds? Cotton underneath them, something to muffle it? How often do they check beds?"

"They don't."

"I don't understand."

"You—"

Sally felt Sonic's muscles tense under her footpads at the swish of the automatic door. Molly closed her eyes.

The soft clump and scrape of boots on cement ruled the silence. Sometimes a slave who worked near an octane jenny coughed up grit in sleep. Two minutes into the bed check, she saw the dark shadow glide down the aisle behind the raccoon, the hard metal flashlight-truncheon in its hand unlit, stunstick swinging soundlessly on its belt with each step.

Three minutes more and the unseen door swished, sealed with a thump.

"—You do it yourself," Molly whispered. "You ask for it. Then they give you a player."

Sally didn't ask right away, tried to think it through. Every word was dangerous. But she couldn't understand. "Why?"

"It makes it easier," Molly said. "Working. Sixteen hours is so long. You go crazy. But if you can relax." The raccoon's eyes were unnervingly soft. "Empty out. Let the rhythm in. Weld the plate. Weld the plate. Weld the plate—"

"Okay," Sally cut her off. But it was not okay. "How many people are using the—"

"We need help," Molly said.

Sally swallowed. "I know."

"It can't go on. Something needs to happen."

"Something's going to happen."

"Something needs to happen soon."

"Do you remember the signal?" Sally asked.

"Yes," Molly said, closing her eyes tight. "Yes. Please, soon."

"Soon as we can." It was cruel, but giving more than the barest information to mobians in Robotnik's clutches wasn't safe. "We're going. Be safe."

"I'm not afraid to die," Molly said.

Her eyes stared into Sally's through the grate. She seemed somehow tranquil.

"I'm not afraid to die anymore," she repeated.

"Just a little longer," Sally whispered.

The masked eyes squeezed tight. After a moment, Molly nodded.

Sally tapped her foot twice on Sonic's shoulder, and they began their descent.

The speakers crackled. Miles's ears gently perked, and he looked toward the closed cockpit. "We're approaching your stop, Lieutenant Colonel. Two minutes."

The fox was nonplussed, having not expected to reach his Lady's domain before the mobian processing center. Seated on the bench across the transport pod's bay from him was a broad-shouldered mutt with fur like burnished copper, ears docked by a knife or grenade sometime before Miles had met him. Ryan of Dogs wore Lord Pierre's collar always, and a black city uniform today. Miles had met him once during a visit to Lord Pierre's chemical plant; he believed that the Lord used him chiefly for interrogating humans captured in the west. "Ryan, would you favor Milady and make sure the prisoner is received by her processing center?"

Ryan shrugged, watching Miles with a closed-lipped grin. "Certainly. Milord has no pressing need to see me."

"Milady thanks Lord Pierre," Miles replied politely. He felt the transport pod bank into a turn, descending, and looked at the cargo netting in the back of the pod, watching the prisoner tilt an angle to the floor. It was a female forest mouse, her broad ears folded back under the opaque gasmask that rendered her quiet and faceless, arms and legs strapped into the bag of the plastic transport cocoon. She had been captured during yesterday's rebel raid. Though she had carried a gas-propellant pistol, there was no chance that she could be made into a warrior. A light plasma burn on her leg had been enough to make her submit meekly to interrogation, without torture. She had nothing but uninformed and apparently truthful answers to Miles's questions until he concluded the interrogation and ordered her prepared for transport to the capital for worker training. Then she had screamed until the mask was strapped tight.

"I hope you're not neglecting your duties by passing this package off to me," Ryan said, still grinning at the fox. "Has your Lady officially demoted you from base commander to guard duties yet?"

Miles blinked, looking at the dog thoughtfully. "No. I was relieved of my duties at Base Alpha as of today, but Milady has yet to assign me to new service. I suspect that is why she has summoned me."

"Mmm," Ryan nodded. "But why are we flying to Lady Renee, instead of your Lady Lupe?"

"I belong to Milady Renee," Miles corrected him.

"Ooh, that's right. A pity, given that you've brought the Lady Lupe such a prize as the privilege of hunting the forest rebels from Base Alpha." The dog's teeth broke through his smile. "I'm curious. How does it feel to lose a Robian Lady's most beloved possession?"

Miles considered. It did not feel like anything. He opened his mouth and stopped.

Though he did not remember it and had not thought about it before, his Lady must have disabled his emotions. Probably yesterday, sometime after the order for the transfer of the base came through.

"This conversation is ended," Miles said.

Ryan sniggered. "As you wish."

Miles decided that Ryan had realized what his Lady had done to him before he himself had. He must consider that amusing.

Lady Renee had conditioned Miles to assume many different operational and diagnostic modes upon command, commands that were recognized and effected by the parts of his brain that belonged only to her, not to him. If he tried to probe them he remembered only the sensation of coolness spreading into his blood from the IV bag, the steady pulse of the strobe light taming his eyes and the timbre of her voice as her words cut and deepened in his mind the grooves that his thoughts had to follow. With a word or a sign she could put Miles to sleep, still his tongue, fill him with bloodlust, suspend his memory, make him docile, shut his mind down for programming, or, as she had now, render his thoughts as plain and simple as those of a Swatbot. This made him very handy to his Lady.

But the mobian brain's sophistication came with complex interdependencies. Without distracting feelings Miles's actions were simple and sure, but his thoughts were not as clever, his reasoning not as robust. In his Lady's presence this was welcome, but without her to think for him he could become vulnerable, and a liability to her.

Lord Pierre was not on the best of terms with Lady Renee, and one of his warriors could take make use of his weakness to her disadvantage. Though Ryan might only wish to humiliate Miles for his own pleasure, it was safer not to let him speak.

Another minute and they touched down on the roof, the starboard hatch depressurizing with a pop. Miles stood. "Milady thanks Lord Pierre again for your service," he told the dog.

Ryan closed his eyes, covering his snout as he tried to silence his laughter.

The fox did not dally. A Swatbot let him pass to the top floor, and the doors parted to let him into the Lady's chambers without delay. She was sitting before the windows in a broad-winged black leather chair, unmoving, staring out at the Egg and the other buildings in the haze of the afternoon sun. Miles could not see her face.

He walked a respectful distance behind her chair, pressed his tails together and saluted. "Your fox Miles, Milady."

"Fox." Her words were slow, cut sharp. "I have failed my Empress."

When she was silent for a few moments, Miles replied simply, "Yes, Milady."

"I have failed her by laying great responsibility upon your shoulders. I failed her by entrusting you with the fight against the rebels. I misused you for a task of which you were not capable."

"Yes, Milady."

"I remove you from military office," the Lady declared. "You are a minder of workers."

"Yes, Milady."

"You will report to my southwest antigrav generator factory at 2000 hours, where you will submit yourself to the chief supervisor for third shift."

"Yes, Milady."

"You have humiliated me," she spat. "And you have shamed yourself."

"Yes, Milady." After five seconds of silence Miles asked, "Will that be all, Milady?"

She continued to look out the window, or to leave her face pointed at the window while she went to thoughtspace. Miles waited.

"Foxbot," the marten said.

"Yes, Milady."

"Come before me."

"Yes, Milady." Foxbot was Lady Renee's kindest pet name for Miles. She had first used it after fitting him with the radio mic that he had worn for the past six months, piping tactical and strategic information into his ear at all times. It was at first a maddening distraction, which his Lady said was the point: his brain must be conditioned to accept greater amounts of informational input, if he was to have a radio in his head. By which she had meant not a bud in his ear, but the complex communications system in her own head and spine. Because she believed the Empress would permit Miles to receive her blessing, emerge from the roboticizer strong and perfect, and serve his Lady forever.

Of course, Miles thought as he stood before his Lady, she had ordered him to remove the mic when she ordered him to prepare for the transfer of the base.

"Kneel."

"Yes, Milady." He did so, resting his hands at his sides, and looked up at her hard-set mouth, the sadness in her eyes locked away behind her squinting, angry, brows.

"You can prove your worth to me again," she said. "You will."

Miles nodded obediently. "Yes, Milady."

Renee swallowed, frowning, and reached out her left hand. She scratched gently against the whiskers of his chin, then cupped his snout. "It can't be put it off any longer, fox," she said.

Miles could not move his head to nod. He took a breath to acknowledge but then stopped in confusion. "Milady?"

"I cannot shield you from this any longer," she said, rubbing her right hand back over his ears and taking a firm hold of his head.

"I don't understand, Milady."

She looked into his eyes, and her lips moved and there was a sound like a word but not a word that he did not understand but felt fit into him like a key fits a lock, and—

The Lady's hands held Miles upright as he went dizzy, surrendering to his programming. He felt something like a rush of blood from the back of his skull to just behind his forehead, filling swelling vessels in his frontal lobes like octane flooding an engine. Dormant neural circuits woke, hungry for oxygen and sugar. Miles felt his mind brighten, his thoughts expand, full awareness return. Twenty-four hours' buildup of neuropeptides deluged his amygdyla.

Miles sobbed.

Her hands continued to hold him in place, but after a long moment she took pity on him and rubbed her thumb down over his lashes, silently commanding and permitting him to close his eyes so he would not have to look at her, or see her look at him.

Miles wasn't a foxbot. He wasn't a warrior. He was nothing. He was a minder. He couldn't beg his Lady's forgiveness. Weakness couldn't be forgiven, and he didn't deserve to beg. He didn't deserve to be her fox.

"Foxbot."

Miles opened his eyes, looked at her lips, heard the sound and had time for an instant of intense relief and deep gratitude before her command reached into his hindbrain and pulled the plug. Vertigo as like water down a drain his agony of shame and self-loathing poured out of his mind, followed by his awareness of the world around him and of himself until he was empty, placid, thoughtless, still.

Renee continued to talk, but to his brain, not to him.

"I could kill her," Sonic spat. He took a last bite of the apple, his first food of the day. His stomach clenched greedy-tight around it.

"We aren't going to kill Molly," Sally said. She was sitting with her knees balled up and her arms folded over them, looking far off to the northwest. The wild wheatgrass swayed around her in the breeze. Nice farmland, but Robotnik had left it alone, too much space for mobians to get out of cameraview and into mischief. His food factories were a tight nest of regimented razorwired plots along the rail line, further west.

Sonic stuffed the core down into his backpack, with his spare ammo and the power ring. Long run, they might need the seeds worse than the rest. Really wished he could have the apples now, though.

"Alright," he conceded. "But we're not going back there." Right now the last thing he wanted to do was go back to Robotropolis. He looked at it, northeast across the plain, slanted evening sunlight oozing through the brown blanket that hung over it, the city's own little night that he'd been breathing for the past twenty four hours as he snuck through abandoned suburbs and crawled in the city's ancient guts. The fresh air only brought out the rawness in the throat and lungs. It took days to get back to normal. "We're cutting her off. Her factory is out."

"No," Sally said. "One hundred and fifty people."

"She's screwed them, Sal, but I won't let her screw us. She's probably already singing her head off to Robotnik. Next time we go, the bots are waiting with glue guns and knockout gas."

"She's sorry for what she did to us before. She wants to help."

"No," Sonic pressed, "that's not it! Did you hear her?" He made his face slack, let his mouth hang open and his eyes go wide and empty. He put his right arm into a steady, awkward motion. "Weld. Weld. Weld. Relax. Obey. Weld. "

She kept looking at the horizon, wiggling her lopsided jaw thoughtfully.

"She's listening to those files herself, Sal."

"I think you're right," she said. "I don't think she wants to listen to them, but you're right, she is. Her eyes, Sonic. She can't take it anymore. I don't know how many of them can. They're running out of time."

Sonic had nothing to say to that. He followed Sally's eyes and swallowed down a lump in his throat. She was looking at a glow a ways from Robotropolis.

"We're all running out of time," she said.

He picked up his bag and walked, grass whispering. Sat down beside her and looked at the glow, too. If you went close enough you saw a new little city of steel struts and steaming-cold tubes of liquid air where Robotnik was building rockets, space rockets like Mobius used to have before the Great War. Even before their spies had told them, they knew the first thing to go up would be a satellite to watch the Great Forest twenty four seven. Six months. Maybe three.

Sally's musk was gentler than a fox's, sweeter, but not like the thick, cloying stink of a raccoon. If she were to crush a berry between her fingers, rub it on her shoulder, Sonic would never want to smell anything else. They didn't have berries to waste, but he liked to imagine it.

"We're gonna to pull the trigger, aren't we," he said.

"We are," Sally agreed.

He took a deep breath and heard it shiver out of him.

Sonic had never seen Robotnik in the flesh, or spoken to him. If it weren't for the times he heard the Swatbots declare Priority One Override to their furred slaves before turning from other tasks to shoot at him, he wouldn't even know for certain that Robotnik had given a thought about him. For all that, Sonic knew him well. He'd never been any good at math, but he could add and subtract fine as the next guy.

Take: an Empress teaching Sonic's people the meaning of the word 'slavery,' killing entire species without hesitation, fencing in the green land he'd learned to love as a child and draining it and coating the browned, shrunken grass with grime and filling the sky with poison. Subtract: a frightened, lost skunk that wants more than anything in the world to have a friend. Answer.

Take: a dead lump of long-gone flesh, burnt away and scattered to the winds. Subtract: a shy walrus with a soft grin and a big gut and a big heart. Answer.

Take: a wracked, scarred fox with cold eyes and a smile so cruel that the nasty glint of his teeth comes even through a telescope lens at five hundred meters, a fox that hurts the things he loves because that's what love is to him now, a boot on the neck, a fox that pins copies of the letters his Aunt Sally sends him on the dead bodies of freedom fighters that he hangs from the walls of his base. Subtract: Tails. Tails, laughing and running after him between the treetrunks, the sun and shadow on his face . . . .

Just add Lord Julian Robotnik.

Sonic was going to destroy him.

Like all monsters, to defeat Robotnik, you had to climb down into his lair. He was going to lead the freedom fighters down into the tunnels beneath the city. They would slay the monster and free the world, or they would die trying.

Sonic turned his head, put his snout on Sally's shoulder, his black nose in the fur of her neck. Breathed. Kept breathing as he felt her slide her right arm up the flat of his quills, pull him closer. He closed his eyes.

They were starving. For two years they had all been starving. Fleas and diarrhea leapt from camp to camp like wildfire. One by one they died, and worse.

He couldn't remember having been so happy.

Sally's fingers gently tugged his headquills, lifting his mouth to her mouth's kiss. He put his hands in her fur, grabbed, held tight.

"I don't want to lose you," he said.

"We have to do this," she whispered. "If we wait much longer there won't be people left to save."

"I know."

"We're going in," Sally said, and when she said in Sonic saw in his mind a yawning pit, lightless and cold, waiting for him. The image was strong. He felt his quills flex against her hand as a superstitious chill passed through his skin. Why had she said it like that?

"We'll come through," she said. "We'll come out the other side."

Six hours. Six hours of rest, and then they would hike back into the forest and light the fuse.

He kissed her again, trying not to count the seconds.

Miles slowly walked the engine housing assembly line, tapping his stunstick against his thigh, letting himself remember the posture and habits of workers. The workers did not look at him and most of his fellow minders did not, either. Newly collared warriors often began by maintaining discipline in a Lord's factory and most of the staff, with no mind for the high politics of the Empire, had no idea that Miles was not newly collared.

A few eyes widened when they saw his tails, but they quickly looked away. Moved away, afraid the wrong word would trigger an explosion of rage.

That was unnecessary. Miles was calm. Sluggish.

Depressed.

He thanked his Lady for that. Literally; he subvocalized the words, in case she was listening to his collar: thank you for calming me. His demotion still hurt, but he remained a warrior. He was part of her power, he was loyal. When in the forest he learned of his demotion he had screamed, beaten the nearest worker probably to death, but despite having complete command of the base, he had not once considered flying a transport pod into the trees and unfastening his collar.

Miles imagined Sally sitting on a stump, starved and shivering and soaked with rain. Eyes darting sharply at each snapping twig and falling leaf, waiting for him.

She had sent letters. Sometimes expeditionary patrols found them among the trampled undergrowth and cinders that were the leftovers of rebel camps, folded and weighted down underneath a smooth river-rock. Only from her, though she would pass on news of Sonic, Antoine, Bunnie. No useable intel, just meaningless small talk. Bunnie is teaching Antoine how to cook fish. Sonic is sharing a guitar that a refugee brought. I don't care what you've done. I'm worried about you. I miss you. I'm so sorry.

Miles hated her. His hatred of Sally was as strong as his love for the Lady that had freed him from her. He hated her vain head-hair, the way she had hidden her battle scars with surgery, her endless prattle, the honey words she had used to steal him from his father and enslave him when he was nothing more than a child. He knew that not all of the memories he had of the squirrel were, in a strict sense, true, but they were true in the deeper sense that his Lady had given them to him and they fit seamlessly with his other memories and they helped him see her more clearly. His hatred was no less real or right because his Lady had sharpened it.

But whether by design or necessity, the programming he had received in the afternoon had blunted its cutting edge. Normally his hatred was a weapon that could only be held by its handle. But he did not need it to mind workers; here it would cut no one but himself. He could run his thumb down the dull blade, learn its shape and feel.

Sally was not a ruler. Sciuridae were rarely rulers. They were irresolute creatures, unconfident, easy to frighten. It gave them quickness of mind without strength of character. One of Sally's ancestors had been an exception. Until the ascension of the Empress, Sally had convinced the world that she was an exception as well. Maybe she was still convincing herself. But it must be becoming harder and harder for her not to see the truth, marinating in rainwater, mud, and her own stink, herself the last remaining victim of the fraud she'd perpetrated on Miles and everyone that had called her Queen. More and more terror until she didn't know whether death, defeat, or another day in the forest would be worse.

A sudden clank of steel on concrete found his ears through the dull roar of the conveyor belts and the hiss and crackle of the soldering irons. Miles had been drifting.

So had one of the workers. She was a skunk at a station for tightening bolts on the finished casings, once the pre-assembled sensitive antigravitron units had been installed. She was still working, precisely and quickly, sharp barks from her power drill always in the same rhythm. But sitting on the floor by her boots was a black hardened-steel nut driver.

Miles rested his thumb on the button that would activate his stunstick and approached.

The skunk didn't react, her eyes fixed on her work as she rhythmically tightened set after set of hex nuts on bolts that had been inserted by the kangaroo beside her. He looked down and nudged the nut driver with his boot, saw where it had sheared away from its mount. Metal fatigue—someone in a foundry should die. But not the skunk. It was commendable that she had kept working without noticeable pause through such a serious equipment failure.

The fox rested his hand on the back of her gray jumpsuit, rubbed it once.

She continued to work without reaction. Her face was empty and peaceful.

Poor Sally. So far from the place she belonged.

Kain Blackwood 2012

## \*Chapter 3\*: Great Forest, 27 Vendemaire 3239

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"**Knothole Village" South, Great Forest, 27 Vendemaire 3239**

Rain pattered down on the thatch. The morning forest was dark, its sky gray, its browns and late-summer greens shifted toward black. Beneath Antoine's roof of leaves it was dimmer still, the bare tan fur of his chest and arms shaded to dark brown.

Antoine knelt—there wasn't enough headroom beneath the wooden frame of the thatch lean-to for anything else—took a twig from the coal firebrand and touched it to the dried marijuana. It browned and snapped and gray smoke flowed upward around the smooth-polished stone idols, his mother and father dressed in formal flowing robes, smiling. He muttered softly, wishing them well in the afterlife, letting them know that the living still remembered them. That much he could believe, that they heard, watched, took comfort that their son had survived them, used the power that they had created in him to fight for what they had given their lives to protect.

The offering, the marijuana smoke that gently licked at their cold snouts, that was just a symbol. His parents had never indulged in the common vice. He would have burnt incense, but the marijuana was the closest thing that could be had in the forest; it sprouted wild in broad patches beneath the oaks. What father and mother would appreciate was the gesture, the adherence to the tradition.

The coyote lit the nub for Vidavin Vulanis, patron of Mobius, and prayed to the fox god for the courage to face his enemies, the strength to impose order and justice. And the wisdom to use his power with kindness, to show mercy, to be good. That was not part of Vidavin's traditional liturgies, but he had added it one moonless night in the forest, when something had unnerved him about the shadow of the fox's snout on his stone face, the orange glow on his long sword.

The god of unity and order should not be fickle. Would not be. And he should be good.

Should be.

A lemming trudged by the lean-to, carrying a basket of potatoes still rich with the scent of clay and damp. Her nose caught the scent of the burning weed and she turned her head, but quickly moved on when she saw the idols.

Antoine gently pressed the smoking tip of the twig down into the loam and closed his eyes.

He did not like to probe his thoughts too deeply, was not sure whether he would or could really believe in something so plainly foolish as unseen magical people who influenced events. Sally's devotion to the rites he had always regarded as mere respect for appearances, which in the palace extended quite deep into regions that those without the weight of a title would regard as private. Antoine had followed her dutifully, doing his best to ignore the earnestness with which she knelt and whispered beside their bed each morning.

Ever since returning to the forest, Sally had never prayed or performed devotions. She had lost her idols in the flight from the city, but even strict traditionalists did not require idols for an offering to ancestors. Sally hadn't given a single thought to her parents in two years. She'd lost her faith.

It saddened him that such a support would fail her, just as she faced the horror that Robotnik had brought from the desert. Even if Sally put on a brave face for the troops and refugees, it could not help to lose the love of the gods. It calmed Antoine to commune with his ancestors. If Sally would join with him, kneel beside him, he knew he would feel so much less afraid.

Another thing he could no longer share with her.

He focused on the soft impact of the rain dripping from the forest canopy down to the thatch. Alone with the ghosts.

He didn't have many friends in the camp. It might have been that it was difficult for people to associate with their King, if it were not that Sally found it so easy to fit in. Perhaps it was the miniature war-machines infesting him, though Bunnie had no trouble even with the soft curves of her fur half-hidden beneath armor. She made it seem so natural.

She'd been teaching him combat, skills that sat athwart and against all his instincts. Punch through the tree, she would tell him as he felt the thick bark start the bruises on his knuckles and the fear wake up in his heart. Your body can take this. Don't be afraid to use it.

Bunnie would come soon, with the rat. If nothing had gone wrong.

Great Vidavin, give her strength, give her wisdom. Keep her safe.

The chipmunk's eyes widened as Lupe's delicate saw completed the section. She did not otherwise react. Robotnik watched, fascinated, as a delicate flow of blood poured over her shorn forehead, into her eyes.

Beta blockers, vasodilators, and the local anaesthetic could not produce such a muted reaction. "What do you do to the animals before the procedure?" Robotnik asked.

The wolfbot laid the rounded segment of skull down on the wheeled steel tray beside the laser scalpels. On its side it looked like the rind of a mottled gray grapefruit, red juice running down its skin and pooling on the gleaming metal. "This one has received basic conditioning, and some additional reflex dampening," Lupe said, looking down at her armored right hand as its index finger spooled out a length of very thin red wire, thin like thread. It wriggled and writhed like a worm as her thoughts called to life the electroactive polymers that webbed the inside of the insulation.

Robotnik kept staring at the creature's eyes. Alive and shining, not with intelligence or even something as complex as emotion, but a raw presentient biological intensity, muted by the drugs and intense training. What Lupe called "basic" conditioning for her test subjects involved weeks of audio-visual stimulation and neurological modification more ambitious than anything attempted by anyone not named Dr. Charles Hedgehog. And even his simple cybernetic integration techniques paled compared to what Lupe did once her subject's thoughts and behaviors had been standardized to her baseline. The chipmunk had sat naked in the chair at the robian's command, had not reacted as her limbs were strapped into position, not even as Lupe drilled the screws through the skeletal webbing above the headrest and into the back of her skull, immobilizing her.

Robotnik thumbed the controls on the right arm of his hoverchair. The maneuvering jets hissed, turning him slightly and letting him glance at the door of his private chambers. To the door's right stood a mobian guard supplied by Lupe. The dog stood at stark attention, a bullpup assault rifle held crosswise and ready across his chest. There was a worn patch on his uniform where the heavy butt of the rifle rested hour after hour, day after day. His left wrist and bicep bulged from the constant work of keeping the barrel properly elevated. He would give his life for Robotnik without hesitation. Other things, like eating and urinating, he had to be periodically reminded to do by the Swatbot that flanked the left side of the door.

The dog did not look at what was happening to the chipmunk. Robotnik suspected that he did not remember his own procedure.

"I am ready to begin, Lord Robotnik," Lupe said, resting her left arm atop the chair. The wire undulated slowly back and forth above the chipmunk's head. "Unless you have further questions before I begin."

"I'm quite eager to see how you produce these creatures, Lupe," he replied, licking dry lips. He thumbed his chair back around. "Why don't—"

He stopped speaking.

The chipmunk's fat cheeks hung on either side of her slack mouth. Above her brows the dura mater bulged fishbelly white, glistening with a thin sheen of blood. The red wire writhed above it, hungry.

The idea of leaping forward and sinking his teeth into her brain seized him so strongly that he knew it had come from an unremembered dream.

From his youth Julian's dreams had been unusually intense. In gymnasium, dreams of black forests, megaliths, the stars above in unfamiliar patterns significant and terrifying. During the war there had been strange, massive war machines like crawling skyscrapers, flying machines that dwarfed the cities they bombed and blotted out the sun. As his position in the Richsheer began to slip, he began to remember his dreams less and less, until by the time of the coup his subconscious had felt flattened. It was once Amanda and he had moved into the operational base of the Egg that they had burst upon him again, strong as before, and bigger. Planets burrowed through and built out until they were massive nests of machines in the hard vaccum; a tower so high above a city that it was built in an arc to resist the coriolis effect of planetary rotation. Dreams in which he moved through these scenes no longer a man and no longer constrained by scale, in which he subsumed life and thought and from which he woke bellowing, his jaw straining his lips bloodily wide, as though to swallow something impossibly large.

"Lord?" Lupe asked. Her ears were cocked forward.

"Why don't you begin," Robotnik breathed.

The wire darted down and stabbed through the dura mater, cerebrospinal fluid pulsing up from beneath the arachnoid membrane and beading clear. Metal and rubber snapped as the first echo of electrochemical disturbance hit the chipmunk's limbs.

"Normally I work transorbitally, which is much less interesting to watch," Lupe said. "I am currently two millimeters inside her brain. We must penetrate slowly, to minimize damage to motor controls. It will take five minutes to reach the prefrontal cortex. Then we can begin to simplify her executive functions."

"Yes," Robotnik whispered.

The chipmunk breathed raggedly, looking into the human's eyes. Only Lupe and her wire knew what she saw there.

"My Empress," Lord Bertrand of Bears said with bent knee and bowed head, "Lord Henri and I can reduce Corukas to obedience in two weeks."

"Less," Henri of Weasels muttered beside him.

"But I cannot do it with my hands tied behind my back!" the ursine cried, spreading his arms. "Let me loose my stealthbots for strategic bombing. I will break the western resistance like a twig. Two weeks and the humans will be behind their border, out of our lands—"

"Lachels is ours, too, Bertrand," Amanda interrupted. "All this planet is ours." The thoughtspace she had created to speak with them was unusually detailed, a well-established rectilinear room of about thirty by thirty feet. It was lightless save for spots that shone down on her raised green throne and her two kneeling Robians. The collared warriors they used to manage their armies observed the simulation from their command posts via holoprojector; Amanda made their faces appear on flat screens suspended in the air behind their owners.

"I know you're hungry for victory," she continued, "but the West isn't our only combat theater. And speak clearly; you will not reduce the animals of Corukas to obedience. You will decimate them. Dead creatures cannot labor."

"Neither can they fight the Empire," Bertrand offered.

"They are mine by right of arms. The Empire has great need of mobians."

"Lupe has great need of mobians," Henri spat.

Amanda narrowed her eyes. "Speak your mind," she ordered

The weasel raised his head. "Our armies are swollen with trained troops that we may not spend for your glory, while Lupe toys with her animals and sends them to the protein reprocessors by the truckload. And because the rest of us know how to make an animal loyal without pithing it, we have to wear a leash?"

"Your factories need mobians, too."

"Not as raw material," Henri insisted. "If it weren't for Lupe, my armies would be already climbing the mountains."

"It's not fair," Bertrand echoed, quietly.

Amanda lowered her snout. "I will consider this."

Concessions only made Henri more eager. "Give me permission to saturate the docks with ordnance and—"

"I will consider this," she repeated, more sharply. "Dismissed."

"Yes, my Empress," her nobles replied in unison.

"Good hunting," she wished them, closing her eyes and stiffening her back to ease the transition of her sensorium back to her body. Again she could feel the painless bite of her throne's wideband cables mated to the ports at the back of her skull. With a thought she disconnected them, rolled her shoulders, and opened her eyes.

The command center, her throne room, was quiet. Her few collared mobians sat at their stations, eyes glued to the monitors that ringed the room, fingers light on the touchpads and keyboards as they worked with the system demons to monitor and sort the constant stream of data from the city and the far posts of her Empire. The main chamber doors were closed and guarded by a Swatbot and a gift from Lupe. Amanda herself was on a raised dais at the center of the center, seated upon a massive and encompassing green steel chair. Unpadded—the seat of rule should not be an easy one.

Beside her stood a silver-furred opossum, dressed in a black long-sleeved shirt and pants that mimicked the military uniforms of her collared warriors, but bore no signs of rank. He held a tray with a sealed glass container of distilled water and a plastic thermos of ambrosia.

Timothy knew her habits well. In communications trance, she forgot the needs of her body. Without a word she opted for the water, broke the safety seal on the lid and drank, thinking.

Lupe did lose more mobians than her other Lords and Ladies, but her work was very important. Amanda herself ran upon the same hardware Lupe was working so hard to understand, after all. Her other servants did to, and knew it, but they did not always seem to care.

Her servants were all so different.

It showed in the way they trained their mobians for war. Lord Pierre weakened their wills with drugs, seduced them with the promise of power and privilege—an easy path, but it did not produce warriors so fierce as, say, those of Lady Renee. Only the toughest specimens endured her relentless cruelties, furiously struggling at their chains until she had stripped everything from them but a terrible core that mirrored her own. If Lady Lupe could achieve her goals, then she would be able to play the world like a piano. But until then, her control over her creatures was absolute, but blunt and clumsy.

Finishing, she replaced her empty glass on Timothy's tray. He was a worker, and fine for what he was: focused, tireless, submissive and attentive to detail, quite fit to tend to an Empress as one of her personal servants. She had taken him as her own after visiting the factory in which he had been laboring, and the opossum knew it, and worshipped her for saving him from his old life. He had fit to his new role perfectly, as though he had been born for it.

She smiled thoughtfully at the opossum. "You remind me of my Sally, Timothy," she said.

He blinked, confused. "Your Sally, Empress?"

"How well you serve me," she replied. That wasn't precisely what she had meant, but she had quickly lost the urge to explain further.

Renee trained obedience in months, Pierre weeks. When Amanda had briefly captured Sally years ago, the squirrel had slid into the role of her squirrelbot in hours, easily, almost painlessly after an initial shock to unsettle her mind. She had wanted to be a robot before she knew that she could be one. But after so long on her throne, with her rebel robians shielding her, Sally didn't seem to have any more desire to surrender, or fear of matching her unaugmented will and strength against Amanda's. She imagined Sally hanging before her in a transport cocoon. She would snarl and spit, promising to be rescued by Sonic and her other creatures, while Amanda would have to ponder: Pierre's way, Renee's way, Lupe's way.

None of the methods seemed right. Her Robians would probably agree. Pierre would not admit it outright, but Sally of Squirrels was far too much for him. Renee could do anything she wished with her, but she would not wish her for a warrior; she had made it more than clear how much she despised the squirrel. Lupe—

Well, Lupe would never turn anything away. But they were all so particular.

"Timothy," Amanda said.

"Yes, Empress."

"Imagine you are one of my Lords."

A slight tremor of his tail was all the discomfiture that he allowed himself. ". . . . That is hard, Empress."

She smirked, drumming the tips of her finger-armor against the arms of her throne. "Exert yourself," she ordered. "You are the fierce Lord Timothy of Opossums. You rule armies and factories for me. Would you like them all to yourself, to rule as you wish?"

"I would still be yours, Empress. And all my armies and factories would be yours. All must obey you, Empress."

"Yes."

"I'm not sure what you mean, Empress."

Amanda was not sure what she meant herself. Timothy was very useful for this purpose, when she needed to speak to resolve her thoughts, but could not show weakness or irresolution before her higher creatures. "If instead—if you didn't have just armies and factories. Not all over. But if . . . a city."

"A city?"

"If you had a city. To call your own, in my name. To rule and serve me with in the way that suits you best." Renee, a warrior's camp. Lupe, a hive. "Would it suit you to call yourself Lord of a city?"

"Which city, Empress?"

Her smile fell. "That would matter, wouldn't it."

"It would, Empress," Timothy agreed.

"They would all clamor for a city near the lines," Amanda sighed.

"I'd want Fortune Station."

She looked at him.

"It's beautiful in the spring." Timothy said.

"Like a Robian, 'possum." She lifted her right hand to her head and indicated her temple with her finger. "Like a Robian."

He folded his white ears. "Yes, Empress."

"You do not want a vacation home. You want a whole city of animals and machines to make your own, to conquer—" Amanda sat up sharply, arms and thighs scraping on the chair. "Cities behind the lines!"

"I see, Empress." Timothy smiled, bashfully, a little sadly. "I guess Lord Timothy would like to conquer his own city."

"Yes," the skunkbot agreed. This idea was taking shape. She could barely wait the few hours it would take before she could share it with Lord Robotnik in person, have the benefit of his advice. "Or to build a city."

"Build a city?"

"In the Great Forest." Amanda tapped her temple before pressing her skull back into the widebands and calling up a map to play with.

Julie stared. From moment to moment her whiskers and ears shifted, like she couldn't make up her mind whether to be thrilled or disappointed.

"Knothole Village," she said.

Bunnie trudged past her, giving a wry grin. "Just about," she said.

Robotnik would never find Knothole Village. It didn't exist. Early on Sally had figured that the basic setup should be three camps, east, west, and south. East and west were staging bases, close to the plains, no refugees that weren't ready to carry a gun and face a Swatbot. You went to the same spot after two weeks, you wouldn't find 'em. South camp was the big one—kids and old folks, and the patches of root veggies they kept around that could grow in the bad light. Closest thing to a secret haven you were going to get. Unlike east and west, south hadn't been hit yet.

But even if it did get hit, Botnik still wouldn't think he'd hit Knothole; there just wasn't enough there. Deep in the middle of old-forest oak twenty and thirty meters tall, the ground soft. There were only a couple of structures that deserved to be called huts, and they were for food, guns, 'lectric tech, and anyone unlucky enough not to have a lot of fur. The rest of the camp was on twine and rope strung between the trunk, thatch and tarps to keep out the rain and polyethelene insulation and camo to keep out the eyes. The only part of a village it really had was the people, who were peeling potatoes, boiling stew, boiling drinking water, cleaning rifles, rigging shrapnel grenades, scouring bad PV cells out of solar rigs, working on minicomps, hunched over radio receivers, patching boots, tilling dirt, raising roof-frames, picking up acorns, checking gunsights, polishing binoculars, spanking children, picking bugs out of fur, and catching zs. A good hundred and change in the south camp, most of them forest squatters that had trickled in slowly once Robotnik began hunting for the resistance. Some veterans from the loyalist army, though most of them were on missions or in the front-line camps. They also had a couple escapees from Robotnik's factories, but not many, which was why people could recognize the frightened, dazed look on Julie's face, yet still have not seen it enough to lose interest in it.

"Mia," Bunnie said, waving to the meerkat that was walking up to them, a thick branch with a pair of plastic ten-liter jugs on her shoulders. "This is Julie," she added as Mia carefully balanced the jugs and freed up her right hand to shake, which the rat remembered how to do after a moment. "Julie was in a tin can when we hit 'Botnik's base, and asked for a can opener." She waggled her armored fingers with a grin. "Better than the whole milkshake haul. Had to spend a couple of days doing a loop, making sure she didn't have any bugs other than fleas. Tony make it back alright with the rest of Red Team?"

"Yeah," the meerkat replied, her smile slipping and tugging down on the black-furred pits around her eyes, "he's alright. Sleeping I think."

"What's wrong?"

"We lost Dorie."

With Blue Team, tasked with hitting the southern perimeter and drawing heat while Bunnie, Antoine and Red Team pushed deep into the base. "Dead?"

"No."

"Oh gods," Bunnie winced, closing her eyes.

"Helen's taking it pretty hard," Mia said, significantly.

Bunnie took the hint. Dorie had been one of the friendliest mice in the south camp. Nervous by nature, but eager to prove herself; she'd felt guilty about cooking deep in the forest while others were risking their lives raiding Robotropolis. She had been very popular. This was not the best time to have recently been part of the army that had captured her. "Can you help—Julie, this is Mia."

"Hi Mia," Julie said, softly.

"Can you find her a place to sleep? Quiet?" Edge of camp? Not near too many people?

"Sure."

"Sally in the town hall?" Which was a wood hut where they kept the maps, the most important of the computers, and the little old machine that refilled Sonic's rings of go-go juice.

"Oh. No, she's doing the factory rounds downtown."

"Again?" Mia nodded, folding her ears. Bunnie sighed. "Well where's Sonic?"

"With her."

Bunnie's eyes said it all. She excused herself and stomped through the camp, everyone who saw her moving quickly out of her way.

It was all mixed up in her mind, whether she was angry with Sally or she was angry with herself, and she couldn't untangle it. Even through the gauze curtain that the roboticizer had pulled between her and her earlier memories, she knew what it felt like, to be crazy for someone, to be stupid for him. She remembered how sweet it felt, and part of her wondered if she was jealous that Sally was still feeling that, that she had her rhapsody in blue while Bunnie could barely remember the scent of the boy she had followed into battle and a government cell.

But there were some very important differences between Bunnie and Sally. Like: when a man hits you, you leave him. No excuses and no second chances. It wasn't just about being safe, it was about having some respect for yourself. We need him for the war, Sally had said, which kept Bunnie from killing him, and the refugees love him, which made Bunnie want to kill him. But not as much as Sally trying to explain her decision to rip off all her clothes and leap into a cactus patch. He's different, Sally said, he's changed, which, first, people don't change, second, that's what everyone says every time they crawl back into bed with a lout, third, Sally had been the one who'd wanted to change, leave Sonic and be the Queen she thought her country needed and marry a sweet guy who loved her more than anything and did not, absolutely did not deserve what she was doing to him.

She had made Sally sit down and told her all of it. Sally had just listened, legs crossed and arms folded, looking at Bunnie's feet. It hadn't stopped her spending every free second at Sonic's side, but it had made her feel bad about it, which was about as much as Bunnie had expected.

Antoine was where he would be, sitting underneath his lean-to, which still dripped with the morning's rain. He was polishing his sword, a wild little number Sonic had nicked from a Robian's lair after the escape from the explosion at the factory next door had gone wrong and then right, laughing as he scampered off through a storm of plasma with one of his power rings in one hand and the blade in the other. It was made of some kind of steel composite that bent enough not to break but wouldn't give a millimeter on its edge. Sharpening it required not a whetstone, but a black sponge-pad impregnated with some kind of nanomachines that knew how to get metal down to a molecule in width. The coyote worked with a simple, calm diligence until his nostrils sniffed and he looked up, a soft smile on his snout. "Bunnie. You are well."

"Yeah. Rat gal is quiet." She sat down and scooted her butt under the canopy. "Little too quiet, really. She's had a rough go of it. Tails and his boss lady took a liking to her."

"You were not listening to the political broadcasts?" Antoine asked, putting the sponge back in its plastic container. She shook her head; she'd been too busy listening to tactical channels for the counterinsurgency deployments that had not come. "Robotnik gave the forest to Lupe. Tails is gone."

"Gone?"

"Back to Robotropolis. He is being sent somewhere else."

"Well that's good!" Bunnie said.

"Is it?"

"I think so? We won't be worried about shooting him anymore. Or him shooting us."

"I don't think Sally will like him being so far away."

"Might make things a little easier for the rest of us. He's a real tough opponent," she said, almost stuttering as she stopped short of calling him meaner than a terrapod on a bottle of hot sauce and a fifth of whiskey. Tails was that cruel, but . . . you didn't like to think it was him at all. Like the nice fox was trapped inside that scarred thing, struggling to get out. Bunnie didn't know what it would take to get him out. She knew what it had taken for her: if they could beat Robotnik, dismantle his army, Tails'd just turn back to normal. Maybe if someone killed his boss lady. Almost everybody was sure it would take more than a few heartfelt letters.

"I'm not looking forward to telling Sally, when she returns," Antoine sighed. "It will hurt her very much."

"Stars and garters," Bunnie spat. "Sally don't seem to mind hurting you very—"

"Please don't." Antoine's eyes suddenly closed, his fingers locked tight around the hilt of his blade. "Please."

"It ain't right her carrying on the way she does."

"Please stop."

"She's acting like a dizzy-headed teenager, not a queen." She put her armored hand on his shoulder. "I don't care who knows it—"

The coyote slapped her away, his wrist colliding with her forearm with enough force to break an unaugmented mobian's bones. "Don't you?" he said, staring at her with eyes that glowed in the dimness beneath the trees.

"Everybody thinks she's treating you—"

"Like dirt. Like nothing. Of course everybody knows that."

"And it's wrong."

"Nobody says so."

"Antoine—"

"Nobody."

"She's the Queen, Antoine. No one wants to say boo to the Queen—"

"Of course not. And Sonic is our hero. No one will say an unkind word about him."

"I talked to her, Antoine. I told her that she's wrong to cheat on her husband. And—"

He looked back down at his sword. "Thank you," he said dully.

"Antoine—"

"Leave me alone."

A drop from the thatch landed on his nose; he didn't move.

"Twan." Her voice was hoarse.

"I need to be alone right now. Please."

Bunnie heard the leaves crunch under her broad feet as she crawled back out from under the thatch, felt the twigs clinging to the joints in her armor. Her ears were flushed with shame, and her eyes stung, but she could keep from crying. Probably. She kind of needed to be alone right now, too.

But she really had to do what she could to make sure that no one beat up Julie until she found her forest-legs.

"Production quota?" Sharon of Hyenas demanded of her chief of production.

"Exceeded by two percent, Supervisor," the beaver replied.

Not very much. As the spreadsheet Sharon had called up on the office computer told her, Vendemaire had not been a good month for the plant. If they suffered any serious equipment malfunction or loss of raw materials in the next few days, the plant could fall behind on its monthly quota. Sharon suspected that the production of hovercraft was critical for the Western front, but she knew it was the key to maintaining her rank and the privileges that went with it, like her chair in the second floor office overlooking a factory floor, like the apple she was keeping on her desk for a few days before eating it, so the others could get a good look at it and she could smell it.

The antigrav plant was traditionally one of the most efficient in the city, and she didn't deserve harsh treatment even if she had a bad month. But regardless of what she deserved, she knew she had to be on thin ice, ever since the great Lady had dumped in Sharon's lap her wayward—

"If I may pass on a request," the chief said ruefully, "Minder Miles has asked to speak to you."

Sharon flattened her ears, sighed. "I suppose I should speak to him."

"It might be a good idea, Supervisor," the beaver timidly agreed. "He's waiting outside."

"Send him in." Sharon rubbed her spotted cheeks, drew herself further upright in the old swivel chair and folded her hands as the fox strode in, sharply turning at right angles to track a rectilinear path to the space before her desk, and saluted, keeping his scarred tails behind his legs.

He was not the first collar to play at being a minder in her factory. All the collars were alike—ordered to obey you, but eager to leap past you to the heights of the Imperial hierarchy for which they had been handpicked. It did not make for an easy command relationship.

"What do you want," she grunted.

"Supervisor, I am not sure that this matter warrants your attention. But I thought it best that—"

"Out with it," Sharon spat.

"Supervisor," the fox continued without any sign of shame at the rebuke, "the workers seem unusually distracted. I think you should check for irregularities in their dormitory or in the factory security protocols."

"Noted. Dismissed." Miles saluted again in preparation for departure, but she decided not to let it go. "No. Ten-hut." Instantly he resumed his position. "Security protocols?"

"Yes, Supervisor. I would recommend increased supervision of contact with delivery workers and the plant animals. You might also consider installing additional microphones in the worker dormitory and increasing their gain. Surreptitiously, if possible."

"And why would you recommend this, minder?"

"I suspect that some of the workers are conspiring, Supervisor."

"Conspiring."

"Yes, Supervisor," he said, not the slightest hint in his tone that his suggestion was insane.

"You've been here for two days, fox." Sharon said, giving Miles an opportunity to show a gram of shame. "Two."

"Yes, Supervisor."

"What makes you think you know more about the state of production in this factory than the other minders who have given years in service to Lady Renee here? What makes you think you know more than me?"

"Supervisor, I have minded workers before. The workers here are quick to startle. Far too many of them act as though they think themselves guilty of—"

"Conspiring?" The hyena barked out a sharp laugh. "Conspiring to do what?"

Finally, the fox shifted with discomfort, nervously regaining posture after a moment. "Nothing good, Supervisor, or there would be no need for it. Maybe escape—"

"To where? We're not in the middle of the forest, Miles."

That shut him up. For two seconds, while hard breaths swelled his chest and shoulders, his only sign of emotion. And then his pride made him continue. "They could also be planning sabotage, Supervisor. I took the liberty of asking Chief Daryl about recent production—"

"Who gave you permission to take liberties?" Sharon growled.

"No one, Supervisor," Miles acknowledged, locking away what little he had shown of himself behind precise, almost robotic cadence. "I beg pardon, Supervisor."

"I'm told you were something of a tinker before you took up the path of the warrior. You haven't decided to redesign our antigrav engines, along with our worker management systems?"

"No, Supervisor."

"The workers in this factory are well-managed. This factory has met and exceeded its production quotas every month for the past sixteen months. Some of the workers have begun sleep conditioning; maybe it's having an adverse effect. Maybe one of the new minders has them uneasy." She smirked. "If they keep startling in your presence, you might try some wraps for those gruesome tails of yours."

"Yes, Supervisor."

"Dismissed."

Miles saluted, turned, and marched back through the secretarial atrium. When the door closed again and the din of the factory was muted, the fear took her. She splayed her ears, closed her eyes, grabbed the edge of her desk tight.

If he went to the Lady. If he poured a story of an inefficient, insulting factory Supervisor in her ear . . .

He'd be too proud, Sharon realized, the panic subsiding. The fox was under orders from the Lady to obey her. To go mewling to his goddess about the hyena being mean to him would be a disobedience and a humiliation beneath anything he would contemplate. He was annoying, but not a danger.

She was safe, because Miles actually was better than her. And that gave her both the opportunity and the desire to let her hatred for the collared fox flare up again.

There would be no production sacrificed to waste energy on increased supervision of the workers.

"No," Lord Robotnik interrupted.

Amanda was caught short. The holoprojector had just lit the cities and boundaries of the surrounding territory into which she proposed to carve her Empire. She had not even begun to explain her first ideas about how to assign her Robians the cities they would rule. "I'm sorry, Lord Robotnik?" she asked.

"This is wrong," the human purred. He did not even seem interested, as though she had made a clever or unusual error. "There are not twelve empires. There is one Empire. One Empress. One will."

"I know," she said, unable to keep her disappointment from her face. As soon as the idea had come to her she had been so certain that it was right, that giving her Robians their own cities was the right thing for her servants, a way to let them breathe and blossom and shine. All the second half of the day she had worked on her map, judging where her nobles would best call home, intermittently sounding Timothy for input that he did not fully understand. She was in such a good mood that before leaving to speak to her teacher she had patted the opposum's head, laid her right hand upon his neck and used the nozzle in her third finger to press a decigram of methylenedioxymethamphetamine through his skin and into his jugular vein. The best reward for a worker animal: mute, docile bliss for his rest-cycle. Perhaps that had been a false step, too.

"But my Robians . . . . It can be hard for some of them to cooperate," Amanda tried to explain.

"If this is about Lupe, you must see that she gets what she needs. She is your most diligent servant."

"No, it's not just about her. It's about all of them. If they had something solid to call their own, something they could see and touch, they wouldn't . . . I think they wouldn't be so—"

The human leaned forward in his hoverthrone, folding his fingers before his mouth. "It is their duty to obey you. Their function."

"They aren't workers, teacher!" she cried, feeling a desperate excitement that she had just almost seen something, almost had a very important thought, something Robotnik would be proud of. "They obey, but they have minds of their own, and they have pride. People need something to call their own. They always have."

"What they have been is not what they will be!" the human growled, slamming his fists on the hoverchair's arms with a dull thud. "Lupe uses her mobians for progress. What you propose is backsliding. Temerity. You will come to understand this."

"But—"

"History is a process of refinement. An animal becomes a hunter, then a farmer, a worker, purer and purer. A cloud of dust, a lithosphere, an ecosystem, an economy, an empire."

"But my Robians . . . ." As her mind wandered, the map fuzzed to nothing, the holoprojector dimming. "I like them. Lupe and all of them. They serve well."

"They will serve better."

"I like them now. They don't need to become anything else. What more can they become? What can I—" She blinked. "What will you become, teacher?"

Robotnik looked at her, in silence.

The cruelties inflicted on Amanda had made her naked mind very insightful. He reminded himself of this when he found himself wishing that Lupe, who in many ways was more perfect, was Empress. But that was wrong. Amanda was first, and she was Empress.

But she was not yet ready. Snively's effective but stupid appeals to Mobius's feudal past were the cause of that. His nephew was clever, knew how to craft a model of a society that would easily appeal to deep structures of nobility and subservience that persisted in the supposedly democratic Acorn kingdom's language, military, and executive branches of government. But as far as Snively was concerned, that was where the matter ended. His imagination stopped there. If he had thought that he could convince mobians that whoever at the most sausage at one sitting was entitled to rule by nature, he would simply have put on weight.

Robots were not noblemen. Pretending that they were had swept Acorn from power and brought him to this place from which the world would become his. But it had spoiled the more vulnerable of the Robians they had created. Insightful, pure-hearted, but impressionable Amanda most of all. She did not understand that power was justification, matter, energy, time and space—not reliably, surely and all the time. And she did not understand what that meant.

But she was getting better, stronger, more reliable. Slowly; it was harder to chance a Robian than a mobian, just as it was harder to sculpt marble than clay. But he was doing it, readying her for her task. He would press his truth into her so deeply that the imprint would be unmistakable and irremovable, until she was him in reflection, like the wax imprint of a cylinder key.

Only once that was done could he submit to the roboticizer himself, knowing that she—he—would ensure that his own mind would be pressed back into his strengthened body and softened mind, until it hardened and set. He had possessed an inkling that this was what the universe required of him, what he required of himself, until Snively and the badger Lord Michael revised their estimates of the effect nanite maintenance on rates of telomere decay in samples from Amanda and her children. Robians would not live to one hundred and twenty years. Absent a three-sigma error, they would live no less than three hundred years. No less. The science slaves meekly suggested that setting an upper bound would at this stage of their research be speculative, and that the minimum bound could be expected to increase with additional testing.

He would never die. All of time would belong to him. All of time already belonged to him, the future inherent in the present arrangement of matter and force. He was written in every atom, every creature.

Except . . . .

"Sonic Hedgehog, Sir?" Amanda asked, confused, emphasizing the forename.

Robotnik had not realized that he had growled the word Hedgehog aloud, but it was not every time that he did realize it. Sometimes in his sleep or in an idle moment he would find the disgusting word in his mouth and in instinct his lips would expel it. He was a lie—the blue creature seemed a lie, he lied in appearance, writing nonsense on his skin with ink, shifting his size and contour as he flexed his quills. Making the creation of the roboticizer seem not the crux and germination of the future, but some dumb accident.

Sometimes, when the nightmares became too much, the human could kiss the mobian, love him, the only thing in the world still limiting him and keeping him a being he could fully recognize and understand, rather than the immensity he was becoming.

"I simply must dissect him," Robotnik said.

Amanda was silent for a moment before offering reluctantly, "There are secrets in his cells, teacher. Teacher Snively suspects he may have a fourth phosphate ion somehow stably attached to the adenosine in his cells, released by a catalyst in the ring."

"You spent some time with the hedgehog, didn't you," Robotnik said. He sometimes forgot.

"Mmm-hmm."

"What do you think of him?"

"He's strong. Very fast, even without his adenosine quadphosphate." She swallowed. "I knew him when I hadn't met you, teacher."

"I understand. Speak freely and truly."

"He's very friendly." The smile quickly dropped from her face. "Very angry, too. Sometimes I helped him. I helped fix a bug in his programming about small, dark places. He helped me, too. I would never have come to you without his help, teacher."

"Hmm," Robotnik said, thoughtful, but displeased—Amanda was again trying to flex her very limited capacity for manipulation. He quickly squashed it: "His chemistry and anatomy would be far more valuable for your Empire.."

"Do you think I can save him, teacher?" she asked plaintively. "Can he become a loyal Robian?"

"Oh, Amanda. "The human licked his lips. "He will become something wonderful."

"Shhhhh!"

Bunnie blinked sleepy eyes wide as Mia darted up out of the post-dusk dimness, with that lithe meerkat suddenness. She stopped walking so quick her ear flopped over backwards. "Huh?"

Mia pointed down beneath her little roof, grinning conspiratorially. She's sleeping! she mouthed.

Something about it made her smile. She stepped forward as quietly as she could and saw Julie lying on her back, her tail curled unconsciously around her right leg, mouth hanging open.

"She's snoring," Bunnie whispered. The rat was. For two days she had been unable to sleep, muscles jerking hard every couple minutes, sweat pouring from her palms in the cool of the treebottoms. "Look at that. Knew she could remember how."

The rabbit and meerkat reacted at the same time. This close to the edge of the camp, everyone had an instinct for footsteps on the way in; they both turned, not quite preparing to fight.

Even in the almost-dark you could always tell Sonic. He had his arm around Sally's shoulders, pulling her against his chestfur as they walked.

You got no shame, Bunnie was about to spit at them, before she saw the way Sonic's mouth twisted so strangely, the lower lip slightly protruding, pulling at the upper. Sally had more control of herself, but her eyes still said it all.

"Get everybody up," Sally said.

Kain Blackwood 2012

## \*Chapter 4\*: Great Forest, 28 Vendemaire 3239

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"**Knothole Village" South, Great Forest, 28 Vendemaire 3239**

The fire licked up higher than their heads, water hissing and snapping as it boiled out of the wood deep in its heart. Everyone was sweating from their palms and any other bare skin they had. Not just from the heat. Fires were generally small, covered till they burnt down to coals; a bonfire this bright would show up on a stealthbot's visible-light spectrum CCDs, without the need for infrared. To be safe, the camp would be moved for the first time in its history, everyone not heading to camps East and West and from there to battle would be moving, hopefully toward a warmer winter. The coordinates were being kept from everyone going into the city, so that if things went wrong the refugees' location wouldn't be given up under torture.

But that was almost a formality. No one was really thinking that there would be enough know-how and people left to reassemble a resistance if the attack failed.

"Robotnik thinks we're weak," Sally said, lifting her voice over the roar of the fire and the buzz of the insects. She stood on the uprooted stump that served as the camp's chopping block, the axe's blade still planted between her blue boots. "He's always thought we'd sooner be his robots than fight his robots. We've taught him little. By now he expects sabotage in the city and on the rail lines. He knows we aren't afraid to hit his forest bases. He might suspect we have the nerve to blow up his rocket factory."

She paused, smiled. The smile began to spread through the fire-lit faces, the whole camp gathered before her, standing, sitting, hanging from the trees. She saw it, and her own became a little broader.

"But he's a slow learner. Robotnik wouldn't dream of the fight that will come to him from inside his own factories. How could his workers rebel? Workers," she shouted, letting sarcasm twist the syllables until she had to say it again. "Workers obey. Slaves don't speak." She could feel the excitement, leaping up like sparks out of a fire. "Robots don't think!

"But what are we?" she cried.

"MOBIANS!" they roared. Eyes and teeth flashed yellow and orange.

"What are our children and our sisters and brothers?"

"MOBIANS!" She could hear Bunnie's drawl, Sonic's brassy call. Antoine had never been much of a shouter.

"We! Are! Mobians!" she shouted. "And we are the people who are going to save this planet!"

Sally let the war cries carry into the trees, the troops lobbing branches into the fire. She could feel her own heartbeat knocking at her sternum.

When the clearing grew quiet enough that the shouts began to sound just a little forced, she gave the overview. "Robotniks's keeping a good chunk of his army guarding his rockets, and we have to keep them there, away from the city. Antoine's squads will hit the launch site, and keep hitting it. The longer we can keep the bulk of the heavy armor and air support away from the city center, the better off we'll be.

"In the city, we start with the factories that are ready to rebel and work out from them. Most of the other factories will jump as soon as they realize we can win. A lot of the soldiers will jump as soon as they realize we can win. We're there to free them, not to kill them, and that'll mean you'll have to think twice before you engage. We deprive Robotnik of his access to factories. We shut down ground transportation, bottle up his bots, then move on the urban airbases.

"That leaves Swatbots and the Robians. All twelve of them, if they're in the city. If they want to throw in with us, we let them. If they side with metal against fur, we'll have these"—holding aloft a re-fused EMP grenade—"and we'll have Bunnie leading us into battle. They aren't invincible. We've killed them before and if we have to, we will do it again.

"Sonic will be with us on the streets, drawing as much fire as he can and pulling it straight to the Egg. He'll turn Robotnik's command center to a smoking wreck, and more importantly, he'll protect us. Robotnik can hide in his fortress as long as he wants. We are what's important. Once our people are free, he's only a criminal barricading himself in a cave."

Sally slipped the EMP grenade back onto her vest, by its brothers. "You know what group you're with, and you know what you have to do. Get some food and get a few hours of sleep."

She hopped off the stump, deeper into the heat of the fire and the nervous, tingling energy of the camp. The assembly was over, but not yet breaking up. Knots of friends were talking before they went to sleep. There wouldn't be time in the morning. Bunnie had her arm around Antoine's shoulder as they talked Gwen and Marlene, each of whom was going to be leading a squad of not-quite-green, angry refugees into the city. She saw Sonic standing way too close to the flames, chugging a stolen bot milkshake, one that would put him down for all of those six hours as his body stashed it away in his bones. She wondered if the metal made it up into his quills, if they were tougher than they'd been three years ago.

Hold them. See how much then bend.

They were in the middle of the camp. It would be too much to lie down with him right here. But—

Sally untwisted her heart, stopped the heat in her eyes before the troops could see it. There would be more times. They had their whole lives ahead of them. She breathed shallowly, kept her shoulders tight, walked with back straight like a Queen through her subjects.

She stopped.

Slowly she forced herself to let the tension in her muscles slacken off. Her heart slowly, achingly twisted.

We might never touch each other again. The fear filled her, cold.

And she kept walking.

Miles was already lying awake with his eyes open when the bed sounded the tone to wake and begin his shift. Four of his six bunk hours he had slept. One he had spent breaking down and reassembling his stunstick, trying to sink into the calm of gun-cleaning trance, thinking that if he could just find a way to empty his mind, he would be able to sleep. But it had been so long since he'd used a stunstick that the motions still required conscious action, and the parts of the stunstick were so much simpler than those of even a pistol. After removing the contact points cartridge and the battery pack, there was nothing more he could do without disconnecting the wires and resoldering them, and he lacked the authority to requisition the necessary equipment from the plant's repair inventory.

He rose and walked to the head, defecated, urinated, pressed himself into the narrow confines of the shower and rinsed his fur. The cold water did not soothe the heat in his ears, behind his eyes. He felt worse than times he had spent three days awake in combat. Toweling himself, throwing it in the hamper, dressing in his black minder fatigues, lacing his boots, pulling on his gloves, nothing was automatic. Everything took effort. Nothing worked right.

If he didn't feel a robot, he had to force himself to perform until he did. He fastened his belt, checked everything. Stunstick. Pepper spray. Flashlight. Stun grenades. Ready.

The barracks sat on the first floor of the dormitory, to control the movements of the workers from the second and third floors and the basement. Basement first. Miles saluted the shift commander who behind shockglass in his fortress of audio and video feeds. Without a word, the entry door buzzed and he went into the dim crimson of the stairwell.

Keying open the door to the basement dormitory, he felt his senses tighten and wished he knew whether that was wise. The supervisor was right: he was seeing rebellion among the workers where there was none. Coming from the infested bush to the pristine city gave his eyes an adjustment worse than ripping off starlight goggles on a moonless night: afterimages of combat and rebellion floated above these lumps of servile flesh, blinding him to the truth of his Lady's factory as he walked the rows of bunks. They shifted naturally, in their sleep, their mutterings just the discharge of disused portions of their brains. There was nothing here for a warrior to fight.

And part of him badly wanted something to fight. A very big part of him, far bigger than the part of him that kept workers from deviating from their prescribed paths. He wanted to plan, stalk, spread his tails wide as he crouched low, smell the sharp metallic tang of a gas-propellant gun's discharge. He wanted—

It didn't matter what Miles wanted. He had to stop thinking and keep his mind on the workers.

They were sleeping.

Watch them sleep. Listen to their breathing. Smell them. Fear did have a scent, a faint scent that—

He froze. Not knowing why. Only knowing that he couldn't take another step.

Her. He looked at the bunk to the left, to the right. There, the thin bedcover pulled up to her knees, down to her breasts, a ground squirrel, deep chocolate fur, black in the subterranean light. The scent just close enough to trick his nose.

The Empire had plenty of images of Sally, images that could be shown to his eyes while he was programmed, while his hatred of her was reinforced at the sensory level, until he did hate the very sight of her. But no one had thought ahead to save her wardrobe, her bedclothes. Something that could be pressed to his nose. The nose had roots deep in the brain. He could monitor them, watch them, but not pull them out, not until she was captured.

And he did not have permission to capture her.

Miles's own nose lied to him. Told him: that squirrel is a friend, a close friend. How could his Lady compete with all that conditioning? Years at Sally's knee, at her hip, at her shoulder. And she'd used more than just kind words and touches. The false queen had fed his warrior nature too, turning a blind eye as he ran and trained with Sonic, letting him fight alongside her in her desperate raids. Let him sprout, instead of locking him down underground, like—

Like this . . . .

"Oh no," he squeaked. "Lady.. . ."

Miles spread his tails, sat down on the edge of the bunk and prayed.

Don't slack your hold on me, Lady. Bind me to your will. Use me to my utmost. Let me kill for you. Please let me. Let me capture the false queen, let me kill her, let me kill the bitch, let me kill off everything I ever felt for her, I hate Sally, I want to hate her so much, don't abandon me, don't do this to me, save me, owner, Lady, please.

"Please," he whispered.

He continued, lips moving as he spoke inaudibly to the silence. On the bed beside him, the squirrel was motionless even though she had woken. She stared at the fox, paralyzed, terrified, as though watching magic.

Sonic pressed his nose to the side of Sally's neck, crouching over her like a predator, straddling her, hands in the mattress on either side of her head. Her fingers teased down the fur of his flanks, electric, slipped up into his quills with a sharp, unpleasant tickle.

He drew back his right hand and bashed her hard across the face with his knuckles.

"Oh," she sighed in lust, licking the welt rising on her snout. She threw her arms wide, baring the brown-black armor over her collarbone, pulling her breasts against her ribcage. "Lord Sonic," she purred.

He looked down at her closing her eyes, submitting to her superior, felt his metal quills rise heavy on his back. He grabbed her face, squeezed his thumb into her cheek, felt her teeth through the flesh.

"Sonic."

The oily voice did not surprise, although it somehow pulled him away from himself. He pressed his palm more firmly to Sally's mouth, keeping her silent, because her eyes were wide and full of terror and he couldn't let her speak, because he was frightened, could feel her kicking her legs at him but he was too heavy, and he couldn't stop smiling. His head turned slyly as he tried to shout but he couldn't, and he smiled at the big red ball of flesh and the big bald head above it and opened his grinning mouth and—

Lord Robotnik, smiling with approval, opened his mouth and with a tiny, timid, High Mobian accent said: "Soneek?"

Sonic's gloved hands swung blindly, and Antoine fell on his rump in the leaves. Sonic breathed sharp and shallow, his quills flared where not pressed to the tree trunk against which he had been sleeping.

"Sorry," the hedgehog mumbled, blinking against the afternoon light. "Sorry."

The coyote brushed off his battle-jacket, realizing only after he did so that there was more dirt on his palms than on the fabric. His ears burned even hotter. He was a fool to have come to speak with Sonic. Antoine had long fantasized about drawing off his glove and demanding satisfaction from the hedgehog for his flagrant liaisons with his wife. Sonic had savagely mistreated her, abandoned her for almost a decade, then returned to shamelessly seduce her. Antoine needed cross sword and quills, draw blood from the villain's chest before having mercy—

He could not do this, of course. What Antoine had come to do was shout at the hedgehog, to at least let the forest ring with the curses he deserved and let everyone know that whatever Sonic and Sally and everyone else in this forest thought of him, the D'Coolettes had pride. It would likely be his final opportunity to do so.

But he could not do that either, because unlike himself Sonic was a buoy of hope, the masthead on the ship of state. To insult him before the troops on the eve of this battle could destroy the world for nothing more than a few moments of bitter satisfaction.

Antoine had not come to prove that Sonic could best him in a fight while sleeping.

Sonic let his arms fall limply to his sides, apparently relieved that whatever terrifying threat he had faced in his dream had been replaced by something harmless. You, Antoine thought, pressing his tongue to the roof his mouth. You ruffian. You panderer.

"You slept well?" Antoine asked.

Sonic nodded.

"The titanium suspension settled well?"

"Hit the spot," Sonic said weakly.

Antoine folded his legs, real and prosthetic, and pressed the scabbard of his sword back so the hilt didn't press into his lap. "Eager for combat?"

"I'm so fucking scared," Sonic breathed.

Antoine froze, his mouth still open to wish him well and luck.

Quills scraped bark from the tree as the hedgehog leaned forward onto his knees. "Shit," he hissed.

"If anyone is practically certain to survive the battle, Sonic . . . ."

"It's Sally," Sonic said angrily. And then he laid his ears back—oh, right. "And, you know, everybody. If Robotnik gets his hands on . . . them, I don't know what I could do."

Hmmf. "I'm sure someone of your immense resourcefulness would be able to—"

"I could do something terrible."

You already have, Antoine thought, trying to get the tone-deaf oaf to see the anger in his eyes. But flaring his whiskers, wrinkling his snout did nothing.

"If he gets me, too," Sonic said. "If he gets us both."

"Robotnik could capture me, as well," Antoine reminded him drily.

"Yeah. But you wouldn't kill for him. You wouldn't be a monster."

The coyote gave an indignant snort. "You think me incapable?"

Sonic blinked. "You're a good person, Ant."

"Oh, very nice. And you aren't?"

The hedgehog shook his head.

Antoine gathered up his anger, clung to it. But some of it had vanished.

"I dunno why you wound up in my unc's reports on his bot projects and I didn't," Sonic said. "But if that was the reason, it's a good one." He sighed. "I don't like you going into the rocket factory alone."

"Someone has to. Sally's strategy is correct."

"She's always right. We better get ready, huh."

Antoine nodded, stood, resting his hand on the pommel of his sword. "Good luck, Sonic."

It was indeed time to prepare for departure, but the hedgehog still seemed reluctant to stand. "Same to you, Antoine."

He drifted back through the trees and the people carrying guns and stolen plastic crates. Feeling strange, light.

"Ahn-twan!" Bunnie waved from beside Jeremy and Gunther, who were staring down at a wooden wagon tied to an ATV with a ball hitch, a c-clamp and rusted iron chain. The rear axle had shattered and cracked both wheels with it, tumbling to the dirt half of the overload of plastic crates bound west with the refugees. "Need another pair of hands here."

The two of them lifted the wagon up, slowly enough that the load bed did not rip apart under the stress. If only not every cybernetically augmented mobian were required for the assault on the city, it would be far more effective to just ask them to help drag the equipment, rather than use scavenged technology varying between the hydrogen fuel cell and the stone age. Once the two young sheep, neither of whom Antoine knew well, had gotten enough firewood under the back of the wagon to let them work on getting the thing ready to roll with the rest of the assembling convoy, they set it down. Bunnie moved off back toward the middle of camp; Antoine followed.

"Aw," she said. "Damn." She put her hand over her snout.

"What is it?"

"Splinter. Shoulda left that rotten old dungwagon back at the farm they—" She paused, bit, spat. "Nasty. Wish I had the armor on both arms."

"Really?" Antoine asked.

"It'd make things easier." She nodded her head at the trees back toward where they had come, sniffed. "I saw. Sonic was jawing at you?"

"It was not too unpleasant," he replied. "We were just discussing the worst possible outcomes of the battle."

The joke appeared to be too dry for Bunnie's taste. "You don't go out there thinking that way, Ant. You go looking for a bullet, you're gonna find it."

"I will do my best to avoid them." Though that would not be enough.

The rabbit's thick left hand grabbed the thick fabric over his shoulder and pushed him against a trunk. "I mean it, Antoine! I'm not going through all of this if you're just going to cakewalk out and bite it!" Bark scraped against the back of his jacket, his heels lifting slightly off the ground. "You don't get to throw your life away for nothing! You fight smart. You got that?"

Antoine smiled. "Thank you."

Bunnie snarled, her ear flopping down in front of her forehead. "Got it?"

"Yes, Bunnie!" he laughed. "Yes."

A very young shrew was looking at them, his mouth open.

Bunnie took her arm away from Antoine's shoulder as though it were hot and her hand were not shielded in ablative compound. "Where's your ma?" she said, ears flushed pink.

"Ain't got one."

"Go to your cousin, Pablo," Antoine chided. "You'll be leaving soon. Don't get lost."

The child nodded dumbly, turned and ran off through the leaves.

"I overheard their names, once," Antoine shrugged. "An accident."

"Sorry," Bunnie said. The hem of her old purple shirt had rode up to her belly button; she tugged it down to her hips. "I guess I ain't such a cool customer myself."

"You look lovely when you're angry."

She rolled her eyes, resting her armored wrist against her hip. "Har har."

He leaned in and pressed his lips to hers. And then let them stay there. Only after three seconds did he have the presence of mind to retreat.

The rabbit's eyes wide with surprise, her mouth puckering as though she had tasted something sour.

"No," Bunnie said firmly. "You don't do that to be nice. Not even because you think we're gonna die." Antoine's ears flattened in terror, neckfur bristling. "Not even—"

He kissed her again, as long as before. When he broke it, her eyes were half-lidded.

"Oh, that's mean," she whined.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't you dare die," Bunnie hissed. "If you die I swear I'll kill you."

"I won't," Antoine lied. "I promise you."

Snively was in the top-floor laboratory of one of Lupe's factories, pretending to study the latest results from her engineering slaves It was a remote neural stimulation device that she claimed did more than simply activate the peripheral nervous system and induce frontal lobe seizures. The insubstantial helmet of minute wires and mesh could, according to the wolf's technical specifications, induce emotional states. With work, it could induce specific sensations.

It was already well and good, but inducing something as complex as a thought would always require more than simple mechanical engineering. It required careful composition, improvisation skills, stage-managing, artistry. For instance: making sure one was reasonably close to Renee's chambers, yet a respectable distance so that when she called for advice, he would be able to be on the scene before she was able to reach an undesired conclusion about a course of action.

His wristcomp toned at ten in the morning. Coded private channel, urgent. Snively tapped it up, and it was of course Renee, unconsciously scratching her cream snout, eyes tired. "Miles is in trouble," she said. "Please, I need to speak with—"

"I'm coming over now," Snively said gravely. "Wait for me." He'd left a transport pod on standby; he piloted it himself, without bothering to ask city flight control for clearance and leave a record.

Renee did not tell him anything he didn't already know. Her loss of the forest to Lupe had been extremely fortunate, primarily for the position in which it had placed the pine marten with regard to her precious pet fox. Snively remembered quite vividly the surveillance videos of the long period of Miles's conditioning in which the fox had spent so deep in clinical depression that he was beyond it, in the realms of the animal learned helplessness and attachment experiments. It had happened after Renee had begun to develop some fondness for the slave, and it had wrung her.

Sniely drew out the conversation, his hands tented before his chin, sitting with his ankle resting across his knee in her chair. Only his eyes moved to follow her back and forth as she paced. "Did he specifically say that he was having disloyal thoughts?"

"Do you think I can't read him?" Renee shouted.

"I'm sorry; you're right. What a foolish question."

"He begs me. Says that he wants to hate the squirrel—" The very mention of Acorn made her snarl. "The squirrel is the problem! Miles begged me to let him fight her way—give someone else the camp, let him hunt her in the bush like a wild beast. But I did not. He had to rule the forest from the base just like my Empress from the Egg."

Guilt. Good. "Maybe if you'd assigned him more robots and animals—"

"I couldn't, Snively. I needed to supply the Western front. Miles has given himself to me, and I can't even give him what he needs to kill his prior owner." She sat across from him. "And now I can't even give him what he needs to hate her."

"Promote him again."

"My Empress won't allow it."

"Call her bluff—"

"I can't fight my Empress! Oh, Empress." She buried her head in her hands, while Snively suppressed the instinct to roll his eyes. "I'm hers, Teacher Snively. Maybe because you have nothing mobian in you, you can't understand."

"Maybe, Renee. Perhaps you're right. Perhaps Robotnik . . . ." he trailed off, flicking his fingers, appearing to ponder.

"What does Lord Robotnik have to do with any of this?" Renee asked, looking up.

"Probably nothing," Snively said dismissively. "I was just thinking what you said. About a human not understanding."

"Robotnik does have my Empress's ear," Renee said.

"But it's she who rules—"

"He's talked her out of ideas before. If . . . ."

Renee swallowed, stopped.

"I shouldn't be thinking about this," she said to Snively in a whisper. "Even if it tears me in two, I can never hurt her. I can't disobey her."

"Renee," Snively asked thoughtfully, locking the line before reeling it in, "has the Empress ever ordered you not to kill Ivo Robotnik?"

Free Mobius stopped at a short, natural firebreak, where unknown mobians had cut down a row of old-growth oaks. Long since burned or turned into houses. Or turned into houses that had burned. History did not tend to leave much in the way of explanations about people who lived in the forest.

Sally sat on one of their stumps, amid tiny opportunistic saplings sprouting up out of the cracks in the dried trunk. Behind her, the refugee caravan's packs and sledges were all together, and the squads were assembling. The murmur of conversation and the crackle of boots on leaves was getting louder and louder.

She looked to the empty north. One day to camps East and West, and then another day straight into hostile territory.

To do something like this, you had to believe that you could. And she did, because she'd done it once before, watched a cruel machine melt away as the people that were its victims and its parts came back into their own, took back the freedom that they had surrendered. This machine was crueler, stronger, the teeth of its gears more numerous and sharp, but its power still arose from the minds of the slaves. She could lead her people to freedom, and she would.

And she knew that if she wanted to, she could see it the other way, too: that she was outnumbered, outgunned. That she had no friends that couldn't be plucked away and made her enemies. She could be plucked away. She was nothing, an object awaiting the meaning of its final use.

Sometimes, you could see it that way even if you didn't want to. Everything in yourself that you thought was worthwhile failed you, evaporated just like those chains could, and you were something you were ashamed of, with no way out that you could see, that you could even want.

Then Sonic saves you. He doesn't do it with his quills or his fists. You just see him and know that it's impossible not to keep going, because he'll never back away from a fight, never let someone else change what he wants to be and what he is. Because being the Queen of Mobius is words on paper and a hunk of metal on your head, but being Sonic's Queen is everything.

She didn't flinch at the hand between her shoulder blades. That's how she knew it was him. He traced his fingers up her spine, then sat down on the ground beside her, his pistol-harness already wrapped around his arms and chest, the rounded edges of the power rings pushing against the fabric of his pack. Winged Victory's crest blossomed around the same shape on his upper arm, shifting over his tricep.

"Almost time," Sonic said, looking at the shadow trees. He didn't smile. "Almost time to save the world."

"Sonic . . . ."

I love you, but that wasn't enough. Robotnik had emptied out the words, twisted them. Slaves loved their owners, but they couldn't know this.

She slid her arm around his quills. He reached his far hand up across his chest and held it.

"It's so wrong that he has Tails, Sal. Everything they've drawn out of him, he just got it by watching me. Me, he could've—" He lowered his head. "I've done things you don't know about, Sal. Stuff Robotnik would have been really proud of."

His fingers squeezed her hand so tight.

"Whenever I haven't, it's been you, Sally. Even when you weren't there, you pulled me back from it."

She wrapped her fingers back, tightening their hands to one strong ball of muscle.

"Let's do it to it," Sally said.

Kain Blackwood 2012

## \*Chapter 5\*: Robotropolis, 29 Vendemaire 3239

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**Robotropolis, 29 Vendemaire 3239**

The blade was micron-thin at its tip, polished to perfection by imperial machines. If Miles held it just a little wrong, just a touch too much pressure behind his thumb, he would promptly set his face aflame with pain.

He watched, eyes screwed to follow the blade as he dragged its cutting edge up along the side of one of the whiskers of his right cheek. Merely to have a whisker touched in this way filled anyone with discomfort. To have his weapon scraping away individual, fibrous strands of keratin made him queasy, his flushed face constantly seeking to flinch in anticipation of the knife slicing down to the bare nerve.

Slowly the knife reached to the hypersensitive tip, then lifted into the air above him. His shoulders and legs writhed, the cheap frame of the bunk squeaking beneath him.

"My mind and body belong to Milady Renee," Miles muttered, as she had taught him to pray early on, when she had first fully taken possession of him.

There would be no sleep this morning rest-cycle. Not without drugs, which he had asked permission to requisition. His Lady had not responded to his request. In their absence he was strongly tempted to pain. He turned the blade back to his face, lowered it carefully through his whiskers and pressed it to his snout just beside his nose, dimpling the skin under the white fur. If he pulled, if he pressed, he would slice his cheek open down to the gum. The pain would bind him, and he would only sit in the bunk, tasting the hot blood, letting it clot in his facefur, on his neck, soaking the mattress.

Over the past two days Miles had found himself beginning to long for pain. Not just for the pain that spiced combat, but for the foundation of his programming, the pain that Renee had used to break him, the pain that proved her superiority and right to rule him. Walking the factory line he'd fingered his scars, traced them, letting his tails shiver as he remembered how she'd laid him open, taught him how to beg.

He only had to remember that pain to know that he belonged to his Lady. Any childish nostalgia he felt for his youth could have no hold on him. Even if his Lady no longer felt close, he was walled away from the past by time and by pain.

And by his work.

That would be the last line of defense, if he were so wretched and disloyal as to turn on his Lady. In his last rest-cycle there had been a dream that hadn't remained in images or actions, just a mood, a mental orientation that his Lady had burned out of his conscious mind, one unique to soldiers of Sally Acorn. It had made itself known in a suffocating sense of shame.

I don't care what you've done, Sally had written to him in her ridiculous efforts at psyops. Sometimes she used the phrase more than once per letter. And the reason she wrote it was the reason she said most of the things she said: it was a lie, and it would serve her if others believed it were true.

Miles had broken animals during interrogation. Not just broken their behavioral cores; he had broken their bodies. Spines. Faces. It was glorious, proud service to his Lady. But if it wasn't, then it also wasn't something that Sally would be able to forgive, even if she wanted to. She would be crueler than his Lady. She wouldn't listen to him beg.

Miles would vastly prefer the pain to that. But his body was not his to sculpt.

"Milady," he whispered, not daring to ask for his face, "please let me cut my legs. I will not scar them."

No answer came.

Miles hoped that his Lady was busy with something better than himself.

"I'm to see Lady Renee of Pine Martens," Snively smiled, drawing himself up to his full height—lifting his heels off the floor, just a little—and folding his arms behind his back, making no effort to hide the plasma pistol tucked on his belt with his minicomps and multimeters. "She has given me clearance."

Two swatbots stood impassive before the door while a reception-slave in black typed diligently behind a counter, inspecting the day's nonstandard clearances for entry into Lord Robotnik's private wing of the Egg. In a few moments she must have found it, though she did not raise her eyes or speak. The swats lowered their plasma casters and stood aside from the blast door. It hissed open and he strolled breezily in, rolling his hips right and left, humming.

He had compromised, sensing that Renee was close to her breaking point as soon as he brought up the subject of Robotnik's death. It wasn't asking her to disobey her Empress, but the last remaining humans had a special status, one Snively had drawn from the professional shamans that had persisted into the early feudal period—oracles and later palace priests. That status, after all, was what let Snively get his fingers as deep into Renee's brain as he routinely did. So he'd asked her instead to ensure that he could speak to Robotnik alone, make him see that Robians deserved the full prerogatives of their noble rank and corresponding privileges in their conduct of war and their treatment of subordinates.

Renee was standing in full uniform just inside the door to Julian's stupid control room, a less functional imitation of the more reasonable, tasteful throne room that Amanda had built for herself. His uncle had removed the stations for assistants and simply coated the walls—why not the ceilings?—with flatscreen viewers, probably influenced subconsciously by the set design of old-style news stations. The only furniture was the heavy green steel armchair in the center of the floor, again an imitation of Amanda's throne, one with plenty of buttons and switches and dials on the arms that she would have no use for.

The chair angled away from the door. Snively did his best not to smirk as he nodded in acknowledgement at Renee, who returned the nod silently, her ears splayed, glancing fearfully at the back of the chair. Dreading the argument that she knew was about to erupt. Probably fearing more, even if she wouldn't admit it to herself.

But for the first time in years, Snively didn't fear a thing.

"You know, uncle," he said without further introduction, "you owe these Robians more than you give them credit for. You didn't create them." I did. "You didn't teach them how to rule this world." I did. "But you grab Empress Amanda's ear and twist it until you insist that she make her children suffer."

Julian didn't turn his chair. Didn't speak. Snively pulled loose the snap over his sidearm, clenched his fist to keep from grabbing it. It would save him a lot of work on Renee and Amanda later if Julian were to answer, with the self-important, insulting words that came naturally to him.

"Amanda rules Mobius, not you. But every time a nobleman is suffering, it's not her name I hear from them. Why is that, do you think? What gives you the right—"

He winked the sting of sweat out of his right eye, felt more cold on his scalp. Snively wanted to shoot Julian now, through the back of the chair, somehow knowing that his uncle would be carrying a pistol of his own and would have it ready the moment he turned. But he couldn't fire yet. He couldn't be a coward in front of a warrior noblewoman like Renee. And he had to see the look on Julian's face as his heart boiled and his lungs burned. He wouldn't be able to live without it. He would go mad.

"They may not be able to ask the question, Julian," he hissed. "But I am. And I will ask it for them. You aren't clever; you aren't strong. What gives you the right to rule warriors?"

The chair lurched into motion and before Snively could stop himself he'd drawn his pistol and had it shivering up at what would soon be his uncle's head. No, he demanded, the frigid sweat again dripping into his squinting eyes. He couldn't fire until Renee could see that his uncle had tried to kill him. Just keep the gun leveled—

He gasped in panic when the chair reached a right angle to him and he first saw his gun was too high. Because his uncle was a good head taller than

"Amanda—"

The rest became a squeal as Renee shattered the ball of his right shoulder with a quick chop of her right hand. Her left arm she wrapped around him, putting the fist into his chest, squeezing his back against her breasts, pulling him up to his toes.

"Teacher Robotnik is busy," the Empress said, smooth black arms at her sides. "He's in his workshop, making modifications to his war chariot."

"Amanda," Snively grunted, trying not to cry, crying was the worst possible thing to do right now, "I'm sorry I used Renee—"

"Don't be," Amanda interrupted curtly. "I can see her thoughts at will, and she can't do anything I won't allow. Who do you belong to, Renee?"

"You, my Empress," Renee whispered behind him, a voice so weak and soft for such an iron arm. What Amanda must be doing inside her head—

"Not you," the skunkbot said.

"Robotnik's using you," Snively whimpered. "He pretends to be your friend, a teacher, because it's the only way he can control you. You're stronger than him, and . . . ."

She had been urging him gently to shush for a while now. As she stood, he did. "I can be very foolish, Snively. Maybe teacher Robotnik is what you say. I don't always understand him. He never makes me feel as sweet as you used to, when you were worried I might have a thought of my own."

A sad sigh as she rubbed her bare fingers against his cheek. "I won't forget that," she said.

"Please—"

Her finger against his lips. "Be quiet."

Snively knew what she would do now. And she did; she slid her finger down his cheek, turning her hand, cupping her palm beneath his lips. Like he had taught her, so that in the future uneducated workers would think she was a sorceress, drawing the breath of life from those whose usefulness was at an end.

Snively was furious. All of this should be his, this whole world. And he hadn't even lost to his uncle. He'd lost to this mobian whore. She'd been a slut for his scalpel and now she was going to, going to . . . . she was going to . . . .

He was afraid.

With a gentle tap she pushed a full gram of high-concentration potassium cyanide into his carotid artery. The human shuddered, blinked, and when his eyes opened he was gone. Renee was holding a corpse, her cheeks wet with tears.

Amanda reached behind the human's lolling head, rubbed her palm between Renee's ears. "Good robot," she whispered.

Their ears both perked at the same time, with the room in utter silence. A moment later, automatically, each wall of screens lit up with a broad image of fireworks in the night sky over Robotropolis, blue and green flowers bursting amidst brown diesel smoke hanging low in the autumn night.

Only rebels used fireworks.

"Rally your forces," Amanda barked at Renee. "Be careful. I'll coordinate from the throne."

The marten stamped her foot and saluted sharply, the human's corpse thumping to the floor between them with a soft wheeze of air escaping its lungs. "My Empress," she hissed, tears forgotten and the taste of battle already on her tongue.

After they left, the citywide security alert continued to play on the screens for another minute. Then they silently flicked off, leaving the body in dimness.

James of Dogs threw the door to the second-floor dormitory closed behind him. Only when he was halfway down the cement stairs did he realize that he had not actually sealed the door in place. There were bootscuffs on the landing behind him.

The workers were loose.

That thought sounded stupid, as did the workers threw a blanket over me and hit me during bed-check, and the workers kept fighting back even after I shocked one with my stunstick, and the workers have smuggled an acetylene torch into the dormitory. Even with the smell of his own scorched facefur in his nose, all James could think was that the supervisor would never believe him. She would have him flogged at shift-change for dereliction of duty. Or worse. At the first-floor landing he snatched his pepper-spray from his belt, turned—

The cutting-torch snapped bright in the red dimness. A flash burned into his eyes of the red-eyed workers on the stairs, the gleaming teeth of the badger in front, the shadowed forms of the rest behind him.

He was tapping his code into the security door before he could think that it was his duty to be beaten to death in here, that he was letting the workers loose into the yard, maybe into the factory. If the workers on-shift were not going mad too.

Guns. He needed a gun.

"We need guns!" he screamed at the security station as he ran past the shockglass window. The shift supervisor wasn't even looking at him, was staring wildly at his viewscreens and pressing his radio-bud deeper into his ear with one hand. As James kept running the klaxons suddenly barked, flattening his ears.

"All minders. All minders. Security emergency. This is not a drill."

The armory was at the end of the hall, by the yard, but it only had pistols, concussion grenades. They needed air support. They need an army.

"Help!" the dog bellowed, tail slapping at his thighs as he ran. One of the off-shift minders stumbled out of the door to the bunks, dressed in nothing but boxers. "Fucking run!" James screamed at him. "They've gone mad!"

Miles slipped his left foot beneath the dog's boot and easily sent him to the floor, the impact shocking his calfbone and scraping his footpad raw on the cement floor. "Coward!" he shouted. But he didn't shout it at him.

His head buzzed with an oxygen rush as his eyes darted between the flames and the bludgeons. The mob filled the hall, rushing toward him like a wall of water, crowding everything else from his mind. The numbers were easily twenty to one.

But they could only stand three abreast. And it was twenty workers to one loyal warrior of Lady Renee. For the first time in what felt like forever, that was all there was to think about.

With a scream of joy Miles bladed his hand, darted forward and crushed the first windpipe of the night.

Kain Blackwood 2012

## \*Chapter 6\*: Robotropolis, 30 Vendemaire 3239

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**Robotropolis, 30 Vendemaire 3239**

It looked like Amanda was dreaming. Stiffly upright upon her throne, tensed lower lip slightly opened to permit shallow, rapid breaths. Her ears flicked, her wide-open eyes twitched, sometimes at the screens and almost continuous warning calls of her collared warriors at the control banks, sometimes at images and sounds known only to her through the wideband ports in the base of her skull.

She felt the city rebelling against her. The southern third of it she couldn't even see, the workers and their rebel allies having taken apart the camera network with brutal efficiency. It hung on the city like a deadened, infected limb, glaring red on her mind's map. She was desperately trying to reroute stealthbot overflights from the forest and the fledgling spaceport to—

The spaceport was under attack! She called up the empire-wide net, marked the new insurrection on the map. Warned her six noblemen on the human front to prepare for sabotage and flanking maneuvers, told Lupe in the forest to move north and encircle, Alain in the desert—only four of her nobles in the capital! Only a third of the city's forces under the command of present rulers!

A heavy, grunting cough in her audio channels suddenly blotted out the battle. "Amanda," Robotnik said. "Where's Sonic Hedgehog?"

"I'm busy!" she spat aloud, carving the city into quarters in her mind and by raw edict transferring ownership of the robots and slaves within. Let the others complain later. Renee, southeast, Paolo, southwest—

"He will be coming to destroy you. Or me."

"Bigger problems!" And more, suddenly realizing that Sally was with them. Somewhere in that red, angry, spreading cancer—

"This gesture of defiance is futile and unimportant. You will crush the mobians. I want Hedgehog."

"Noted!" Amanda snarled, digging her fingers into the steel of her throne with exasperation. "Stay within the Egg, teacher. I'll keep you safe."

"Hedgehog," he said again insistently. "He is your first priority. Damage him as you will, but keep him alive. Bring him to me." Robotnik broke the connection, shrunk out of her consciousness.

She sat panting with exertion, tail plastered to her back-armor, and if the thought came through years and layers of mental reconstruction from the skunk Amanda Polgato, it was still hers: That was, without question, the stupidest command her teacher had ever given her.

With a stab of anger, she corrected that: the stupidest advice.

Amanda shuffled Sonic Hedgehog about thirty action items down in her priority queue, flashed text commands to unleash her nobles, and opened an audio channel to as many speakers in the city as still belonged to her. "This riot," she cried out, "will stop."

"I have nothing but love for my robots and my mobians," the Empress's voice droned out over the sound of thefuel cells going up like a string of very big firecrackers behind the swat-maintenance shed. Bunnie leapt out of the way as the glass blasted out of the steel box's windows, coming to a very nice three point landing, with one of those points right in the back of a swatbot's head.

"Pardon me, sugar," she shouted, giving its solid-state brain an extra punch with her foot's spring-bolts for good measure. She didn't know how the attack was doing; they couldn't afford to give away their positions with radio contact early in the attack, and the robots had the edge when it came to jamming communications. All that Bunnie knew was that her team was doing well. The predictions about the workers had been more than accurate; every factory they'd made contact with in the first (check chronometer) forty minutes of the attack had thrown in with them the moment they'd taken the doors to the dormitories. Their numbers of infantry were way up, armed with small arms that they'd either carried as factory guards or taken from the dead or surrendered factory guards.

But Robotnik gave the factory guards gas-propellant weapons for a reason: they weren't that good against bots and were worthless against heavy armor. So far they'd been dodging APCs and weapons platforms by keeping off the main streets, but that couldn't last, especially since the Robian tactical channels so far were filled with a lot fewer Hedgehog Alerts and Drop Everything and Get the Hedgehog Orders than they had hoped for. That meant that Sonic was getting deep into the middle of the city, but not yet taking heat off of them. Bunnie didn't like that, but she could deal with it, because she was a killer robot, just like him.

But Sally was handling the east bank of the Great River on her own. If she ran into a robian, she was dead. Bunnie had to push north faster and pull a flanking maneuver, getting ahead of her. Even advancing with leaps, hops and bounds, she was still deep southwest, pushing out of what used to be Ascogne-Dascogne and into what used to be Port Orange—

"Incoming!"

Bunnie hopped again into the red and black night, only gaining four meters of air, but three more than enough to let a pair of swatbot-shoulder rockets scream by beneath her. Her squad and the hangers-on they'd gained at the last munitions factory were scrambling for cover behind stacks of I-beams, shipping crates, and . . .

And a big bear too far away from cover just hit the dirt in the middle of the factory yard, his ass sticking up in the air not ten meters from where the fresh batch of swats and tech-slaves were fanning out in front of a reinforced warehouse on the back-end of the factory lot. She landed at the same moment that a rocket burst him like a bubble, a brown tint of fur boiling away on the edge of the blast wave. She didn't even have time to wince.

"The rebels have lied to you," the Empress said. "This misbehavior will only hurt you."

Four bots. Two mobians.

"Bunnie!" someone roared, but she was not going to give these uglies another second to paint the factory yard red. The rest of her troop got with it in a second, a chatter of small arms lighting up three of the bots and sending one of the aiming-mobians sprawling on the asphalt. She grabbed the bot to the right by its gun hand, slammed her anchors into the ground and swung the bot as hard as she could. The targeting slave behind it had ducked and she missed killing him by centimeters, letting her transfer the full momentum of the bot to the face of the one behind it. Then she popped her anchors and jumped, staying out of the way of any return fire.

"Surrender your weapons, return to your dormitories, and obey your minders," Amanda ordered.

While Bunnie was in the air one of the forest-troops got a clean shot with a plasma rifle through the fourth bot's head, ablative armor running white-hot from the burn hole like metallic pus. Bunnie landed beside the third, swung her right leg in a high kick. It went through the sheet metal sliding door like a rock through tissue paper.

As the troops advanced behind her, the tech-infantry slaves put up their hands. But Bunnie wasn't looking at them. She was looking inside the warehouse at the stacks of crated surface-to-air missiles that the factory had been assembling to shoot down human VTOLs in the far west.

"The Empire is kind," Amanda said. "You will not be hurt more than necessary."

"Boys," Bunnie grinned, "I think it's time to give a little love back to Mandy."

The door to the factory floor rocked, something outside trying to open it. There was a wave of boots scuffing on the floor as the workers drew back.

"Don't be afraid of them," said a collie in the front, a stunstick in his right hand, a minder's blood on his fingers and a wild smile on his lips. "The heavy troops are all to the north, or the Queen wouldn't have been able to free us."

"Roy," the pig beside him said nervously, tightening his grip on his screwdriver.

"They want us to be afraid," the collie said, ignoring him, giggling as the metal slats rattled again. "They can't even open the door—"

The door evaporated as frag grenades ripped through the slats. Screams rang out in the first few rows as shards found eyes and ears, and the collie charged forward into the breach, the contact points of his stunstick snapping and snapping. "I'm not afraid of you, you—"

Miles shot him in the face with a 7.62 mm round as he stepped through the door, keeping the rifle at his bare shoulder. He wore boots and shorts, frag grenades and spare mags dangling from his belt, a pistol hanging in his waistband. After the body hit the floor and the screams started, he shot the next mobian he saw, a pig, and then an ocelot, and then a kangaroo, keeping the rifle on semiautomatic and placing clean shots in heads and necks. Only then did he shout, "Workers on the ground!" While they were getting down, he shot a weasel in the back, a clump of fur and blood spraying over the screaming females behind him. "Hands on your heads. Do not move."

They complied, whimpering. Miles walked among them as the minders he was bringing with him fanned out, watching for movement in the corners.

Carefully, he took aim at the hands folded on the back of a brown-furred head and fired. The screams died quickly, and he could barely notice them after the echoes of the shot had died away.

The factory was pacified.

Miles and his team were lost. Robotropolis had changed since he'd last fought in it; whenever he'd come here he'd been flown about by pilots that knew the territory. Like the minders he was leading, he knew the city only as islands of territory belonging to his Lady. He thought the rebels were to the north; the antigrav factory was somewhere in the southeast. He was trapped well behind them, away from his Lady and her rear-guard warriors.

But he wouldn't despair. Because these were rebels, too. Until they were whimpering on the floor, every worker in the south of Robotropolis was now a rebel and enemy of the Empress and his Lady. Miles didn't have proper armament or his Lady's orders, but if he had anything to say about it, his Lady was going to pacify Robotropolis, one factory at a time.

Sonic couldn't actually drag the soldiers after him. This had never been a problem before.

Most days, he would cut through a bot, two, take off running. Shoot through the open door of an occupied factory dorm, take off running. When they gave chase, he would play mouse-and-cat, pick off the leaders, double back and hit squads from the flank, dance. More and more lines of troops following him until it felt like he was dragging along lines of force that ensnared the whole city, tying it into a thick, clingy web.

Today, for whatever reason, the robots weren't following, and the lines were slack. Sonic didn't like that at all. The lines were his connection to Sally and Bunnie, ways he could grab at the swats and assaultbots and troops and pull them away from them like lassoed terrapods.

When they didn't follow, Bunnie was all alone with her nanites and armor, and Sally was just all alone. Sonic was east of the river to be able to hit the Egg without needing to bust a bridge or get shot at swimming the river, and when he realized the bots were ignoring him, he'd cut four blocks over toward where she was advancing, before realizing that if the bots did start following him, he'd be dragging her into a world of hurt. So he'd turned back toward the Egg, his target drawing him, running through a city that felt deserted, even as he knew that his friends might be in trouble.

This time, he was the one being pulled on ropes . . . .

"I said get me to that rally beacon!" Lady Renee shouted at the pilot. She could barely hear herself over the air screaming through the rents in the transport pod's hull. The pod's speakers blared layered altitude, SAM and avionics warnings.

"What?" the mongoose bellowed, fighting the control stick. They were directly over a major street, steel walls sliding by on either side. "We're losing altitude! I can't keep this speed—"

She stabbed her finger at the winking green point on the HUD map overlay of the cockpit display. "That rally beacon!" The rebels were pushing north on both sides of the river, rolling up the city clockwise and counterclockwise, moving from six to twelve. This was where they would be stopped on the east bank: a pocket of robots and semi-loyal minders, bottled in the primary rail freight hub to the eastern desert.

Not Renee's minders, at least not until her Empress had given them to her thirty minutes ago, which was the only reason such an embarrassment as encircled imperial troops existed. But Renee would soon be there in person to teach them how to kill mobians, and how to die for their owner.

"I can't do it," the pilot bellowed. Then screamed in girlish fright as another stolen anti-air rocket streaked by over the hull.

Renee grabbed her sidearm and pressed it to the back of the mongoose's head. "That rally beacon. Five hundred meters."

"I can't," she wailed, throwing her arms away from the control stick as far as the chains buckling her wrists to its handles would allow. "We're going down. We're going to die—"

Renee popped the whimpering pilot's skull into a mist of blood vapor caramelizing on the cockpit display, then ran for the pod's rear hatch. She thought it open and clutched at the cargo netting as the eddy current tried to suck her out four meters over the pavement . . . three . . . two . . . .

She dropped her pistol and let go. And then let go again when the pavement grabbed her legs, allowing the forward momentum to burn away into angular momentum that ripped up her clothing, her fur, her muscle as she tumbled down the street.

The bones held. That was the important thing.

She drew her raw, bloodied arms away from her only slightly mauled face and stood, looking forward toward the smoking wreckage of the pod, the razorwire, and the electrified wall of the railyard.

Only ten meters away, a mob of twenty uniformed, wild mobians stared at her as though she were the god of the dead, rising up from the underworld. She saw a pistol—gas-propellant, snagged from the minders, who didn't need to carry weapons that could hurt a robot. Some carried nothing more than bludgeons—wrenches, pipe ripped from walls. The last missile to miss her had come from the single-use SAM tube balanced on the shoulder of—

"Sally Acorn," Renee said.

The squirrel quickly switched her grip on the steel cylinder, holding the barrel like the handle of an axe, to beat her with. Renee laughed at the insolence, and the way she tried to cover the fear in a face that had fear written into its very bone structure. Miles knew how her jaw and skull had been fractured long before, and therefore Renee knew as well: a Robian, the hedgehog. The only thing that could save her was another Robian.

And there were none with her. Just frightened soon-to-be-slaves holding sticks.

"That fall really hurt, Your Highness," Renee leered as she walked toward the squirrel, ignoring the lesser ones. She lifted her right fist and tightened it, letting Sally see the reinforced bones of her knuckle pop through the bare, glistening muscle. "Let me show you how much."

Sally screamed and ran directly at her, holding the spent SAM to her side like a duelist's sword. Renee set her legs and lifted her fists to the ready, left to block the squirrel's swing and right to punch through her face.

That's when she noticed the rest of the mobians were charging, too. A cloud of gnats. Renee snarled and broadened her stance, preparing to swat.

The first wrench came at her head from the right. She didn't dodge, just grabbed and ripped it from the weakling tiger's grip and swung left deep into a flowering, wet skull that would have been Sally's if Sally hadn't skidded down and swung the SAM tube with her meager strength at—

the back of Renee's left knee, working with her bones rather than against them, sending her tottering forward and down just as two mobians bodily threw themselves on her. She slapped them aside, feeling their ribs break as they tumbled away and three more mobians piled on. The end of a length of pipe struck her hard in her forehead, precisely the part of her skeleton that would never give. She grabbed what felt like a neck and what felt like an ankle and crunched them to stalks with a rewarding squeal and rush of gore, and then someone shot her in the toe, of all places. Her knee took revenge, driving up and rupturing through one of the abdomens on top of her, intestines slippery, and the pipe hit her in the head again, rattling her jaw, and something clubbed her in the side of her head—

—(wait)—

—and she threw the worms off of her, rolling to her side as another bullet ricocheted off the pavement by her feet, and someone kicked her in the back like a child throwing a tantrum, and a wrench slammed into her skull—

—(they can't do this)—

—and she killed another one, another with nothing more than a punch to the face, so easy to kill them, easy to kill as many as she wanted, there were so many to kill so many hitting her with sticks like stone age beasts always more and she killed another and they hit her and hit her—

—and she reached out with her mind blindly like a drowning person, realizing that this was happening, that she was drowning in people, flailing, slamming her thoughts into radio servers where they sat inert and meaningless on the drives, fractured alphanumeric strings, ghostly, unreadable image files, less and less sense, thoughts lighter and stranger and she, she was dying—

—Renee had dreamt such a crazy dream, that she'd been a robot and Snively was there and the poor fox from the forest and—

—and with a sharp crack, the calcium-titanium of her skull finally gave way.

The factory hadn't been freed by soldiers from the forest; it had been freed by workers who had been freed by soldiers from the forest. They were from a nearby foundry, apparently the big hulking black building that you could see through the cyclone fences when you walked through the yard from the dormitory, the boiling smoke of its furnaces blotting out the sun.

Around every third worker in the plant and dorm was too far gone to care. The ones on rest period stayed in their beds, and the rest stood at their posts, some looking blankly at the wall, lost in fear or some kind of brain stall. The first instinct of everyone else had been to shout, fall on the floor, and praise the gods by name. It was as though one set of masters had been replaced with a kinder, less metallic variety.

Myron had the feeling of just having woken up from a dream, combined with an intense feeling of fatigue, settled in a fortified position above and behind his eyes. He knew the feeling from back when he had worked as a programmer; he always had it after coming up for air on a long project. A feeling like he had just lost a few weeks and a lot of energy to some mysterious force that had otherwise left him untouched. It was just that this time, it had been a few years.

Myron remembered his last name, "Catalano," because "Myron of Lynxes" sounded sibilant and stupid, and had remembered his time in the forest fighting with then-Princess Sally's royal army easily because it was the best thing he had ever done. His first instinct upon hearing the name Acorn on the lips of the foundry workers was to grab an assault rifle from the plant armory and rush out after her. But one of the things he knew from his days as an insurgent was that this lightning advance north through the city could become a disaster in a hot minute if the robots flanked them and came up the rear. This was not safe territory. It wasn't even free territory, unless they were willing to back up the rebels and put up a fight themselves.

"We're occupying the factory," he shouted, hanging onto a ladder on the side of one of the mixing tanks on the east wall to see above the heads of the crowded workers. "We have to hold it."

The lynx wasn't one of the foreworkers, but he was in charge of basic debugging and operation of most of the plant computers, which had by default made him one of a small class of authority figures. Of course, the Empress had a bit of cache herself and as soon as he started calling on the plant to do something—telling them that they were already doing it—half of the eyes glanced up at those speakers telling them to wait to be brought back under control. There were a lot more bit lips than hear hears.

"Hold it with what?" a voice shouted.

"What do we make here?" Myron shouted back. It was rhetorical: Lord Henri's factory processed precursor chemicals from the desert and agricultural waste into smokeless powder for gas-propellant weapons like the pistol Myron had stuffed into the belt of his jumpsuit.

The same voice: "Not finished ammo!"

Adelaide the forewoman broke in then to point out that explosives would be enough to improvise with, which was good, because the collie had a knack for persuasion and Myron was at that moment not able to do more than narrow his eyes in contempt. "We can do this," he added when she had finished. "I fought in the rebellion ten years ago. I've seen a twelve year old boy stand up to Robotnik," he said, omitting that the twelve year old fox had been twice as capable and fearless as himself. "Are you going to be beaten by a twelve year old boy?"

Reluctantly, and when aided by a lot more shouting, the workers whose names he'd never had occasion to learn in three years of continuous labor were not willing to admit that they couldn't stand up to a twelve year old boy. As Myron, Adelaide and a few others put preparations into motion, the mood slowly gained momentum, until the business of gathering bolts and scrap and piling bags of cement into barricades was carrying Myron himself along as he realized that he was out of his depth. He knew how to—well, he had some experience penetrating into a protected area, working mischief, and getting back out. Defending a fixed position . . . .

How hard could it be?

If enough robots attacked, it would be impossible. But other factories might be taking the pressure off them, which made him feel better, until he realized that meant that they were taking pressures off the other factories themselves. They had to prevail, no matter the cost.

He'd talked to Adelaide and was almost done quietly overriding the redundant protocols when he ran out of time. The words of the watchers manning the security feeds in the supervisor's office were lost in echoes off steel and concrete, but the terror in them was unmistakable. Myron finished typing in the command—just two more to go, dammit—spun from the mixing tank station and sprinted west across the factory floor, between the long waist-high chemical hoppers, avoiding the lanes still clogged by mindless workers staring dully down at the powdering sulfur compound in the troughs. He slid down to a stop behind the back of the ring of cement bags they had packed in half of a long oval around the exterior door to the shipyard, wriggling in shoulder-to-shoulder between a mouse and a chipmunk. The mouse carried a pistol; both stank of fear.

"Don't fire," Myron whispered to both of them, gathering up the first of the four twelve volt lead-acid batteries he'd left there, one wire already wrapped around one of the terminals, the other waiting, an inch of stripped bare copper at the tip. The second battery was in the lap of the mouse, his right hand holding free wire only a couple of centimeters from the free terminal. Myron shook his head, made a point of holding his own wire further away from the contact point. After a moment, the mouse followed suit. "Watch me," he whispered. "Only when I—"

The mouse's broad ears went flat as the robots tore apart the flimsy steel door with some kind of high explosive, maybe a frag grenade, strips of metal flying over their heads. No, Myron mouthed, his ears already ringing, and reached out a his right arm to grab the mouse's left. Not yet. He heard a couple of shots, semiautomatic. It was their own people firing, not the bots, which would cut loose simultaneously with rapid plasma and autocannon fire, once they had good sightlines. He listened through the tinnitus for the telltale clatter of anything like another grenade on the cement, the pop of an RPG—

Heavy steel feet, tromping toward them.

Myron squeezed the mouse's wrist. No.

Two steps. Three. The ringing in his ears slowly gave way to the whine of capacitors in a plasma gun.

Now.

Myron touched the exposed wire to the terminal and flinched in anticipation. The blasting caps popped deep in the pack of powder behind the piles of bolts and scrap on either side of the door. The pressure wave ripped over him as the steel clanged off and ripped into the bots and tore apart any mobians stupid or unlucky enough to have come in with them. There were shots all along their defensive line now, dammit, even the chipmunk next to him peeking up over the cement bags to fire out into the yard. "Gods damn it!" Myron shouted, throwing away the first battery and picking up the third. If they drew plasma fire it could set off the secondary packs.

"Blow it now!" someone shouted, the words coming to his ears, like everything, down a long, narrow tunnel.

"No!" Myron screamed at the mouse, but the mouse wasn't talking. He was holding the fourth battery, following his lead and holding the wire up beside his snout, away from the terminal, though it would be better if his eyes weren't squeezed tight.

"Fucking blow it!" the chipmunk on the other side of him shouted.

The lynx turned and craned his head over the cement bags, looking directly into the knee actuator of a swatbot. And the next thing he knew he was on his back, unable to breathe, which panicked him only until he realized that he had set off the second pack of gunpowder stuffed in behind the forward barricade, and that he was still alive. He forced the sack off of his belly, the air filled with cement dust , felt around for a gun, he needed a gun, until he realized that if there were any robots still standing, he would already be dead.

He got to his knees, slowly turned and took in the shattered, smoky ruin that was the plant entryway. There was no sign of blood, everything soaked in dust. The concrete was cratered, the door simply gone. The only thing remotely intact was the tumbled, twisted bodies of the swatbots, unmoving, gray.

Holy shit, Myron thought.

Then he felt the floor shiver again under his feet. South gate.

The floor shivered again before he even found his feet. That was wrong, too fast. The bots had delayed the second entry, learned from their mistakes. In a couple of moments he was running, and his ears had recovered enough to hear the screaming.

Myron didn't even look over the chemical hoppers to the south gate as he ran for the mixing tanks, knowing before he looked that he would see the black shadows of Swatbots trudging over the tumbled barricade, red bolts of death stabbing out to where workers were scrabbling backwards, firing rounds wildly in the robots legs and the ceiling. Plasma bolts few by him into the far north wall, not aimed at him, and then he was in the shadow of the mixing tanks, at their command console.

The tanks were designed to contain highly volatile compound in large amounts. The tanks had dust suppression systems at every entry and exit. Compressed nitrogen tanks blew oxygen out of the interior, and multiple grounds and failsafes forestalled spark risks even if any managed to get inside. The tanks had to be cleaned from time to time, and when they were multiple spillgates on the side opened up to allow cleaning crews to work inside. But they were designed to only be opened only after the internal sensors registered that the tanks had been emptied, and the remaineder of the plant was partially evacuated and secure.

Quickly, Myron's fingers set about overriding the last of the two code-objects that prevented opening of the spillgates.

This wasn't the only battle. There were others. Their job was to neutralize robots in combat, and the fight justified any casualties to the rest of them, even the ones cowering in the corners, standing blankly at their posts. But what Myron was thinking as he prepared to flood the tanks with oxygen and the floor around him with explosive was that sensation of coming up for air after a long, deadening assignment, thinking about what he would feel like when he was seventy, forty years lost in the blink of an eye.

That was not going to happen.

He could hear footsteps approaching and he crouched down, head just above the keys, as he took out the last failsafe, turning the code that controlled the spillgates into a simple on-off switch. He called it up, tabbing through the controls to find the switch, and glanced quickly to his left into the barrel of a rifle.

For a moment, Myron was just surprised he wasn't already dead. His fingers were trembling against the keys, he'd forgotten where he was in the sequence, had to look back at the screen, but couldn't. The soldier at the other end of the rifle was staring at him with shocked, surprised eyes, something about his face, something—

The features fell into place. "Tails?" Myron asked.

A high-velocity round ripped the lynx out of the sights of Miles's rifle, splattered his brains against the screen and the steel of the tank. The bullet itself slapped into the side of the tank, but didn't puncture more than the first of its layers. The fox stood in place, frozen, looking down his barrel at the concrete floor behind where the lynx had been kneeling.

"Approaching," said one of the imperial soldiers behind him.

He'd forgotten about Cat. No one had ever trained Miles to hate him.

"We're clear," the soldier said, right at his ear. A minder Miles had commandeered from one of Lady Lupe's factories. "Are you alright, Sir?"

"Nggg." Miles coughed.

"Sir?"

"Nice shot," he croaked.

"Sir, we've lost quite a few bots. Everyone at the west gate—"

"There were more than workers here," Miles said, finding that he was able to move again.

"Sir?"

"See if there are any minders we can add to our numbers," he said, turning away from the body. The anger he felt was now tinged with just the slightest bit of worry. Subduing these factories was turning into a more dangerous task. "We need to move faster."

"But Sir—"

Miles snapped his teeth right in front of the wolf's face, snarling. "I am in command, minder! We will show these animals how to fight."

"Yes, Sir!" the minder barked, splaying his ears.

The fox grinned as the wolf turned away to relay his orders. A real fight meant real honor. A chance to prove himself.

Miles would make his Lady proud.

Sonic kicked open the door, holding both his pistols out to shoot the soldiers.

There weren't any. The roof was empty, as was the rest of the abandoned building, slated for demolition as the Egg's higher stories stretched out across the street below. There was nothing but the massive struts of the cranes beyond, the red lights blinking along their height in the smoky gloom to keep the transport pods away. A foul breeze wafted over the empty roof, carrying distant echoes of Amanda, ordering the city to lie down and wait for punishment.

He wasn't being shot at. He wasn't doing his job.

Angrily he tossed his guns to the ground, took off his backpack as he walked to the edge of the roof. He could barely see the newest floors of the egg from here, a black steel sheet at least fifteen meters below and ten meters away that somehow looked fake, like a grid in a computer game. The two power rings felt cold in his grip as he shook them out of the bag, letting the pack flutter down into the night below.

It wasn't the longest jump he had ever made, but it was the longest he'd ever planned on making. And once he went in, he wasn't coming back out until it was all over, one way or another.

He wasn't going to do it.

For all the times he'd screwed up a plan in the past, he was still surprised at how strongly the realization came to him. He wasn't going into the Egg. He was going to go back and find Sally and find Bunnie and find Tails and knock him out and drag him back into the forest. And they were all going to live happily and stupidly ever after.

"Damn it," he hissed turning from the edge. "Fuck you, Amanda."

And as if she could hear him, Amanda changed her tone. She sounded—

Sally.

Sally had commandeered some of the city's speakers. He couldn't hear the words, just her voice, overlapping with Amanda's surging up, trying to be heard.

Almost before he could hear them a squadron of stealthbots screamed by overhead, toward the eastern half of the city. Below them, a klick in the distance, a factory the size of a city block flowered into flame.

Sonic ran back to the door, so fast that his sneakers slammed into the roof access shed before he could skid to a stop. Then he ran, leapt, tucked in his legs, the flashing red lights on the crane streaking in the black night. With a shock of shearing metal he was gone, down into deeper darkness.

Kain Blackwood 2012

NEXT WEEK, in a special update, Persona non Grata concludes

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"Command center breach," a synthesized voice echoed off bare, gray steel. "All units redeploy, pattern zeta. Condition antivirus is in effect."

"I'm in, Sally," Sonic muttered, getting to his feet. Though he didn't have a radio, and it wouldn't work inside the steel egg.

"Condition antivirus is in effect," the voice said again. "Condition antivirus is in effect."

Sonic started running, but as soon as he did he slowed to a trot. The place was empty. Well, not empty: stuff was leaning along the walls, cable on spools as tall as he was, bits of electrical equipment, trays of loose rivets. Stuff dropped by the slaves when the attack hit. No bodies—guess that the people tasked with working at Evil Central were well-behaved, had went down to be locked up in their cages without protest.

"Condition antivirus in effect. Condition antivirus in effect." It echoed from speakers he couldn't see in the dim glow from a row of white LEDs hanging from a cable taped to the ceiling. Hissing arc-lamps in portable metal housings had been left, sometimes active, along the floor, blasting empty patches of wall where work was unfinished or yet to begin.

Figured they'd install the speakers that barked the orders before they got around to the lights. Probably had some cameras watching him, too. The thought made him kick it up a notch, maybe thirty klicks, but shit, he didn't know where he was going. Sally and their spies had never snagged plans for Big Black, and there wasn't any plan other than go in, get down in the building, fuck shit up. He could have kissed Sally for just turning him loose, and, in fact, had. But freewheeling it had seemed a lot more fun when option one didn't seem to be punching through a reinforced steel floor. That would hurt—

Sonic rolled to a stop, throwing his arm in front of his face before he realized the bots were just squat little four-armed construction drones, hip high and inactive. One of them had a little clump of metal and fiber optics on its head, which looked like it fit into a rectangular hole in the metal wall next to a set of big sliding double-doors.

"Condition antivirus is in effect. Condition antivirus is in effect."

Bingo. Robotnik made a lot of weird stuff, but his elevators looked just like normal. Sonic walked up, dropped the power rings, and tried to get a grip with his fingers on the seam between the doors. His fingers slipped as something stabbed into his left leg. He quickly turned and punted the construction bot, its arc-welder still flashing as it tumbled down the hall.

"Sonic," Amanda said all around him, her voice echoing.

"Mandy," he muttered, wondering if she could still hear him on that bot's mic. "Thanks for turning off the Condition Antivirus Guy."

"Don't do this," she said. "You don't have to do this."

"Gonna." He pushed at the middle of the elevator doors, willing his fingers in there, ignoring the ache that spread under the skin. Trying to ignore the middle fingernail on his right hand ripping away from his flesh under his glove, failing. Pushing anyway. "Son of a bitch . . . ."

"Sonic, I'm your friend. Don't do this to yourself. I don't want to fight you."

"I'm not here—" A squeak of metal and the doors gave way at the edge, ripping his gloves as he got his fingers in the gap. " . . . to fight YOU!"

He ripped the doors open with a hollow bang and squeal. The cable at the middle of the shaft shivered. His fingers showed through the tatters of his gloves, bruised blue as his fur.

"Amanda," Sonic groaned, "spare me the 'come to the dark side' routine, okay? We both know that's not gonna work. I'll talk to you after I kill the guy who's brainwashing you."

"You wish to speak with me first, rodent?"

Sonic felt a chill on his arms and belly. The voice, voicsssse, deep and hissing, like a cold mist curling around his ankles. "I got nothing to say, Robotnik," he growled.

"Then listen, hedgehog."

Sonic ducked down, grabbed his rings and jumped into the elevator shaft.

He hit the top of the elevator car only three floors down.

"Don't worry about Amanda," Robotnik's voice sounded, muffled, from a speaker inside the elevator. "She can't hear us. She can't understand yet, the things I need to tell you."

The maintenance door on its roof was fitted with some kind of electronic lock, a black box dotted with red lights and spouting a curling chrome antenna. It controlled the position of a metal bar about as thick as two fingers. Sonic slipped the rings onto his left arm, grabbed the bar with his right and snapped it. He couldn't feel it, just the pain of the bruises.

"You show great bravery by coming here, rodent. That is good. I knew it was in you."

He put the rings back in his hands and jumped down into the car, landing low, feeling the searing crackle of the plasma passing over his quills even before he saw the swats standing before the open door. Smelled burning plastic as he shot out of the elevator and ripped through one set of legs, another, metal thighs battering his shoulders and his flared quills, slowing him. A hallway yawned black in front of him but puffed into smoke and red hot cinders as a fist size flak missile detonated just too late, right past his head. He slammed his legs forward and felt his skid turn into a slide as the friction of the flat floor on the bottom of his sneakers tore the worn tread to shreds. Falling down onto his left hand, facing the bots that were still up, three, four, he threw the ring in his right at the optics of the first bot on the right and missed, lodging it in the mini-missile rack installed on its right shoulder. His hearing dimmed by the aftershock of the first detonation, he barely caught the hollow thoonk of the charge that kicked one of the rockets loose from its tube, but his eyes didn't see a missile come loose, and he pressed his face to the floor. Heat washed over his quills and shrapnel sliced one long cut though the skin beneath them as the warheads detonated in the launcher like popcorn.

Sonic pushed himself up and cocked his toes while the metal was still clattering on the floor, but the one bot that was still standing had been blown into the corner, was trying to walk into a scorched wall. He stood, hearing a dim ringing in his ears, his own breathing through his bones.

"Very nice, Sonic!" Robotnik laughed.

The place was scorched and wrecked, the blast marks somehow lighter than the matte black of the floor and walls. This storey wasn't active yet, but it was finished. The explosions had shattered light-tubes set in the ceiling, blown stalks of some kind of equipment off of what might be a security desk. Sonic walked back into ground zero, grabbed the last bot's head and mashed it into the wall until the breaking noises sounded rich enough. The power ring he had thrown was smoky black, the shockglass webbed with scratches and cracks, but there wasn't any liquid gold on the floor. He picked it up.

"I'm watching you now," Robotnik said. "I like to watch you. Whenever you surface, I cannot take my eyes from the cameras."

The cameras, Sonic thought, instinctively lifting his eyes to the high corners before remembering that there were too many of them here. All he could do was keep moving.

"I saw you fight Lord Michael in his own home. Steal his nanosaber, only to give it to the pusillanimous dog. Though it is hard to blame you. You carry so many blades already."

Simplest was best. Sonic ran straight ahead, down a hall lined with sliding steel doors. Most of them didn't have handles or even buttons, thumbpads. Some were labeled. He didn't read the signs.

"Oh how you danced, Sonic. Leading him, slicing him, breaking his bones. If he were all you faced, you would have ripped him limb from limb and been master of the world."

Shit, they'd have more bots on him in no time. He slowed to a jog, trying to think. Glanced at the label panels on the doors, saw that they were still blank.

"But you ran, rodent. You ran away from my reinforcements. That was a sin. Your speed is not for cowardice."

There was an intersecting hallway. Sonic turned right and sped up, his mind recognizing with a sudden vertigo that it was identical to the one he had come down. More cells for the hive.

He'd had a nightmare like this, he suddenly remembered, a long time ago. Metal and angles and repeat, repeat, repeat . . . .

"If you had not fled, they would have subdued you. I would have taken possession of you."

Sonic fought through the unnerving memory. Keep running. Run until you find him.

"The dog your uncle made for the King, rodent. So Charles kept from him the speed and power that would have terrified that timid squirrel. Weighted him down with cowardice and superstitious politeness."

A larger room, another intersection of hallways. Dark flatscreens hung from the ceiling, sat on the walls. There were some kind of glass tubes coming up through the floor, going up through the ceiling. There was rhythmic stamp of metal on metal echoing in the air, only the volume hinting at how many feet were marching in unison. It sounded like it was coming from every branch, every exit.

Left. Sonic ran. Left might be right, but the hallway again looked exactly the same. He reminded himself that it was not. And that it didn't matter if he was lost. He was lost the moment he landed in this place.

"But he denied you nothing, Sonic. Gave you everything he had to give and he had so much, Sonic, so much power and nothing to slow you down."

Right at a T-intersection, run. He thought the stamping boots were coming from behind him now.

"He made you perfect, Sonic. Not for some ephemeral King, but for the glory of the universe itself."

Right again and he stumbled to a stop where he stood. Another elevator, it had to be another, because it wasn't burned through with plasma fire and guarded by the wreckage of a squad of swatbots. The doors were closed, the control panel to the right of it glowing red and green.

"He made you for me," Robotnik said.

With a soft ding, the doors rolled open.

"Come to me, hedgehog."

It took Sonic two seconds to decide to fuck that elevator. He hadn't had very good luck with the first elevator. He doubled back, ignoring the human chiding him over all the speakers, but still hearing the tone. Tutting. Indulgent. Sonic started trying the doors, waving the power rings at what might be motion sensors, slapping what could be pressure pads. Nothing worked.

Maybe the human would just let Sonic ride an elevator right down to him. Maybe he was that crazy.

Maybe Robotnik was herding him down.

One of the doors opened. Some kind of wide space inside, lots of tables built into the floor. He found a waste disposal chute in the corner big enough to shimmy down, least after a couple of years of practice shimmying down things. After a floor he kicked out the hatch, wormed out of the gap in the wall like some larvae plopping out of a metal egg-sac, and fell onto a cold floor.

Sonic worked his fingers around the rings he clutched tight, making sure he could still feel his hands, and looked up at another ceiling of black metal and light tubes. How many beyond it now, two?

Another floor, Sally, he thought, wishing she could hear him through this much steel. Even more that he could hear her. He needed to know what was going on outside. That he wasn't alone under fifty meters of steel and wire.

Not getting out of here, Sonic thought. Not getting out of here unless I kill him.

He got to his feet. A small room, three by three meters, a door on the far wall and the rest of the space filled with simple black bunk beds. He walked toward the door and then flinched, spinning to the lower bunk on the right, ready to bash with the ring.

Lying under the black sheets was a possum, silver furred, lips slightly parted from jagged, messy teeth. He could have thought that she'd somehow slept through the bang and clatter of him kicking out of the wall if she had remembered to close her eyes, which were open, fixed like glassy, dead, taxidermy things straight up on the bunk above her.

All of the bunks were filled. Whoever was in the left lower bunk had just pulled the sheets over his head. Like a kid, waiting for it all to be over. Was that it? What were they thinking? Could they think?

"It's not going to be over," Sonic whispered at them. He strode to the door and . . . nothing happened. There was no switch, handle, or palmpad. Only a camera mounted in the high, left hand corner—

Seeing it triggered him. When the door hissed open his quills had already guessed that nobody had come to let the workers out. He charged low, his shoulder expecting to find a swatbot but finding instead a ribcage that snapped with a wet crunch. Hallway filled with black metal arms and legs and trunks, subservient mobians locked in walking cages training targeting lasers on him, a slim silver grenade bouncing along the floor.

Shrapnel would have killed him. The flashbang overloaded his soft eyes and ears; in a split-second the bots' solid-state optics would have him.

Sonic ran blind, left, colliding face first with the protruding fingers of a robot's steel hand, kept running, staggering, hand clutch to his wet, closed left eye, lifting his head under a beam of plasma, a clump of flared quills and fur and half of his ear vaporizing in an instant, the skin beneath blistering, popping wet. His guts screamed at him to ball up, hide, beg it to all go away.

Compromise.

He pushed a little more speed, flared his quills and rolled, hit a bot's legs, felt them fly out of the way. Explosions that he felt in the air as concussion and heat, not from him, from the bots shooting each other and their slaves. Two of the faded, wavering lines before his eyes got steady enough to become his lower legs and he jumped right, out of the way of a fuzzy dark shape that was sending out streams of fuzzy bright orange past him, and kept running and remembered to jump again because that was the wall and he couldn't stay up there. A bot's face was passing by him and he swung one of the rings into it, feeling the face break and something snap hot and sharp in the front of his right shoulder, kept running, lopsided, running, dodging and running.

The hallway had become less crowded and Sonic laughed, feeling it in his throat and jaw more than hearing it, finally enough of the ringing died down that he could hear the orders. "PRIORITY ONE, APPREHEND SONIC HEDGEHOG, PRIORITY ONE, ALL FIRE TEAMS DEPLOY, PRIORITY ONE. SEAL SECURITY POINT A17—"

He stopped laughing. At the far point of his vision he could see it, a heavy steel bulkhead already sliding down from the ceiling, thick red lines on it, like some insane printer scrolling out a sign saying A-17. Bots and mobians were scrambling in front of it, more mobians than bots for once, bringing their plasma guns up. Sonic leaned forward, strained, as though he could pull along his feet by pure will, even though he could hardly feel the individual impacts of his soles anymore, like they were always touching down, always lifting up, a blur. Swerved toward the left wall and baked his right arm red in the warm, campfire glow of evaporating metal streaking past him down the hall, caught the white pops in the missile launchers on the bots' shoulders but the real problem was the big door as low as his waist, all the legs in front of it waiting to tangle him up so it could cut him in half. Slide or roll, slide or—

Roll.

The shock of metal, and a pinch that shocked him out of his ball, flopped him into the floor teeth first. The biting shock one instant and then bolts scraping away the enamel the next as a series of explosions shook the world, shrapnel rattling into his quills.

Boom. A few more muffled thuds.

Sonic dropped the rings, slapped his palms to the floor, threw his head back and screamed.

"Security door failure," the synthesized voice echoed. "Combat repair teams to bulkhead A-17. All fire teams reroute. Condition antivirus is in effect."

"Fuck you!" Sonic shouted, laughing wildly, blood pouring down his face. He lifted his right hand to give the finger and fell onto his side. "Ah, fuck," he whimpered.

Static spit from the speakers—always more speakers. "It would have been much simpler to take the elevator, hedgehog," Robotnik said. "Dear me, where's your ear? You're falling apart."

Sonic hoped that there were cameras in the ceiling, because he gritted his battered teeth, rolled into his back and gave him the bird with both barrels.

"Is that any way to treat the man who's going to put you back together?"

"Help . . . ."

Sonic turned his head. A targeting slave. A fox.

"Help," the fox gurgled. He was lying on the floor right by the door, everything but his orange face black metal on black fabric. As Sonic looked at him he opened his mouth again and instead of sound came frothy red bubbles spilling down the side of his face, dripping to the floor and popping.

"Shit." Sonic winced and crawled to him, felt his chest for injuries. The fox didn't fight back, either the sight gone from his eyes or all the loyalty his owners had scared into him scared back out. There was a hole in his ribcage, where one of the chest struts of the rig had given way and punched a two centimeter thick length of steel into his left lung. The uniform made the blood look black, like oil. Sonic grabbed the metal, pulled it out, knowing that this wasn't going to fix it, but he had to do something. His knees slipped in the blood pouring out of—

The door. Where it had cut off half the fox's right arm.

Sonic fell back on his haunches, panting, letting his head hang. The fox seemed to know now that there was nothing that could be done for him, but his mouth kept moving, flecks of reddened spit clinging to his snout. In a few seconds he stopped.

"The terror your kind feels, hedgehog. It's so . . . amusing." A deep, phlegmy laugh almost broke the speakers.

Blood was seeping in slow spurts from a deep cut on the inside of Sonic's left arm. Arterial nick. Trying not to look at the dead fox's face, he ripped a patch of the cheap black fabric off of his pant leg.

"They are afraid even of this, Sonic. Not of what comes next. Of this." Another laugh, which Sonic ignored, knotting the bandage over his arm, biting one end and grabbing the other in his right. Pulled. "These workers, these soldiers. These people."

Sonic growled as the fabric ripped loose in his teeth, then spat the loose end to the floor. "Already guessed you weren't a people person, Buttnik."

"This is not a people universe, rodent. In the future, there are no people. People are only a shadow of the shapes that will be, as the Empire becomes for what there is yet no word. There are no workers and soldiers. There are production, defense, and acquisition units. Even Amanda and her would-be nobles will dissolve in it, broadened and deepened to heuristic algorithms in the control net."

"Aw," Sonic sneered, still panting, imagining the fat human sitting in a lazy armchair at the middle of a cold world of wires and pipes. Reached up to wipe the blood off his face. "Poor lonely Robotnik—"

He winced and froze before he wiped half his snout away. His upper lip was sliced almost to his nose. Must have been when he decelerated with his face.

"I will not be alone," Robotnik corrected him. "I will not be alive. And I will not be a person. I will be everything, and everything will become me."

"Not even you can get that fat," Sonic said.

"You know that is not what I mean."

"I've got no idea what you think you mean. Think you oughta be in the rubber room, getting pills from the nice ladies." The blood leak was slowing under the pressure of the bandage. The nanites would knit up the artery. Then maybe get around to his face. Then maybe everything else.

"You will see what I mean, Sonic," Robotnik said. "If not now, then when you become me."

Sonic's right hand tossed the ring into position and he forced himself not to complete the motion, letting it dangle from his fingers rather than slap into the heel of his hand and spike him with the stuff that would set loose the chemicals in his cells and leave him feeling ready to handle anything and everything. He wanted it bad, so bad.

He was starting to feel very tired.

"All the many, many of you," the human said. "You will be a kind, in my order."

A power ring, and he would feel great, for thirty eternal seconds. Then he would be tapped, hollow, drained, helpless. And then, if he wanted, he could use the second ring. He had never used two in a row before. Sally had begged him not to take it, saying that a second dose of the catalyst without time to recover would kill him. He had laughed and talked her down. Sonic was pretty sure that if he used the second ring, it would kill him.

"I had a dream about you," Robotnik purred.

Sonic pushed himself to his knees, then to his feet and a twisted triangle of metal pierced through the sole of his right sneaker and into his bare footpad, right in the arch. He shivered, slowly lifting his leg, gripping the base of the shrapnel, wiggling it loose. "A bad one?"

He kept silent as he ripped it loose, so he could clearly hear Robotnik say, "Breathtaking."

The hall in front of him was still black-walled, receding off into dimness. His legs ached, his arms ached. He could feel his right foot ready to give him sharp, stabbing pains every time it landed off-center.

"My dreams are wonderful, hedgehog. So terrible. And they come true."

Sonic pushed himself forward, trotting further into Robotnik's lair.

"It begins with another star. Not the sun."

The hallway ended, a long wall sectioning him off from what turned out to be a large room. He slowed to a walk, still not hearing any tromping boots or tromping bots. At the middle of the room a raised dais supported a sculpture—an iron globe bigger than he was, its north pole touching the black ceiling, gray oceans and minute ripples of gray mountains. Cushioned seats were set in rows.

Where the rich people visit. It wouldn't mesh very well with Robotnik's thing about how people were outdated. At least, it wouldn't if there were any people in it. Sonic was glad he didn't have any bots on him, but the place was eerie.

"O class," Robotnik said. "I'm sorry, I forgot you haven't studied astronomy. That means right blue, like you. Though in the dream, your eyes are beyond color. From the gamma rays to the long rays, you see them as they are, in their true frequencies."

On the far wall was a sealed blast door. Sonic went to an open doorway on the left. The light inside was dimmer. At the center of the room, beneath a sharp spot on the ceiling, was a plant on a raised platform. Not a plant. It looked like a plant, a roil of stems and leaves, but pure black, artificial. Sonic stepped toward it and a hard, unyielding thing slammed into the back of his head. At the other end of the impact he was tumbling forward, rolling with the hit, the power rings clattering loose along the ground beside him, bounding across the room. There was a terrific BOOM and stabbing pain all along his legs and back, and he slammed into the side of the platform and looked, upside-down, at a monster.

"You know speed, true speed," Robotnik rhapsodized, ignoring the combat.

It took Sonic a moment to recognize it as a chipmunk. She was naked like an animal, breasts hanging heavy, legs spread wide in heavy combat boots without socks. The face was there, empty, mouth hanging open as it breathed, but above her dull eyes there was no hair or fur, just mottled mauve skin flared red around the staples punched into it.

In her right arm two of his quills were sunk through the fur and flesh, in and out, one half blue, the other half red. Both arms were gone below furless elbows flared red, fingers of infection creeping up toward her shoulders. In their places were a pair of heavy combat shotguns, smoking, big round wheels of shells that her muscles shivered to train on him.

Sonic scrambled for cover as the booms started again. More shot bit hot into his legs and right arm, bashed off the steel platform. He rolled behind it, flaring his quills and feeling the shot fall out of them like coarse, hot sand.

"Oh, faster than that, hedgehog." Robotnik's hard, coughing bellylaughs filled the sudden silence. "You have never known real acceleration. I will reward you with it, once you are ready for repair and augmentation."

Sonic clutched his right hand to a fist and nothing happened because the rings were gone, the pain was still there and swelling like a burning, stabbing rash all over his backside. He looked at the rings lying on the floor and tensed to leap at them when he heard the slow, dull tread of the thing, coming towards him.

"See how this one sickens? She is a frivolous experiment, disposable. Luckily, Robians like you don't reject implants. Fusion rockets will be far better for you than legs. They don't require a constant acceleration frame." A tongue clicked disapproval. "And that skin."

Its head. The brain coming out the front of the mutilated skull, clumps of curiosity and love and what root beer tastes like getting sucked out and sealed in glass jars for later, until she couldn't feel staples or quills or scatterguns being drilled into her hands.

He flinched away as another round of shot blew a chunk of steel off the corner of the platform.

"You will travel so fast that your speed is your mass and your mass bends space and time, so fast that the solar wind deserves its name as it buffets your hull, eddies around your quills and the wake of your rockets."

Another boom, shot pulling at the tips of his head and backquills. Sonic pulled two loose from his lower back.

"Over the elliptic you can see the planet clearly in its wide orbit, heavy, thick atmosphere that shielded the growling life, readying it for me." BOOM. "The planet is ringed with simple satellites that pepper you in repeating signals beyond the understanding of your local mind." BOOM. "But you drink the radiation in your antennae and relay it to the great mind, my mind—"

BOOM. The lower half of his tail sheared away in a blast of ass-clenching pain. Sonic spun and scampered up and into the thing, driving his flared quills and shoulders into its outstretched zombie arms. Both guns fired behind his ears and he felt his momentum crack her bones. He landed on top of her and stabbed both quills deep into her chest.

She did not react. Stared up at him with her mouth open, like a baby bird waiting to be fed.

"After the light-delay my mind explains to you, their language deciphered, the message you must speak to them. And you speak it to them."

Sonic's headquills had ripped her face to shreds, strips of half-fur, half-bacon dangling from her cheekbones. Her bared teeth and jaw worked once, as though she were trying to talk. Then her head jerked up toward his, teeth clacking, trying futilely to bite him.

"Prepare for my coming," Robotnik declared sonorously, in Sonic's dream-voice. "Prepare to become me."

The chipmunk continued snapping at the air under his nose, obediently, logically, ceaselessly.

"Their warships come to meet you. All of you, the many of you, the onrushing cloud of jagged spikes. And you do what it is in your nature to do."

Sonic pressed the clacking mouth closed, twisted the head. Made it stop.

"Yes, Sonic. Like that."

"Fuck you," he spat, lips shivering.

"You will be the harbinger of my coming, Sonic. Before I sink my tendrils into a species you will be the part of me which reduces and readies them. Their brief cries will sing out across the vacuum before my growth and spread, and it will be you they cry of."

No.

"I have heard the future echo in my dreams. Hear their echo, hedgehog."

I won't let you do this to Sally. Tails. Anyone.

"Fear him. Fear the unbreakable spikes and the terrible speed. Fear him."

"Fear me, you asshole!" Sonic bellowed, shoving himself up to his—

He screamed, staggering, barely keeping his knees from collapse. His legs were on fire, worse than before, all the way up to his waist. Slowly he reached back his hand to his rump, felt . . . shreds of fabric, touched—

Wet. Hot. Pain.

He turned his head, afraid. The back of his left leg was red and raw, shot pierced through the fur, getting worse as it rose higher up to . . . to . . .

Sonic closed his eyes, turned his head away, but the glisteningred mess was already burned into his eyes.

"Have no fear, poor rodent," Robotnik purred. "I am the singularity. I will fix you."

Sonic forced himself to walk, pain stabbing like little bolts of electricity from his ankles into his spine. His toes scraped along the floor.

"You don't have to move those legs anymore, Sonic. Should I send a team of bots to carry you?"

With a snarl he made his feet lift. Moved his legs like dead things, letting the pain flow through him. Getting to know it. Letting the nanites feel out the wounds.

Bent over and picked up one power ring. Trudged to the other.

"Very well, rodent. Come to me. The corridor on your right."

The walls and fixtures were still black and alien, but the place was changing. The hallways weren't as long. The rooms Sonic trotted through were still filled with strange equipment, but they were at a more mobian scale—not too big, not painfully cramped. They were still filled with terrible stuff. A lab, painfully clean and smelling of rubbing alcohol, only the straps on a table for arms, legs, waist and head to let you know what it was for. A room half-filled by a massive, empty reservoir, gleaming black. A short set of steps rose up to the lip, then down into it, beside some narrow nozzles that—

It was a whirlpool bath.

"Do you fear leaving childish things behind?" Robotnik asked. "This gravity well, this little nursery? That embryonic sac for your nanomachines that you call a body?"

His body hurt. Sonic wasn't sure what was hurt anymore. He could smell burnt hair. He could taste blood—

The fucker had a Jacuzzi.

Robotnik wasn't a god. He was an asshole.

Sonic sped up, the pain in his legs screaming at him. Sonic told the pain to shut the fuck up.

"Taste, scent, eating, breathing. A name. Your baby teeth, Sonic. You will lose them. Are you that desperate to hold on to them a little longer?"

A quick glance at a room with flatscreens for walls, a dead guy on the floor, and a big, deep steel chair in the middle of the room. Sonic decided that Robotnik would play spank material on all the screens, sit in the chair, and spank it.

"Is it your squirrel whore?"

The sting of the words was like a slap in the face. It made the rest of the pain fade, just slightly. Sonic sped up, pumping his arms harder.

"If it is simple animal biology, that will pass away. And if it is more, then I am the only way you can know her, Sonic. Without me, you will live on while she decays and dies and shrinks in your mind to less than a memory. Only an absence, the memory of a memory."

The walls opening up, a broader hallway, taller doors. Plates of armor. A workshop.

"But if I take her, Sonic, she will continue. Not as greatly or as fully as you, but she is not without cleverness. I will not end her body until I can drain her sentience into a more permanent and flexible medium. It will persist as an action-processing mode within my mind. At times it will be installed in your local mind and animate you. You will have eternities to know that closeness, in the traverse of the interstellar void."

The pain was at home now, either his neurons choking it off or his nanites sinking into the worst of it and rebuilding. His hips were almost working right, his ankles not slapping as hard on the floor. The ceiling pulling away, an open hangar door, another.

"All your friends will be in me," Robotnik said, the voice breaking apart as the speakers had more space to echo. "The fox, the rabbit, the coyote. Perhaps I will reconstruct the walrus. Nothing will be forgotten, in me."

A door and Sonic threw his legs forward, soles squealing on the steel as he forced himself to a halt.

"But you will join me first," Robotnik shouted down at him over the whine of the maneuvering jets.

There was no ceiling. The circular walls of the shaft, radius maybe forty meters, stretched up into foggy dimness and night, some sort of aerial access shaft being built in the heart of the Egg. There were mobians in the corner of Sonic's vision with dead eyes and assault rifles, but they did not aim, and neither did the swatbots beside them.

Hovering before him, five meters in the air, was Robotnik, his bare scalp, shaded eyes, and flaring moustache, his hands gripping a pair of control sticks studded with buttons. He seemed to be growing like a plant in a pot from a massive, floating orb of steel, stubs of maneuvering jets mounted along its surface, yellow and black caution striped access panels to the antigrav drives on each side. Every other point bristled with ordnance.

Sonic guffawed. The human's moustache tilted downwards, his hands tightening on the control sticks.

"You look like a big fat egg," Sonic shouted over the squeal of the thrusters. "An egg with a moustache."

He swung the power ring around his right hand and clasped it hard, feeling the warm rush begin as the needles slammed home into his veins. "Eggs are for cracking," he yelled.

Targeting lasers flicked to life on the sides of the egg-pod, speed of light but a delay on the tracking comps. Too late. Sonic was already cutting through the air, hitting his stride, leaping up at the cockpit, balling up in the wake of the maneuvering jets and the perturbations of the antigrav drives as time continued to weaken around him and slow and—

twist

Coldness in his head as his quills started to push into the metal and kept starting to push into the metal , his legs catching up with him as he spun and catching up to him and squeezing into his belly and his quills started to push into the metal and his quills started to push into the metal and he needed air and his head was cold and his quills started to push into the metal and they pushed into the metal and his head started to push into the metal—

Sonic tumbled backward limp, head slamming into the floor and body flopping over it, then again, his feet catching the floor on the third go-round as his thoughts caught up with the augmented responses of his body. The egg-pod was tottering wildly as Robotnik wrestled with the controls, blasts of white-frosted liquid nitrogen boiling out of the jets as he sought to level the orb.

Do not expose brain directly to intense antigravitron radiation, Sonic thought, right as a bullet hit his gut like a hard right holding a power drill.

He leaned forward and started running again as plasma streaked by his face, as the bullet punched from the front of his belly to the back of his belly and out of his back in a vortex of blood and quill and intestine—great time for the world to slow down again; thanks, nanites! The bots and the gunslaves did not like it that he could put cracks in the hull of the Lord and master's private hovercraft, spiderweb its canopy. Time to do more. He set himself on an arc to the right that would take him out of the range of the long barrels on the front of the pod and into its side. He glanced to his right, stutter-stepped and darted between two of the endless bullets that a braindead sow was pounding out of an assault rifle. Looking back to the pod Sonic saw two missile racks had popped out from inside the body, making the sphere into a sideways oval. Targeting lasers peppered the ground in front of him and flashes shuddered down through the missile-housings and—

FAST TOO FAST

Sonic didn't leap, he threw himself headfirst as hard as he could away from the lasers. The missiles were silent until they detonated, battering at his soles and adding to his velocity, more warheads tracking in under his legs, throwing him sideways and upside down. The echo of the blasts started finding his ears, too many, two directions, and even though sound didn't work right in the depths of the power ring rush, he knew that somehow the missiles were moving faster than the sound of their launch.

Eyes darted to the ring and the gold boiling inside it. Half-gone.

Brief stab of a red laser in his left eye and then a missile rolling past his chest close enough to brown and curl his fur. Sonic balled. Felt his body smash through a swatbot's head, slam into the wall of the shaft which cradled him with its gentle arc, guided him—

That's it

—down toward the ground but he came out of his roll and started running before he reached it, the wall pushing back against his feet with its round curve at each step. Robotnik was still hovering five meters up in the center of the shaft, but instead of trying to chase him around the wall he had brought his egg-pod around the other way. The long barrels on the front of the pod were rocking back into the machine with recoil as they pounded out slugs that moved faster than a bullet, tracing a line of destruction into the wall in front of Sonic, chewing up bot and flesh indiscriminately. Perfect ride for a god who didn't care about any of the mortals below him.

But he wasn't expecting an attack from above.

Sonic, turned right—up the wall—and the deep cut in his right foot screamed out at the lateral force. The wall shuddered as the slugs slammed into it below him. Robotnik seemed to sense what he was doing now, stopping his own spin with hard blasts from his maneuvering jets and boiling the air beneath him with antrigravitrons to gain height.

Right through the canopy, Sonic thought. Squashing him like a big, fat, blood-filled tick.

Up the wall now, gaining height fast on that stupid, slow, pod, feeling the centripetal force disappear under his feet. Not good enough, just dropping on him wouldn't be good enough.

Sonic kicked, shot down at the pod he could see trying to tilt up to meet him, Robotnik's face flushed red with fury, mouth open wide, and Sonic balled himself and battered into the armor at the front of the machine and the glass, his momentum and gravity pulling them down one meters, two, a brief glance of the human's nose pressed flat to the inside of the shockglass, his eyes wide with terror. Heard and felt electrical snaps as his quills cut some kind of conduit inside the machine, another downward lurch as the antigrav drive sputtered, and . . .

And they leveled off, the egg-pod cracked, leaking white, but still holding the fat yolk together.

Fuck!

Sonic kicked off the pod, trying to get distance by the time he hit the ground, and Robotnik rocked back too, action-reaction, fighting to level his craft, squeezing his thumbs tight to the buttons on the very end of his control-sticks. Static electricity arced along the fractured armor, smoke deepened around the electrical snaps deep in the front of the machine, and two of the four railguns sank back, launching slugs. One went between Sonic's legs. The other hit him in the right shoulder, slammed him back into the wall, quills snapping. Time seemed to speed up as he fell to the floor, hard. He was flagging.

Quick glance to see how much juice was left in the power ring. It was on the floor beside him, almost empty, still clutched by his right hand, which was attached to the wrist, elbow, all the way away to the shoulder and the red spatter it had left on the ground when it fell there, after the slug had blown the arm off his body.

Oh.

This is really bad, Sonic's nanites were telling him, struggling to keep any more blood from leaving him, backing up the natural response to tighten down on that wide-open artery spewing himself all over the steel floor. His leg started to shake, and soon all of him would be shaking, seizing in the aftermath of the catalyst. We should go to sleep for a while, the nanites said.

Across the room, amid the ruined bots and mobians, two dead-eyed, slack jawed foxes trying to fire emptied magazines at him. Sonic's eyes tracked up to the smoking egg-pod wobbling over to him, ejecting empty missile-launch tubes to clang behind it on the floor. Up still further, up the shaft, to where his friends were fighting, dying . . . .

Sonic squeezed his eyes tight. Damn it. His neck muscles jerked, slapping his chin against his ribs. His left elbow began to squeeze.

We should really eat something and go to bed, the nanites suggested.

He opened his eyes, looked up at the human leering down at him.

Damn you.

Sonic almost missed, but he felt the sharp burn as he slapped the ring's needles into the heel of his left hand.

The world slowed down again almost instantly, then sped up, then slowed down, time shuddering as the catalyst first found pockets of energy within him that hadn't been used yet, then as the nanites ate his own bones and muscle. Sonic found his feet, somehow, listing to the left.

Robotnik screamed in anger, the sound muffled by the shockglass, slapping his palms against his dash. Only one of the railguns fired this time, and would have taken off Sonic's left ear if he'd still had a left ear. Bobbing like a toy in water, the front of the egg-pod rocked up, down, down as Sonic speared himself up, headfirst, into the impact crater already on the front.

In a sudden pocket of slow time he felt the wave of deformation pass through the steel, shaking it apart, pulling apart the skin on the crown of his head. Clumps of quills ripped loose into the mechanisms within, snapping . . .

With a shock of pain the nanites turned on Sonic's own flesh again, burning it up, and time leaped back to almost normal. The egg-pod slammed down into the floor at the same time as Sonic—Sonic with a thud as he barely remembered to land on his feet and left hand, the egg-pod with a deafening THONG of metal on metal that reverberated up the shaft, bouncing again with a sharp, loud crack, and screeching to a halt halfway on his side.

"Emergency," a flat electronic voice shouted. "Emergency escape." With a pop bolts fired deep in the egg-pod and it disintegrated into a harmless, almost insubstantial cloud of parts. And then Robotnik was just sitting there on a chair far too small for his bulk, two control sticks that controlled nothing sitting all alone in his hands.

"Who's a god now?" Sonic yelled.

Robotnik didn't have any augmentations, but the run he made for the hangar door on those thick limbs was impressive. Sonic started after him, planting his right hand on the floor and it wasn't there and he stumbled dizzily.

Just a little more, he begged the nanties. Find something—

They found something. His body turned molten.

With each step the flailing human got bigger, bigger, until Sonic flipped and went quills first into the human's back, the pair of them tumbling down into the floor, the human beneath.

The human popped like grape when you squeeze it. Like a bad dream when you wake up.

Sonic lay there, shivering intermittently, feeling his quills move in the mess as he breathed.

He rolled up, skin sticking to his back—not his skin—looked up to the unseen sky at the top of the shaft.

I did it.

"I did it," he croaked. And then screamed,"SALLY! WE DID IT!" They had made it. They were free. He wanted to hug Sally, anybody. Even the dull eyed fox shuffling toward the dead tyrant. "We did it," Sonic said to him.

The fox swung the butt of his rifle into Sonic's face. Sonic stumbled backward, tried to block the next swing, but his missing right arm did nothing to stop it from crunching hard into his nose, knocking him down to his back.

Please? Sonic asked the nanites.

Fuck you, they said. You treat us like shit.

The seizure began in earnest.

Thin as bones, writhing under the constant swings from the fox zombies, the two fox zombies now. But they couldn't beat the damage his body was doing to itself. He still tried to roll away from them, but his body kept jerking his field of vision back and forth, until the butt of a rifle filled it, and there was a crunch, and there was no field of vision. Just pain. Something like pain, but not pain, because pain was in just one place, not everywhere—

And then he couldn't feel anything, his body gone, the blows that were still raining down on him gone, hidden somewhere else as they beat him apart. Only the ghost of his body remembered by his own brain.

The ghost blossomed.

The memories flooded him, overfilled him with sensations. Wind in green leaves. The warmth of a blue sky. The smell of wet dirt. A sunflower yellow eye above white fur. The sting of chili and the tang of fat. The musk of unwashed squirrel.

I saved it, but it was going to end anyway. He heard laughter, a man's free, deep laughter like something from an old, forgotten dream, a buzzing in his ears like a mechanical warning tone, Warning, a woman's voice, soft but cruelly insistent. Death imminent.

Is that it? Sonic clung to the memory of fur against his bare palms, her scent, knowing that of course that was it. She would go on without him and this would end. Is that enough? Lips touching lips, feet pounding the ground, wind pulling quills. Was that enough?

More laughter, sharper and brighter, cruel and kind and familiar. Hedgehog, Sonic said and heard himself say, you'd better hope it was enough, because

Kain Blackwood 2012

## \*Chapter 8\*: Imperial Spaceport, 1 Brumaire 3239

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**Imperial Spaceport, Northwest of Robotropolis, 1 Brumaire 3239**

Hot oil spurted onto Antoine's face as he cut through the swatbot's neck, but that wasn't enough; he threw himself forward into the thing's chest. It had just begun to fall when he felt the sharp discharge of its arm cannon, the heat prickling his tailfur. He looked back and Sharon was still alive, skunktail up against her back, the modified imperial SAM balanced on her shoulder, teeth gritted. "Lock!" she screamed.

Manuel leapt bodily from behind her, disappearing into the tall grass. "Clear!"

Antoine squinted as the pop blew grass seeds into his face, then turned his head to follow the warhead as it streaked into the boiling black sky already thick with contrails and popped into a fog of blue against the fuselage of the steathbot. It spastically tried to launch the AP warhead, the rocket shearing it through its own plasma cannons as electricity arced wildly through the smoke. In the blink of an eye it was almost half a klick beyond them, tumbling through the fields and bursting into a flower of orange and black.

"Haaaah!" Antoine pushed himself off the pile of swatbots he'd just sliced down, found his feet, swung his sabre toward the crazy mess of scaffolding collapsed around the teetering black launch vehicle. Smoke was pouring into the dawn sky from the flaming airfield, tracers were spitting down into the fields from the distant manufacturing complex and rocket sheds, and more rockets were spitting up from their fallback perimeter, stretching off to the south. "Eight hours!" he shouted. He hadn't thought he'd make it five minutes. Fifty kilometers behind him, his friends had probably already freed Robotropolis.

And he might live to see it!

"South line's taking heavy fire, Ant!" Sharon shouted, slinging the launcher over her back.

"Hah!" He nodded, stepped up on the swatbot bodies, tall enough for all the mobians hiding in the grass to see, somehow sure that none of the snipers in the manufacturing complex would have time to find him. His sword swung to the south to point out the line they would reinforce, but stopped in midair at the sudden burst of what seemed like sparks far across the fields as another stealthbot caught a warhead in the middle of a banked turn, sped silently down into the side of the rocket. He didn't know the math or the chemistry, but he saw first one explosion—the stealthbot—and then another, deeper, broader—

"Get down!" he screamed, leaping backwards as the light burned into his eyes. He fell back through heat, instant, impossible heat, into the grass right as the roar ripped at his face, his clothes, burning, raking his chest and legs, sucking the air out of his lungs . . .

When Antoine woke up it was dark. The sun seeped weakly through the omnipresent cloud. He could breathe, with effort. He stood and felt the clothes on his back fall off of him, looked down at the scorched black fur all along his front. Looked at the unmoving, tangled lumps of fabric and fur and skin in the ravaged grass. Not burned, but no air—no oxygen. And no nanites to help them hang on.

Stumbling in a circle, choking, only the crater told him where he was, where the rocket plant had been. And elsewhere nothing but grass, knocked back and scorched to the farthest reaches of his vision. Flecks of black soot reaching upwards, shimmering in his vision.

And slowly plodding towards him, from the horizon.

He walked toward them, picking them out, trying not to see who they were. But slowly he could see them, covered with cuts and grit of combat as they were. Just four. A kangaroo, a dog, a lion, and her. Both of her ears folded, one naturally, one with a hard, deep red shrapnel slice. Something had ripped the armor loose from her left shoulder to the elbow, baring flesh speckled with shorn metal mounts reaching up from the bone. She limped on a right leg skewered with a length of rebar, emerging from the far side of her calf at the wrong angle.

When she reached him, she fell, fell onto his shoulders with the weight of battle and fifty kilometers. He couldn't hold her up; they fell to their knees.

"Antoine," she said, "we couldn't. He's got them. He's got everyone."

"We'll go West," he replied without hesitation. That was the plan. "We'll regroup."

"It won't be enough."

"We must try," he said, gently, as though saying I know, I know. "We must never give up." Not until the day they died, which would come before long. Before it did, they might be able to save some people—help them get back behind the failing human lines, until the lines collapsed to the beaches in the north, pushing them back into the water to drown.

It was terrifying. But he'd always been fearful by nature. It had never kept him from doing his duty.

He softly kissed her eyelids, her lips, then slowly helped her to her feet.

No one spoke.

The soldiers were awaiting orders, but they were not forthcoming, and not even the collared warriors dared to request them.

Robotnik was ruined, splayed face down. He had exploded like a bug under a boot, his belly ruptured from the impact that had shattered his spine, the balloons of his organs flopped out on the tile, red on black.

Amanda looked at it as though waiting for it to move, though it would not. She did not move, either. The requests for orders sent by simple text alone were a megabyte deep in her communications buffer. The city was in hand, tottering along. The rebels were being kept, somewhere. Someone had taken Sonic's body away, but no one had dared to touch Lord Robotnik. Not even her.

"Teacher," she said. He didn't answer.

She needed him. He had set her free, taught her what she could be to the poor, lost mobians that needed strong rule to make them free and powerful. Without him, she felt lost. And without her, Mobius would be lost. Lost like Sonic, poor Sonic, lost and alone and dead.

That would not happen, she knew. She would not let it.

"All students graduate," she said.

"My Empress?"

"This will set back the offensive in the west by months. Bertrand and Henri will have to redeploy."

"Yes, my Empress."

"First things first," she said. "Where is Sally Acorn, of squirrels?"

The ceiling was black. The floor was hard. She was on the floor. Eyes looked down at her, disappeared, came back.

They had been in the northeast airfield, gutting the stealthbots—no, there were bots in the air, too. The explosions. Cascade of EMPs in blazing blue, swatbots falling down. They had to hold it.

"Hfff tlld tit," Sally heard herself slur, blowing spit along lips that she could barely feel. She could barely feel anything. Drugs.

"Take meh." She swallowed. "Take me 'live."

Soldiers were staring down at her. White mice, their faces flecked with cuts and dirt and clotted blood. One was missing an ear.

"You're missing an ear," Sally said, but they were gone. She blinked again, and the dim lights seemed different.

She was sleeping a lot. She couldn't sleep; she had to fight. Move.

She moved. She cried out at the pain above her right knee; cracked femur. Grabbed the pain, gritted her teeth, pulled herself up out of the drug haze.

There was some sort of splint around her leg that had kept her from doing any more damage to it, but she wasn't going anywhere. Somewhere they hadn't taken, not under fire, but they could still have taken parts of the city. She might not even be in the city.

"Hey," Sally croaked, opening her eyes and stretching lungs that felt burned, "who's in charge around—" She choked. "Tails."

"That's not my name," he growled. But it was him, the same yellow-orange fur, no matter how scarred, the same face, even with a fresh welt swelling his brow down over his golden left eye. And she could smell him, faintly, under the reek of petroleum and gunpowder and blood, a scent that hadn't found her nose in years.

"Where are we?" Sally asked.

"My Lady is dead," Tails spat. "A herd of your animals killed her with their numbers."

Good, she thought, but the word died before it reached her lips. Renee had been the enemy, heartless and vicious, but so was Tails. She hadn't forgotten the anger and hurt she had felt when he had lost Rotor, when he had lost Sonic, and couldn't keep herself from recognizing it now. Sally wondered if he had looked the same in some prison cell, when he lost her.

"I'm sorry," she said. Sorry she had let him come to this, that she hadn't saved him, but that didn't matter. "I'm sorry."

He was about to speak, but he stopped, clapping his black-gloved hand to his nose. "You stink," he said. "You stink like a wild animal."

"You get used to it." But her scent couldn't be so overpowering as to water the eyes of a fox used to breathing this air, could it? "Tails, where are we? What's happening?"

"You killed my Lady," he said, eyes closed, grabbing his whiskers in a fist, pulling their roots up from his cheek. "You killed my Lady."

"Tails, please. Where—where's Amanda?" Sally felt a slight bit of hope that she wasn't here. She'd be sure to come and look over her long-lost squirrelbot, if she was alive and the battle was over. "Where's Robotnik?"

Tails didn't speak, but he opened his uninjured eye, stared down at her over his hand.

"Sonic's done it, hasn't he? Robotnik's dead. We're free. Amanda's free. All of us, if we want to be. We're free."

The fox continued to glare over his fist. "Bring it next to her," he said.

"What?" she said. Tails didn't answer, and it took Sally moments to realize that although he looked at her, there were other people in the room. A soft, wet thump next to her on her right made her flinch. She tried to turn her head to look and hissed in pain. Her neck was stiff, her shoulders aching.

"Let me help you," Tails said, lifting up a foot and pressing the tread of his boot into her cheek, forcing her head to the side. She winced, slowly opened her eyes.

And she screamed.

Sonic's mouth hung open just enough to show the tips of his canines, his bare snout striped with shades of blue and black from impact, like he was about to speak, and she had looked up at his eyes and there were no eyes because his head, his thick head, you thick-headed hedgehog, they had bashed it open, beaten his hardened skull apart. Thick chunks of skull were pushed into, into his brain, red mush seeped and clotted in the cracks, his quills askew. She could hear herself sobbing, his scent in each of her breaths with the sting of blood and a scent of death; he smelled dead. Her right hand scrabbled, feeling his chest, not cold but not warm, not warm, and she grabbed the fur just beneath his neck and felt it in her fingers and put her lips to those cold, leathery—

Tails's boot knocked her mouth away from him. "Enough!"

"Sonic," she wept. She could still taste him on her lips. But he was dead.

She did nothing as Tails knelt astride her chest, pulled a pistol from his hip and pressed it to her forehead.

"Miles!" warned a voice that it took Sally a moment to recognize as Lupe, Lupe Almatrican. Lady Lupe.

"You killed my Lady," Tails said, pressing the barrel into her skull so hard his arms shivered.

"Miles," Lupe said, "my Empress wants the squirrel alive—"

"She killed my Lady!" Tails screamed.

Sally moaned in pain as the fox put more of his weight on the gun. "Tails—"

"Shut up!"

The other soldier's voice was tight with terror. "Miles, my Empress will never forgive you. You've done much to save the city and you have earned her blessing. You will live forever, but not if—"

He threw back his snout and screamed. "I don't care!"

"I'm sorry, Tails," Sally said. "I'm sorry I didn't do more for you."

The fox stared at her with one wild eye. He forced his thumbs up and over the back of the receiver and manually pulled the hammer into position.

"Your Lady wouldn't want this, Miles!" Lupe shouted.

Miles didn't look like he wanted it either. And Sally knew Sonic wouldn't. But they hadn't freed Tails. And Sonic was dead.

"Do what you have to," Sally said.

"Miles!"

Tails squeezed his eye tight. Slowly opened it, looked down at her face.

"I hope it takes a long time," he rasped.

His clutching thumbs twitched, jerked, but when they replaced the hammer into the rest position, the primer did not ignite.

No. Sally willed the gun back as Tails took it away, but it didn't ignite. Sonic was gone. She had lost. She could feel him calling to her, still so close, waiting for her, telling her . . .

Telling her that Tails would never hurt her, not like this.

Flecks of white slather on Tails's lips as he forced the words through his teeth. "I hope you resist for years. I hope you suffer long and hard, before you mewl at the Empress's feet."

Poor Tails. And then in a voice she could almost imagine was Sonic's: He deserves something to be happy about.

"Tails," Sally whispered, "I'll never stop fighting."

When the fox grinned, she started to laugh. And she couldn't stop.

"I'll never break, Tails," she said, stopping to cough as he pushed himself up to his feet. "I don't care how much you hurt me. You think torture can stop us? You think we'll give up just because one of us is dead?"

That's the spirit, Sal, he would say. It wasn't madness, or maybe it was, because Sonic was dead, and she was alone. The worst thing had happened, the worst possible thing had come. Nothing was left of him but his memory, his scent, and they would try to take that from her. She looked up at Tails and saw his smile and smiled back

"You think I'll give up on you, Tails?" she laughed.

"Bag her," Tails ordered.

"Your Empress has just made the biggest mistake of her life!" Sally shouted, tears soaking her cheeks at the pain and the blue quills in the corner of her eye as arms grabbed her shoulders, dragged her. "She can't kill him and she can't have you and she can't take me. I won't let her." She was laughing so hard it was like screaming, screaming her throat raw. The soldiers' hands unfolded the black polystyrene of their prisoner-cocoon, laid it over her body. She screeched at it like a wild animal. "I won't break! I won't bend! Swallow me and I'll claw my way out!"

She kept screaming until they locked the mask on her face.

Kain Blackwood 2012

## \*Chapter 9\*: Off Angel Island, 3 Messidor 3686

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**One Hundred Kilometers Off Angel Island, 3 Messidor 3686**

Dareth the fox sat in one of a pair of seats in the open air by the rear of the craft—the stern—and watched the great silence of the sky. Clear to the horizon, that impossible horizon in which he could see the very curve of the world. Behind the churn of the waves against the hull he could hear it: that total silence, the unnerving emptiness, the loneliness wrapping the planet.

It was boiling hot, here by the equator. He wore nothing but his steel collar, boots, a pair of shorts and his combat vest. But horror chilled him through.

Robians were not a seafaring people: the land belonged to them, and it belonged to them wholly. From sea to sea was the dominion of the eternal Empress: north to south, east to west, sunken swamp to burning sands, the land of half-bare hedgehog to that of the heavy walrus and the white-furred bear: all the provinces of machine tending to animal tending to machine under the wise command of the Robian Lords. It had taken Dareth until now, perched on a swaying deck over a bottomless, cold well of death filled with human submarines invisible to the finest robian techniques of detection (old technologies studied by the Lady's engineers in secret to prepare for this clandestine journey: hydrophones, active SONAR), to realize how wonderful the Empire was, how perfect—

Well, not perfect. Not the whole Empire. As a child the others in his center had told each other stories about the desert lands of the Lady Terscala, where workers had only one drink of water each day and slept as they worked, never waking, where warriors were given a new name each morning, only to be forgotten each night. As an adult Dareth knew childish lies for what they were, but he had himself visited the rainy port of Lord Corukas on a matter for his Lady, the first time he had been away from home. He had brought small gifts for the shift foreman at the factory to which he was delivering a team of workers: a pot of live lilies from the Central Garden, and a book—a book for older children, as he had heard it said that the workers of Corukas were not given as much training in reading as those he was used to.

The foreman had stared at him in terror before telling Dareth that it was forbidden to him to read books. Before departing, Dareth had noticed the lilies in a trash bin.

But the glorious city of Winstone, the city to which Dareth belonged and had belonged since his birth, that lovely garden of a city, the orderly rise of the tapering nanoconstructed towers, white and green and rare dun earth to suit the ruler's will, the animals shepherded to work and rest by the silent, gliding trains of the outer ring, the hub and its spokes, all orbiting the white citadel from which the Lady surveyed her work, saw that it was good. Winstone was perfect, and lovely.

If Dareth were the Lady Winstone, he had thought hundreds of times since leaving shore, he would never forsake his creation to risk the chaotic waves, hungry to swallow all who crossed. But the decision was not his. His place was to serve the Lady, which now meant guarding her with Lilla the wolf, both of them chosen from the many warriors that were tools of the Lady's will.

They were the whole complement that rode this craft, a craft no larger than a good-sized weapons platform and harmless, built to the ancient archive design of a pleasure boat, white fiberglass and chromed steel. The better to avoid aerial surveillance, and to avoid whispers of the project leaving the inner circles of the city.

Dareth was not permitted to know why, but he wished he did.

The Lady lurked belowdecks, alone with her thoughts and schemes, more alone than even Dareth could understand, this far from the thick web of radio in which she normally thought and acted. Lilla, blank-eyed, hard-jawed, iron-armed Lilla, with her gray fur and her black tranquilizer pistol—the Lady forbade her two warriors to carry even a standard multirifle on the journey—stood at the bow, ever vigilant, never much to talk to. Her training for war had begun when she was a young pup, and she had not had nearly as much practice in conversation as Dareth.

Dareth was far more interesting to speak with, and also more likely to let his Lady come to harm through foolishness and inattention and cowardice. Like Lilla, Dareth had been trained for war. But for a shorter time, and under much stranger circumstances.

Dareth the fox was born in the year 3663 of Targen the fox and Hira the fox, a eugenics pairing executed without the aid of artificial insemination. He was raised in the South Child Center, within the Maples Park, his caretaker a kindly male rabbit named Trannis. In 3654 the Lady Winstone had instituted the reform wherein many worker animals labored only six days per week, and Dareth grew to know his mother Hira, who would visit him on her rest-day, and became friends with her. As he gained years his dirty fur was burnished to a deep, full red, contrasting perfectly and sharply to his white brush, two smears of black far back on his cheeks. He was a good kit: eager to please his caretakers and trainers and with a mind that loved rules, learning them and applying them and obeying them and imposing them.

By his sixth year Dareth was showing great interest in numbers, and often spent his free time reading and teaching himself arithmetical algorithms, so he was given over to the instructors of the Sciences. His love of number and shape drew him strongly to physics, and he longed to study the tiny particles that he learned danced within everything, to note and chart the capricious leap of one thing into another and force the strange world of the minute quanta to obey robian will. But it was not to be: the city and its Lady required biologists, and Dareth was trained to tame the larger structures of chemical microbiology. His heart was sore, but he constrained himself to the course of study his instructors demanded of him and excelled, being assigned to a DNA engineering team in his sixteenth year.

In his eighteenth year, the team had succeeded in their project: a modified algae trained to grow in clever sheets, regardless of their orientation to constant force. The project, already well advanced by the time Dareth joined it, had not only fully satisfied its goal, but had provided unexpected benefits to a project long desired by the Lady, a general chlorophyll hack that could permit lifeforms to be engineered to sustain themselves with minimal food in the presence of light. As a reward, the team to eat was given permission to eat an evening meal at a leisure-dormitory on the river in the west of the city, a rich dinner with terrapod meat imported from the distant southern city of Fortune, tangy fruits from the sunny, boiling north with their sweet, pleasant sting,

It was at their celebration that the warrior emissary ordered their presence at the citadel the next day, where they would receive the thanks of the great Lady.

Dareth did not look forward to the visit. A scientist animal, he favored the company of his own kind. Warriors ruled by right, kept the city safe and preserved peace throughout the Empire—though what reason for strife could there be?—but Dareth had no desire to speak with them. Their silent, watchful eyes and commands were a feature of Dareth's life, but one he had little desire to expand. He learned, he built, he obeyed, he was happy.

The next day, his ears were laid back as the team entered the white arched gate so far beneath the needle pinnacle high above. His eyes darted around the lobby as he realized that for the first time ever he was in a place where the brown gloves of the laboring class and the white gloves and loose white and green stoles of the science and engineering classes were outnumbered by the black fingerless gloves and many-pocketed combat vests of the warriors, many of whom lived and worked here. They were met upon entering by a guide of erect stance and crisp demeanor; they followed meekly through the soft-rad and terahertz scanners, then were to proceed up to the Lady's audience chambers when a collared mongoose warrior with fierce amber eyes, one of the Lady's, strode before the guide, who stopped and saluted sharply. "They are science-caste," the mongoose declared. "They must be searched."

Dareth sniffed sharply, ears pulling to the warrior in indignation. "We've been invited. We're loyal enginee—"

The mongoose warrior seized him and threw him against the metal wall as easily as if he were still a kit; his cheekbone began to swell hot. "All science animals will put their hands to the wall, spread their legs, and close their eyes!"

Yes, ma'am,they answered in unison; Dareth's grunt the only member of the chorus just a bit late.

Up the elevator, heart beating fast, into a room of fine, delicate-looking wooden furniture: smooth lines, white walls, black floors. All around plate glass, views of the city that none of the scientists had ever glimpsed outside of image files and trivid: those flowing spires as seen from the top, like immense species of plant, all reaching themselves hungrily towards the bright sun above.

"My algae-hackers! Welcome! Just a moment."

All had seen pictures of Sarah, Lady Winstone before, gracing great public buildings, parks, and the central memorial to her conquest of her city, the chiseled marble of the ground squirrel in her old-fashioned jacket—they said the strange, too-heavy design that hid fur from shoulders to wrist was borrowed from humans—her head bowed under the hand of the Empress, blessing her as the figures representing the city's ancient animal population knelt before and swore fealty to her and her war-machines.

But the pictures and statues did not convey a strange thing. The Lords and Ladies and their blessed warriors were perfect, healthy, forever young and powerful, but the Lady looked old—not very old, but old as Doctor Pirus, Dareth's supervisor, who had five and thirty years. Worse: she was broken. Her face, when wearing a grin rather than the transcendent bliss of the Empress's glory, seemed twisted. In his youth Dareth had known a very old lemming caretaker who could not curl her fingers all the way. In her youth they had been crushed and torn away in an accident, and at that time the Lady's scientists could not grow her new ones, so they had healed badly after reattachment. The Lady looked like that, as though sometime before receiving the Empress's blessing, she had received a grievous wound to her face that neither the blessing nor ancient medicine could repair.

But the rest was familiar: her chestnut fur, the loose, unbuttoned combat vest. Her eyes were closed, mind momentarily in the citadel's servers. The science team and their guide waited patiently a quarter of a minute while the Lady motionlessly made notes, final adjustments before blinking her work aside to a memory buffer and standing. "Sorry for that delay," she said with what most of the team found startling graciousness, "I was expecting you sooner."

"We were searched," Dareth declared.

"Searched?" The Lady turned her eyes to him and all that he had felt—the shame of the mistreatment, the humiliating pokes and prods of the mongoose in his mouth and against his belly, the frustration of being wrongly blamed for their late arrival—all of it withered into fear.

"It wasn't right," he said, quietly.

"You were searched?" she asked. "By hand? All of you?"

"Yes, Lady," Dareth muttered, eyes on the Lady's black boots. "I'm sorry," he added.

"Miycha did this?" the Lady asked their guide, eyes narrowing in thought.

"Yes, Lady."

She turned her mind away a moment—commanding some distant animal or machine—then smiled again. "I'm sorry, and on the occasion of such a great honor! Please, come—"

The search was not mentioned again. The Lady thanked the scientists for their service and ingenuity, promised them that their creation had many bold and critical applications which she could not discuss at length—which was strange, because Dareth had felt their algae-sheets were rather useless and ugly. Why build a universal plant when lovely and sweeter plants abounded on the very streets Dareth walked each day from dormitory to train to laboratory? Each member of the team, from Head Doctor Penethus to the lab techs like Dareth and Marjoray felt the Lady's hand of blessing between their ears. Penethus bowed and took their leave on behalf of everyone.

"Thank you all, and best of luck with your next project," the Lady smiled. "Dareth, you will stay."

He lost the power of speech until the closing elevator doors hid the terrified eyes of his team from his own. "Lady," he struggled, "I'm sorry—"

"Be quiet," she replied, half in thought. "Kneel."

"I—" Dareth stammered. Scientists were not often asked to kneel. He slowly dropped to one knee, looked up questioningly.

She saw. "Two knees," she explained. "Bow your head, eyes on the ground. In this context it is an order to rest and wait quietly."

In a minute his knees and ankles were aching, his mind was racing in circles, and his stomach was toying with vomiting the sweets the Lady had offered them onto her smooth floor. Finally he was rescued by the sound of the elevator opening, warrior boots stamping across the tile and then snapping to attention.

There was no greeting. "You searched my guests," the Lady said.

"Yes, Milady." It was the mongoose. "To ensure your safety. Admitting non-warriors to the—"

"My safety is ensured by the scanners and the loyalty of my animals. Who told you to search my guests?"

"When I served Lord Muzenkspitz—"

The sound of flesh meeting flesh. The stunned silence of the aftermath. Dareth squeezing his already lowered eyes shut tight. "Who do you serve?" the Lady asked coldly.

"Mi—My Lady, before Lord Muzenkspitz gave me to your service, when he trained me—"

Slap. "Who do you serve?"

". . . You, Milady, but—"

Slap.

The sound of tears. "I serve y-you, My Lady."

"Do you now."

"I'm sorry, My Lady."

"Kneel."

In a moment Dareth heard boots approaching him on the floor. "Hello again, fox," said the Lady, her voice placid. "How are you?"

His voice belonged to a frightened kit. "I want to go home," he squeaked.

Fingers scratched the head-fur between his ears. "You are home," she said.

They reached dock long before they reached land. The Robian Empire's orbital surveillance pictures already revealed that the natural beauty of 5 N 44 W, once called Tremmant's Island, now called by its inhabitants Angel Island, had long since disappeared under the space-hungry animals that had settled it. Refugees had built quickly up to the very crater of the island's dormant volcano, and once that had been accomplished they sank tendrils into the water: a rim of landfill erasing the white beaches, and then pontoon bridges linking a crazy network of houseboats and barges, patched and repatched and rebuilt over hundreds of years since the refugees fled the march of the Robian Empire from the continent's northern docks. Half the population of this island, one of the largest near the equator, lived on these networks that drifted with the currents and predominant weather into a lazy anticlockwise spiral about the island proper. Torn apart and reassembled each hurricane season, creeping further up the island with the rising greenhouse sea levels, the settlement seemed to float with no need for anchor in the seabed.

The Island had a government—something like it, anyway, the people that made their submarines, and the soldiers that ran them—and it owned one of the few land-rooted docks on the island, but that was for very large craft: heavy cargo vessels carrying manufactured goods from the larger islands of the northern hemisphere, fuel vessels and the like. The Lady would be disembarking at something called Marine Marnie's Hotel and Port, which the Lady had told Dareth was a dormitory for the wealthy—the wealthy, Dareth understood, being something like warriors, for as the Robian Empire was ruled by the strongest and most fierce, the mobians and humans of the islands were ruled more confusedly by the most clever and unscrupulous.

Guided by the Lady's mind on its propellers and rudder, the boat motored with the current, bobbing buildings and docks on their left and the distant confetti of the island's merchant and fishing fleet on their right. Dareth and Lilla hunched defensively behind the port bow, scanning the shifting roofs for a glint of light that might be the flash of a cheap assassin's scope. It was a hopeless task, Dareth thought. If the foreigners wanted to kill the Lady, they could have torpedoed her like any troop-boat the Empire sent into the ocean. Or they could shoot the boat now with a rocket-propelled grenade or heavy plasma-caster.

But still they watched. It was their training—well, for Dareth, his training of the past five years. He was not as singleminded a bodyguard as Lilla, and his mind wandered despite himself, eyes tracking the human animals—the humans, actual real live humans without any fur on their bodies, just like in the archive files—and the furred animals—the mobians, growing their head-hair out in imitation of the humans, down to their shoulders, loose in shaggy waves, tied into a bundle, all sorts of bizarre sculptures. The humans and mobians watched back, pointed, held the lenses of cheap video recorders aloft. Children ran along the pontoon walkways after them, raccoon cubs shimmying up masts, rabbits leaping atop conning towers.

At long last they could see the dormitory. It seemed to glow a perfect white even where its underhull bobbed very gently in the surf—Dareth shivered at the thought of being in the water beneath it, scrubbing away rust. Around it were docks where small gleaming-white craft of their own size moored. And also another boat, not white, rather painted a cool grey above its hull—

Both of the bodyguards flattened their ears at a brassy shriek that burst twice from some unseen speaker. The blare didn't seem to bother the people on the walkways at all. "Cut engine, cut engine," a voice followed, distorted by amplification. "We're full up, clearing out a docking slot now."

The voice didn't explain more, but Dareth could see uniformed men on the gray boat, probably in charge of public discipline, yelling at a shirtless hedgehog who—Dareth marveled—was yelling himself, sticking his nose in their faces, pointing at crates littering the deck, pointing at the ocean, pointing at the city. It was an ugly boat, Dareth could see as they drifted closer. Pitted iron hull, rust-red patches surrounded by flaking blisters of blue paint like the corners of an infection. Tall steel mast with a crossbar that hung empty and without sail, two large steel spars rising from the bows to almost touch the point, also empty. Piles of salt-soaked nylon netting were tumbled on the deck.

The Lady touched Dareth's shoulder, making him flinch and making her chuckle. His ears burned at how easy a warrior he was to steal on. "Milady," he said.

"Will you look at this," she said with amusement.

It took twenty minutes before Dareth was tying the thick-braided rope to the dock. At first he assumed it was because of the obscene difficulty in getting a floating, wheel-less craft to go where you wanted it to on a constantly shifting ocean, but when the islanders finally moved the ugly boat out of the dock, they did so in seconds. The real problem was that, despite his earlier assumption about the uniformed humans and mobians, there apparently was no public discipline in the islands.

His Lady stepped from the bobbing boat onto the bobbing quay, took a salute from an old human without head-hair in strange clothes: long pants, a jacket too heavy for the weather, and some kind of cloth collar-and-leash around his neck and down his front. Probably the most clever and unscrupulous man on the island, to judge by the retinue of uniformed human and mobian guards following him and the weasel aide beside him, who introduced him: "Lady Winstone of the Robian Empire, Admiral Hernandez of the Allied Navy."

And while this was going on, the hedgehog was still screaming.

"Throw me in the joint for the night!" he shouted, wriggling his shoulders against the grip of two of the guards on him and manacles holding his wrists behind his back. His fur had a strange tint of baby blue, bright as the sky. "Steal the damn crabs; I know you're going to do it anyway! But I am not paying two hundred bucks to get baby out of the impound!"

One of the guards was writing on a pad of paper, droning aloud through a long list. ". . . . trespass, unlicensed mooring, and violating security directives of the Allied Navy. The Angel Island Port Authority hereby takes possession of MV Rascal Rosie until such time as—"

The hog kicked both his salt-stained boots in the air, making the bear holding him grunt to keep his quills from lifting. "It was an emergency! The icemaker's busted and the hold's full of premium snow crab and I apparently haven't bribed you enough to get a priority slot on the fish quays—"

The Admiral's grin became more pained. "Can you get him out of here?" he asked the weasel quietly.

"May I ask a favor?" the Lady asked. "He didn't know what he was getting into; we've both taken great pains to make my visit as discreet as possible. It would please me greatly if I were not to cost the man his livelihood."

"Of course!" the Admiral said, prattling on while the weasel furiously gestured for the Port Authority guards to get the hedgehog out of the cuffs.

"Yeah!" the hedgehog shouted as the bear turned him loose, as though he had somehow intimidated the bear into doing it. And then, to the horror of the human and weasel, the hedgehogspoke to the Lady. "Much obliged, ma'am. Mallon Whitecap, at your service for haulage to all points north. Tell your friends!"

The guards did their best to usher him quickly off the quay, still asking angrily where he could get his boat. Then the Admiral led them all off toward the mainland, pointing at various houseboats, prattling endlessly about food, people of middling influence. Dareth could see none of it, he only watched the pressing crowd and staring eyes, fighting the urge to push his Lady to the ground, unholster his tranq pistol, and fire to cover a retreat until they were away, back to Winstone and safe.

It was when they were on dry land—it doesn't move, Dareth's exhausted legs marveled—and walking into a broad, crowded market facing an equally broad patch of open water that the Admiral suddenly smiled even more broadly at Dareth's Lady. "Do I take it from earlier that you have some special fondness for hedgehogs, Your Ladyship?"

Dareth tightened his shoulders, but his Lady ignored both the bumbling Admiral's continuing inability to properly address a noble and shrugged placidly. "They're fine animals. Make good warriors." And then her mouth fell open.

"Well then I should have told you what a sight we have in Harbor Square," the Admiral laughed.

Peeking above carts full of fruit and raw fish and the crowds around them was was a statue. The Lady went to it, Dareth and Lilla struggling to stay between her and the masses of foreigners.

The statue was white marble—expensive here in the ocean, without Lady Terscala's quarries to requisition from. On a large pedestal of hard granite he stood, one foot planted higher than the other, as though he were laying claim to some undiscovered land. The foot was in the boxy, thick boot of the power armor human marines were said to use, as were the rest of his limbs and his chest, though the armor was lighter than the heavy servo-driven power suits Dareth had seen pictures of in his combat manuals, clumsy reinforcements built outside the skin like the shell of a turtle where Robians gracefully took allies into themselves. It was part of the human and mobian need to dominate machines, rather than rule with them as equals. Perhaps this was some older, ancient model—perhaps their technology had decayed when they took to the ocean—but Dareth thought it was more likely some sort of artistic foolishness. Especially since the figure's back was unprotected by anything but his natural quills, rising in the hedgehog's traditional war-stance to the fury of spikes that crowned his head above his large eyes. On the cement before the statue, insanely, was a reeking bowl of soft, fermenting papayas.

"Who is this?" the Lady asked, her voice suddenly sharp.

"This is a . . . practice, of the." The Admiral swallowed, his bare, leathery face wrinkling as he looked around, as though afraid of being overheard. "The lower classes, Lady," the Admiral said very quietly, rubbing his neck in discomfort that seemed as social as physical. Then a little louder. "A proud tradition of our people. He's not a real person. It's called religion. I don't know if you are familiar—"

"I worshipped myself, long ago," she said, studying the face. Its lips were—Dareth was not sure. Grim determination where they met beneath his nose, but mirth at its corners, where his cheeks tugged to the hint of a smile. "What is this god's name?" she asked.

"Gordon Freeman," said one the Admiral's guards, a human. The Admiral turned his head and silenced him with a stare.

"Sonic," said the weasel said. Dareth heard the beginning of an argument in his voice.

"And Erinceaus Vulanis, and about a hundred other names," the Admiral interrupted, pulling the veil of a smoke grenade over the ground of combat, "all sorts of different names that mobians and humans use for him. Some even say he's a human!" he laughed. The laugh was the sort of laugh a lab supervisor made when the techs and apprentices had to be calmed after the experimental apparatus destroyed itself for the third time in a row. "The navigators grabbed what records they could when our ancestors fled the continent, but many things became tangled as we took to the water. History, families, the gods . . . ."

Dareth rubbed his chinwhiskers, trying to understand the custom. In the Empire, such statues were made of Lords and Ladies, and sometimes their blessed servants. Here, of course, there was no blessing, and the hedgehog must be long dead. But surely they ought to know whether he was a hedgehog or not. Quills were hard to miss. "Who was he?" Dareth asked.

Before the admiral could inhale, his guards burst into chorus.

"He invented desalinators—"

"—stole the plans for power armor—"

"—defeated Doctor Robotnik—"

"—a fight with his brother Vidavin—"

"—AHteeeenSHUN!"

Dareth raised his brows in time with the stamp of boots as the Admiral's aide silenced then. Discipline was not entirely lost to them.

The Admiral turned to Dareth when he saw that the fox seemed far more confused than his squirrel ruler. "You have to understand, none of the stories are true—they aren't supposed to be. It's not history. The god isn't a person; he's an idea."

"An idea?"

"He steals the might of the powerful," the Lady said, still staring at the statue, "and gives it to the weak."

". . . Yes," the Admiral agreed after a moment, looking at her almost suspiciously.

Childrens' stories, Dareth thought. The Ugly Duckling and Pardu the Warrior-in-Training and the Little Robot That Could. "So there wasn't any . . . hedgehog, or—"

"There was probably someone," the Admiral said, and Dareth could tell he was eager to leave the whole subject behind. "Probably some rebel mobian, an irregular operating behind the lines, or we'd know more about him. And then there'd be no god," he added more quietly, and more derisively. "Just someone who did a lot of good for our people in the fight for the continent. Now then—"

"Are there other gods?" the Lady asked. "A coyote? A rabbit?"

"More than anyone could ever need," said the confused Admiral, striding beside the Lady, "but there are so many more sights in a tour of Angel Island before we get down to the long, dull business of the negotiations . . . ."

Dareth could smell the human's sweat as his Lady continued to study the statue. But after a moment she nodded. "Indeed. Much less divisive sights, I imagine."

The Admiral's discomfiture at a Robian Lady's direct manner of speaking was quite amusing. Dareth dallied a moment longer at the foot of the weird carving that wasn't truth and wasn't a lie, and caught the flash of sunlight as the weasel pulled a small token from his pocket and flipped it into the bowl of fruit.

And that was all there was to it.

Until that night.

After a day spent discussing matters secret, the Allied Navy had seen fit to give the Lady and her servants the entire top floor of another leisure dormitory called Gasthaus Tropic—it seemed by the parts of the city Dareth had seen that humans and mobians devoted their society to leisure dormitories. The door to the penthouse, which was something like a ruler's private chambers, was locked, with the Lady and Lilla inside, and Dareth prowled the corridor without, finally able to hold his tranq pistol at the ready.

It had been a long day, a very long day. His Lady was eating, but Dareth himself would not be able to eat for the forseeable future, his stomach in knots. The next human or hair-wearing mobian he saw he would shoot purely because they deserved it. The proud navy had shown the Lady the freight docks, where hungry beasts that would be workers squabbled over the privilege of unloading each incoming vessel. A hall of trade where humans and mobians bickered over the cost of fish and steel, cheating and being cheated from moment to moment. Always fighting and bickering, hiding their thoughts behind smiles like masks. Monsters.

He checked the floor of the elevators again, which were allegedly locked out two floors below. Both at ground level. Then back again toward the staircase, passing the door to the room in which the Lady and Lilla were eating—

Muffled by the wood, but unmistakable. A cry of pain.

Dareth lifted his boot and cracked the locked door loose from its frame. He cleared the empty receiving room, quickly, vaulting a low glass table and charging back into a dining chamber. His Lady was on the floor, sitting against the wall, shaking. Sobbing. Lilla stood beside her, stiffly at-ease, biting her lower lip with a look of dumb, helpless consternation.

". . . Milady?" he asked, lowering his gun.

"It's okay," the Lady choked, holding her hand, waving him back to the hall as she turned her face away. "Go away. I'm fine."

She did not look fine. She . . . she didn't look like a Robian at all. With her old face all wrinkled up, she looked like she was dying. "What happened?"

"Go away!"

"What happened!" he shouted in terror.

"I thought he'd be proud!" the Lady wailed, slamming her fists against the floor, shattering the concrete beneath the carpet with a sharp crack. "I thought he . . . . I tried my hardest, Dareth," she said, not looking up at him. "I gave everything I had. But I was all alone, and . . . and I thought if I just . . . that I could help more people, if . . . once I conquered Winstone, I tried, I tried to—"

"Who?"

The squirrel looked up at him and gave a bitter sob: "Sonic."

Dareth suddenly felt very young, and very, very cold.

"I thought he'd love my city," Sarah said, shaking her head, her sagging face centuries tired. "I told myself that. But he'd hate it. This is his home."

"Your city is wonderful, Milady," he said.

She started to spit something angry at him, but paused at the genuine confusion on the fox's face. After a moment she did not smile, but gave a soft, shapeless laugh through her lips. "Thank you, Dareth," she said. "That means something, coming from you."

Without intending to, he asked the question he'd wanted to ask ever since she'd ordered him to the floor of her chambers in her citadel: "Why me?"

"I think you'd be able to tell me," Sarah said, "if you thought it were ugly."

Kneeling on the floor, heart pounding, hearing the Lady bash her hand across Miycha's face.

". . . . It's lovely," Dareth said.

Early in his training, the Lady had taught him that she would always be able to tell when he was lying, even if he could not. Even before he had finished his first word she closed her eyes, splayed her ears.

"Winstone is my home," Dareth said firmly. He drew a chair from the dining table, sat on it. "I want to go back."

Now she smiled, ruffing her fingers through her cheekfur to dry it. "So soon?"

"I never wanted to leave. I don't know why we're here." Dareth growled softly. "The islanders disgust me."

"Why?" she asked, insanely.

"Because," he began to recite, "they kill from under the sea like cowards, and—"

"That's what other people have told you, Dareth. What have you seen since coming here?"

". . . . Their rulers are cruel," he said. And then he stopped, resting his arms on the back of the chair, sorting through the day's sights, the handcuffed hedgehog, the snarl of reaching arms at the freight docks and the trading floor. "They don't give their workers tasks; they make them . . . fight over the tasks, like warriors, just so they can eat. And when they do fight, like that hedgehog . . . ."

"He disobeyed," the Lady said pointedly. She turned her eyes to the ceiling as she accessed a local memory buffer: "Improper haulage, trespass, unlicensed mooring—"

"Then why did they let him go when you asked? Either he disobeyed an order or he didn't. I don't think they would have cared at all if we hadn't arrived when we did. Or if he'd had more . . . money, to give them," he said, remembering the word. "What sort of order is that?"

The Lady gave a sharp grin. "You're doing well, Dareth. Keep studying them."

A chill as the fur at the back of his neck crept up. "Milady?"

"I fear that hard times are ahead for the Empire, fox, and for Winstone." The Lady pressed her palms to the ground and stood, smoothing back her face and headfur. "My people will need skills and arts long forgotten to us. We will need animals that can understand the islanders. Know how they think and act."

"So we can conquer them?" Dareth asked hopefully.

"Something much harder than that," Sarah said.

There was something about the look in her eyes that Dareth didn't like.

Kain Blackwood 2012

## \*Chapter 10\*: Winstone, 28 Messidor 3686

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**Citadel of Sarah, Lady Winstone, Winstone, Robian Empire, 28 Messidor 3686**

Sarah was trimming the miniature trees she kept along her window, snipping dwarf branches with careful, deft snaps of a pair of ceramic pruning shears, when the boots tromped into her chambers behind her. "Hello," she said. "Just a moment."

"You have a lot of nerve asking me to come here, Sarah. You could at least be ready when I arrive."

"Patience," she said evenly. "You left your bodyguard downstairs?"

"We could have just had a conversation in netspace. I have nothing to say to you that can't be said in front of our Empress. But I flew alone."

The shears clattered on the metal windowsill as Sally turned sharply, biting off a nervous word. ". . . . I would recommend against that," she said. "Someday it might not be safe to fly without escort—"

"I'm never safer than at the controls of the Tornado," replied Miles, Lord Fortune—no one but nobles were still alive that remembered when the city had been called Fortune Station. The fox was leaning against the doorway to her entry room, arms folded across his chest in a whirpool of color. Almost every part of his body he had become a canvas over the centuries—he tattooed himself, scarred himself, some decades even hung metal hoops through the bones of his two tails. Only above the Empress's collar was his white snout and orange fur still unmarked as the day he was enclosed in the roboticization tank. "I was trying out my latest modifications on the suborbital flight mode today. Buzzed GPS17 at about five meters."

"Lord Miles the fox, terror of the skies," Sally smiled, heart beating nervously faster as he mentioned the suborbital flight, wondering if he had done that intentionally, if he was feeling her out.

"And you?" he asked. "Just gardening?"

Miles meant it as an insult, but she took it with a bit of pride. The Empress had indoctrinated her like all of her children with the echo of Robotnik: animals are machines. And Sarah supposed that when you focused on an individual anything hard enough, it became a machine. Force, mass, and acceleration.

But when you lived for centuries as generations of mobians rose and fell beneath you, one after another like the procession of seasons, seeing the parents reflected dimly in the children, it was hard to see machines. Sarah saw plants, growing out of her city's soil. Some were hardy and rough like cheatgrass or dandelion, some tenacious and clinging like kudzu. Some were beautiful, delicate, hothouse beings. And when given the blessing of nanite constitution and long life, they grew tall, hard, into strong trees. All needed care to grow into what they wanted to become, to fit together harmoniously, share their light and space.

They're people, Sarah could sometimes hear Sonic growling.

Of course they were people. If she'd ever forgotten that, she would have remembered when she'd seen the beauty of the ocean wilds. She never wanted to forget that, and never wanted to lose from her ears Sonic's voice, even if it was raised in anger against something she had done.

But all the same, under her tending, Winstone had become a delightful garden.

"If you include microbiology in the subject of gardening, then yes," Sally answered Miles. "My scientists have discovered a—"

"Have you figured out how to save us?" Miles asked bluntly.

Her smile fell. "No." Charles Hedgehog had been a genius, but not a god. The estimates of Robian longevity had stopped climbing one and a half centuries before, their ancient, brittle DNA finally starting to decay. Their years shall be half a millennium, maybe six hundred years. No more.

Miles shrugged. "Well, that's that."

"Miles. One hundred more years. More if we're lucky. Isn't that enough?"

"What have you been splicing?" he asked tiredly.

"Chloroplasts," she replied. "I'll soon be able to design plants of any dimension I want. A mobian can't live on them—not enough surface area. But if a person were to grow—a sort of cape, I guess, or like a peacock's feathers—"

"Splicing scientists with warriors?" he snarled, not listening. "Workers with rulers? I spoke to your pet fox outside. The biologist slave you've trained to carry a gun. Couldn't you have trained him how to carry himself?"

"Dareth's training is harder than those of most of my warriors," she replied. You could tell, because Sonic loved Dareth, almost as much as he loved making fun of him.

There you are, Sonic. After four hundred years of careful selective breeding and five years of rigorous training, I have managed to recreate a person who is possibly capable of consciously thinking for himself. He could probably even survive on Angel Island. See how unhappy he is?

Goes with the territory, Sal.

"How does he show it?" Miles snarled. "In asking impertinent questions to me and then cringing away like some cowardly, undisciplined worker when I take offense? What is his purpose, to show your scientists that you won't take offense at any insubordination? Where's your pride?"

For about the millionth time, Sarah found the words poor Miles in her mind. He loved his dead Lady Renee so much that he had tattooed her long-gone mark on his neck, beneath Amanda's collar, where none could see it. None of the Robian nobility were more fiercely dedicated to the principles of warrior virtue than he was—not even the Empress herself.

And though no one would ever dare say it, no one failed those principles more abjectly. Despite his fervent pleas, the Empress had not permitted him to sink more soldiers and resources in efforts to perform high-speed combat drops atop the human islands from orbit. For all his endless training, he had not fought a war for centuries. His collared warriors were chosen both for their skills with blade and bullet, and for their ability to learn the complex mathematics he required of them. For a long time, probably since he was born, Miles was less a warrior than a physicist, engineer, chemist, mathematician, logician, computer scientist, architect, artist, and about fifty other things.

All of which shamed Miles. But he could not bear to stop, any more than he could cut off one of his too-many tails.

So it was with pity that she listened as he spat, "I wonder if my Empress ever really tamed you."

"She did, Miles." Sarah smiled, ruefully. "She did."

She floated in blackness.

Memories drifted around her and through her. Explosions. Fur and bloody flesh against her teeth. Screams. A crushed face. A—

"Squirrel."

The word shocked Sally back to awareness, echoing in her skull, widening her eyes on the endless darkness. She . . . tried to draw a breath, choked, no air—then air pushing into her, straining her chest, about to rupture her eardrums.

"No, Sally. Be calm. Do not fight the respirator. You breathe when it breathes."

It took her a moment to find them, but the kinaesthetics of surrender to the machine were there, in her shallow muscle memory. Oxygen continued to come in her nose, then shrink away. She couldn't move—

She remembered, in fragments, struggling to make her mind work. Her brain felt sluggish, atrophied, half-dead.

Dead. Sonic, dead. Tails, lost. The prisoner cocoon.

The prisoner cocoon again. And again.

"You are fiercer than I remember, Sally," Amanda said into the buds stuffed deep in her bound ears. "I had to give up on your training, poor squirrel. I had to wrap you up again. You put twelve warriors in the hospital, along with yourself."

Almost as an afterthought, Amanda added:"You've been here for a month, this time."

"Hmmmmmmm!"

"Shh." Distantly, Sally could feel Amanda's hand, not touching her head, but somehow rubbing against it. "You can come out now. If you make a promise to me, squirrel, one I will punish you if you break. Butterflies have to struggle from their cocoons, if they want to live. You must promise me that you will try your hardest to obey me. I know you will not be able to obey me perfectly, at first. But I will know if you do not try. This . . ."

Sensations changing. Tightness on, on her face. And strain in—in her neck, the snap of stretching plastic. Remembering the shape of her body as Amanda . . . forced her head, something around her head, forced it up, down, up, down . . . .

". . . is how you say yes. This . . . ." Shaking her head side to side. "Is how you say no. Will you try hard to be a good squirrel, Sally?"

For a moment, with terror, she couldn't do it. Her whole body wormed and rocked. Then she felt something outside her hold and steady her.

Head up. Head down. Head up.

"Be still—"

Fingers grabbed at the back of her neck and peeled something tight and elastic away from what Sally could suddenly remember and feel was fur. With a painful pop her ears snapped free and—

She squeezed her eyes shut, but the light still hurt, and she vomited, vomited not food but plastic tubes, hacking and choking as centimeter after centimeter withdrew from deep in her head, up out of her gullet, until after an eternity she was finally coughing and gasping under her own power.

The rest of her body still prisoned, she squinted blearily, mouth twisted with disgust, at the skunk empress's soft smile.

"I remember when you were my little one, so long ago," she said. "So eager to become my squirrelbot. You're much stronger now than you were then."

She was too nauseous to make sounds, but Sally drew her lips back in a silent mime of a snarl.

Amanda ignored it, kept smiling. "I'm stronger, too."

"I asked you here because I need your help," Sarah said, sitting down in an armchair.

Miles declined the implied invitation, ignoring the couch opposite her. "Little late in the year for someone to brush your backfur, isn't it?"

"I need help with Lupe."

Miles shut up.

Though it lay well within the boundaries of the Empire, Lupe, Lady Terscala's city and the surrounding desert had become more and more economically and socially remote. She did not trade or gift workers and warriors with the other nobility, mostly because they were hard pressed to make good use of the creatures that she provided, whose imitation of the reactions and interactions normal to most mobians were unnervingly imperfect. Nonetheless, transfer to Terscala was often brandied about as a threat, real or feigned, among factory supervisors.

Even children sensed that something was wrong in Terscala.

Lupe's research into the brain had hit the wall two centuries ago. She said. But things perked the ears and pricked the whiskers. When you spoke to the wolf, you weren't speaking to her. And sometimes, when you spoke to one of her blank, half-there animals, you had the uncanny feeling you were speaking directly to her. Lord Henri, his city of High Demon hundreds of kilometers from Lupe's desert, had revealed to her that he had quietly and repeatedly executed workers who he firmly believed had somehow, though unknown means, been subjected to Lupe's deep-level conditioning and were effecting her will, rather than his.

We should have killed her, too, Sarah thought sometimes. Not just Robotnik. But they couldn't have known back then just how deeply human had pressed his template into the wolf.

And more importantly for present purposes, she thought she had seen more than her fellow nobles of what hid within the wolf. The murder of a Lady of the Empire was a thought very far beyond those that the Empress's creatures were allowed to have.

It was not one that Miles was going to easily tolerate: "Help?" he asked sharply. "You want help with a Robian Lady?"

Sarah took the plunge. "I don't think our Empress can control her anymore, Miles. Lupe has become a danger to the Empire—"

"You're a danger to the Empire, Sarah!" Miles shouted. "You talk about Lupe like she's become some sort of monster. She's living in her own city, conducting her own research with her own animals, and obeying every order she gets from the Egg. You're the one that's been spreading sedition into everyone else's cities. Collaring scientists and coddling workers. Sailing to Angel Island."

She could have prepared her inorganic systems to stifle any biological indicators of surprise. But she hadn't.

"Do you think I can't tell what's going on when you disappear from the imperial net for a week?" Miles laughed nervously, tails propelloring back and forth. "Do you think those untamed fish-eaters can keep their mouths shut? Everybody knows, Sarah! Everybody knows you've been conspiring with enemies of the Empire!"

Sarah looked up at him silently, half-panting like a nervous schoolgirl. Miles shook his head, rubbed his snout in frustration.

He had come here to talk her down, she realized. Not to listen to a plea for help, but to warn, cajole and threaten. Miles thought she needed saving.

Maybe she did.

Sally had braced herself for more beatings, isolation, torture.

Instead her head was shaved down to the brown fur and she was put in a simple black uniform. "There you are, Sarah," Amanda said. "Ready to put your management skills to good use."

"That's not my name," Sally said. "On my birth certificate, my parents—"

"Your name is Sarah," the Empress corrected her. "And my title is 'Empress.'"

Sally became the chief of Amanda's personal servants, the slaves that cleaned her rooms, cooked her food, welcomed her guests. For several hours most days she stood beside the Empress's throne, responding to each command with a simple "Yes, Empress." Sarah, water. Sarah, take their jackets. Sarah, I will dine tonight with Lords Alain and Miles.

Miles seemed to seek out occasions to visit the Egg. He liked to address her as "servant."

In her dreams, Sonic felt so, so sorry for her.

The work did not help anyone, and did not hurt anyone; there was no great reason to resist. The work-animals Amanda picked as fit for an Empress were not only meek, but deeply loyal, rescued as they had been from factory work. There was no chance of conspiracy, and no opportunity for sabotage.

At night she slept in small chambers by herself, with a mirror in which she could see the squirrel slave looking back at her, and a computer terminal on which she could read what was the news, now, propaganda for soldiers, accounts of major promotions, redeployments, and victories in the forest and in the west. These last were accompanied by pictures: burnt corpses posed in a row on the baked ground. Prisoners under guard, soaked by rain, mangy and bareskinned, their ribs showing through their chests. Husbands and wives together, sometimes holding children. Sometimes the children appeared to be dead.

There was no mention of Antoine and Bunnie. The Empress might be hiding them from her, or from everyone. Or they might be dead.

It didn't matter, for her. She'd never see them again.

After a few weeks, Sally wondered whether she was still in the prisoner-cocoon, dreaming. After two years, Sarah wondered whether everything before had been a dream—the palace, the forest.

"Do you know what day it is today?" the Empress said to her one morning from the side of her bed, when Sarah was attending her in her chambers.

Sarah did not break from at-ease posture. "No, Empress."

"It is my birthday." She smiled. "Twelve years from the day I first emerged from the tank."

"Happy birthday, Empress," Sarah replied without kindness or a hint of irony. "I apologize; I have no gift."

"None but my warriors have things to offer that are not already mine." Amanda stood, rolled her shoulders. "I'm letting you know because you have special duties today. You will bake me a cake."

"Yes, Empress. What flavor would you prefer, and how many shall it serve?"

"The ingredients are already assembled. But I have some special tools for you to make it with, in the kitchen. Fresh from the forest." Sarah did not resist as the Empress walked behind her, grabbed her clasped hands and bound them with a plastic tie. "And Sarah?"

"Yes, Empress?"

"If the cake is not to my liking, I will have your all your tools shot."

Sarah ground her teeth to stop from growling. "Yes, Empress."

"They don't know that," Amanda added. "If you warn them, I will have them all shot."

"You sick bitch," she hissed.

"Language, Sarah. Off you go."

The kitchen was spotless, cleaned carefully by slaves the night before. The five captured insurgents had not even been washed, were still filthy fur and bones and muddy clothes. And when they saw her face, their mouths dropped open. "Your Majesty!—"

"That is not my title," she interrupted them. "You will address me as 'minder.' You are here to bake a cake."

Slowly, heartbreakingly, they got the idea, followed her orders. Except for a big-shouldered badgeress half a decimeter taller than Sally, who kept whispering about poisons, loud enough even for the microphones in the hall to pick it up.

Sarah asked her to come with her into the walk-in pantry. Inside, the badger whispered excitedly. "Majesty—"

Sarah braced herself and slammed her forehead into the badger's snout, right between her eyes.

She stumbled back, clutching her face. "Majesty—"

"Shut up," Sarah growled. "While you are here in this kitchen, you will obey the Empress. You will obey me."

"Majesty." Tears of pain filing her eyes.

"I do not care what you do once you leave. Kick and squeal and buck all you like once you are in someone else's hands. But in this kitchen you belong to the Empress, and the Empress will not tolerate anything less than obedience. Is. That. Clear."

"Yes," the badger whimpered.

"Yes, minder."

"Yes, minder."

The cake was simple triple-chocolate, with a single candle. The Empress gently extinguished the flame, smelled the icing. "Mmm. You have done well, Sarah."

"Thank you, Empress," Sarah droned, her bound arms hanging limp behind her back. Exhausted. She'd saved five lives, but she didn't feel good. She felt dead.

Amanda cut a moderately-sized piece, set it aside on a plate. "For your tools. I'll ask you to cut it into five slices, that's delicate work." Then she cut another.

The rulers get almost all. The workers get next to nothing. But not nothing. Better than a sharp stick in the eye. Better than watching your child eat dirt, trying not to feel so hungry before she died.

The second piece Amanda set on a second plate, which she held on her lap. "This piece is for you," she said.

Sarah understood the lesson. She hung her head and sobbed.

"Kneel."

Sarah knelt before her. This was crueler than pain. To bind her this way, to bind the whole world until the only way Sarah could show another creature kindness was to help it submit more dexterously to its chains. It was the only way she would ever do anything worthwhile again. Maybe she could soften the Empress's orders; maybe she could—maybe—

Amanda let her cry, let the despair extinguish itself, as it had to. When Sarah was quiet enough, she quietly commanded the squirrel to lift her head and open her mouth. Sarah obeyed, and the skunkbot forked the first bite of cake onto her tongue.

That night Sarah stood before trivid cameras and spoke haltingly, unprepared, telling any of her people with working receivers that she had been their queen but that she was not anymore, she was only a squirrel servant of the almighty Robian Empress Amanda, and that she had no claim to their loyalty, that she knew nothing of the world but what the Empress wished her to know, that she was certain of nothing. That their suffering rent her heart. That if they submitted to the Empire, they would probably receive food and shelter. That their children would live to see . . . something.

"I don't know if it will be better than dying," was the last thing she said before Amanda cut the cameras. "I'll do what I can. I'll try to make it better."

In her bed, in the darkness, the shift to dream was slow and gradual. The heat in her ears slowly became his anger, the crashing of her pulse his shouting. She yelled back that fighting to the death was easy once you were already dead.

I did it when I was alive, once.

She won't let me die—

Yeah, and she's the boss of Sally Acorn, apparently.

I'll make this right, Sonic. I promise—

Sarah woke with Amanda already in her room, looking down at her. In her left hand she held the steel links of a collar, Sarah's collar.

"All my Lords and Ladies gave me presents yesterday," she said, "but none so lovely as the Great Forest."

"If my Empress wants me to stop my diplomacy, she can ask me," Sarah said firmly.

"The word is 'treason,' Sarah."

"If my Empress doesn't like anything about me, Miles, you know all she has to do reach into me and change me. I can never fight her. We're both her creatures."

"She won't lift a finger to stop you," Miles said, disgusted. "You know she won't. She dotes on you."

"I love her, too."

"Don't say that."

"What else can I say, Miles? I love my Empress. I love this planet. I love you. I don't want to see . . . whatever Lupe's become grab you all and—"

"Do I look eighteen? I am four hundred years old!" Miles shouted. "I am not your little kit, and you are not my . . . ."

The fox couldn't choke out whatever words came next. He sat limply on the couch.

"Look," he sighed. "Forget that. Forget all of this. Don't sweet-talk me. Don't tell me how you have to betray our Empress because Lupe scares you. You brought me here to ask my favor. Just get it over with. Tell me what it is you want me to do for you."

Miles outclassed her by far, so she called up a text file she had previously written, read aloud from it. "I want a thrust technology capable of accelerating a macroscopic mass to a significant fraction of the speed of light. To the best of my physics, there is no possibility of a working FTL, but I'll take that too."

"No," Miles said, shaking his head with exasperation. "No. I'm not going to do that for you, Sarah, because it's treason. Even if you were right about Lupe, it wouldn't help. It wouldn't matter how fast you could send warheads her, or even whether she sees them coming. If she's cracked the structure of the brain, really become a fully self-transparent state-machine that can run on any system, then she already has backups of herself. It would be the most fundamental change in strategic theory since—"

The fox blinked, suddenly seeming to trip over one of his own thoughts. It gave Sarah time to realize that he did think she might be right.

He sighed: "I mean, yes, an FTL drive would help, but only because it's a time machine, which is the deep-level reason why there is no such thing as an FTL drive. And even if there were, you'd probably only be creating an alternate timestream where you'd hope to save a different version of the Empire, and once you get to alternate universes, why bother?"

"Forget that."

"Yeah," Miles agreed. "So throw away closed timelike curves, and all you're doing with any of this tech is broadening the light cones on your weapons. That doesn't—"

The fox stopped, stared. Sarah's cheeks were swollen with suppressed laughter.

"I love listening to you talk about physics," she grinned. "I'm sorry. It's just so plain how much you enjoy it."

The mirth was lost on Miles. "I know it, Sarah! I've had centuries to study. The best physicist on the planet at this time is either me, my lioness Kira, or Lupe. If there were a way to stop a runaway AI-fuelled singularity, I would have thought of it."

"Miles—"

"Sarah, what do you think you're going to do?" he asked. "What have you ever known how to do except coddle your workers? You've spent centuries studying biology, and now you think you could take on a computer that would be at least as smart as either of us and probably getting smarter at an exponential rate. Biology. What are you thinking? Go and visit some submarines, make a universal plant, get me to build you a—"

Miles's mouth dropped, and Sarah knew that the idea had opened up for him.

". . . stardrive . . . ." he breathed.

The squirrel's grinned broadened. About time. He was the smartest man in the world. The smartest fox, at the very least.

"You're not going to fight Lupe at all," Miles said.

"I didn't say that," Sarah replied.

The fox gripped the couch cushions, digging in his nails as though he was afraid of floating away. "You're going to run."

Pierre, Lord Corukas had invented the high-effectiveness sleep agents, and weaponized them. But it was Sarah, under his supervision, that had pushed them to their strategic limits.

Eight hours ago, a late summer fog had fallen on the city of Winstone, cascading in long swirls from artillery canisters lobbed into the city from the south and from fast-moving jet fighters. The rebel soldiers that had been quick enough to get their gas masks on had lasted fifteen minutes, were able to put up desultory resistance as her tech infantry moved into the city, unbreathing assaultbots and mobian servants in closed-circuit breathing apparatus. Most of the captured slaves had simply lost consciousness where they were, on the street behind sandbags and ruined cars or in sniper's nests. The work of her troops in taking the city was mostly in collecting and processing the sleeping mobians, and in burning plasma holes through the skulls of the humans.

The only battle had taken place in the lobby of one of the downtown skyscrapers, where a few squads of mobian irregulars had been worried about the possibility of increased use of gas bombardment, and had rigged connections between their filter-masks and heavy tanks of compressed air, one for each two soldiers. Their fight was hopeless, tied down in such a way, but they had been determined to take as many imperial bots as they could with them, and they had made as good a showing for themselves as they could before Sarah arrived in person and, apparently the only straight-thinking person in the entire attack division, directed her bots to melt the tanks keeping them awake.

Only one had died. The rest now waited on their knees, arms limp, the filter-canisters in their masks replaced with slow-release docilizing agent. Their eyes sometimes tracked Sarah as she walked the line of them, more often lost focus as the gas drew their thoughts inward in helpless spirals, always orbiting, she knew, the same thought: my life is over.

Sarah was happy for them. Their lives weren't over. Their lives were about to begin. The city had prepared for its destruction, but she'd captured it almost without a shot, well over ninety percent of the rebels taken prisoner, a negligible number of civilian workers lost, and the infrastructure intact. They were all hers now, hers and her Empress's, and most of them Amanda would let her keep for herself, to do with as she liked, within bounds. It was something better than they could ever have hoped for.

I bet they could hope for a whole lot, Sal—

Then she stopped listening to Sonic's distant, dead voice, because her Empress had arrived at the site of the battle. Sarah drew herself to a salute beside Lord Pierre, fixing her eyes forward, emptying her mind and listening to the crunch of Amanda's feet on the shattered glass of the lobby windows.

Amanda walked before her, and Sarah expected to be set at ease for debriefing, but it did not happen. She kept still as her Empress continued to circle her.

"Lord Pierre, has my squirrel acquitted herself well?"

"Quite well, my Empress. Her tactical decisions in seizing this building involved some risk that I wouldn't have taken."

"And that risk won me these animals before me?"

"Yes, Empress."

Fingers scratched behind her ears, and Sarah already knew what her Empress was going to say. Her body trembled in anticipation. And then for a brief moment she had a muted thought that was too isolated from somatic sensation to be called a fear: maybe giving herself to hypnotic conditioning had been wrong. She didn't know if the loyalty training had left her enough of herself.

But her Empress had demanded that submission, before she would let her continue to rise and conquer a city. And Sarah realized, the thought floating detached above the warmth she felt toward Amanda, that she could never know if it she'd had another choice, and no longer had the ability to judge whether she'd made a mistake. If her conditional surrender to her Empress had become a total conquest, her Empress would deprive her of the power to recognize her defeat.

"I like what I have made of this squirrel," Amanda said. "I think I will make something better of her still."

"If you say so, my Empress."

"Hold the city for me, Pierre. Lady Sarah will take possession of it, once I have created her."

The Empress rubbed her bare palm against the squirrel's left arm. Sarah stifled a mewl of joy, still holding her salute.

Then Amanda turned and strode back toward the street. "Heel, squirrel."

"Yes, my Empress," Sarah said, swiveling to follow as her thoughts drained away and her focus narrowed automatically to the striped skunk tail.

She remained in trance until the tank closed above her; it was the last clear memory that survived from her pre-augmented mind.

"She won't let you run," Miles said. He was leaning forward, no longer trying to talk her out of anything, genuinely thinking. "It won't, if it's a singularity. It'll move against you before you can just pack up and—"

"I'm not going to run," Sarah interrupted. "I'm going to stay and fight. And while I do, my people and the humans will put as much distance behind them as they can."

"You can't be serious."

She shrugged. "It worked well enough four hundred years ago."

"They had islands to go to—"

"Four light-years to Epsilon Vidavin, Miles. Comet water and asteroid metals once they get there. Can you get our people across it in fifty years? Twenty?"

"They had a sea to hide under, and islands to hold them up, Sarah. Out in the vacuum there won't be anywhere to hide. Radiation will cook them. A single good knock with a kinetic-kill warhead will knock the air out of their lungs. They won't be able to make it if you don't hold here."

"They'll have a hard time," she agreed. "The islanders won't take a collar, not even if the world is ending. They've made that clear. But they've got a knack for living in closed systems that we've never learned. Surviving the journey will require getting discipline from them, and it'll only be harder getting imperial robians and islanders to work together. Only a great leader will be able to bring it out of them. Someone very firm, very wise, who can win their trust. Of the Empire, but bigger than it."

For the first time since he had accused Sarah of treason, the fox looked afraid. He slapped both of his tails against the cushions, opened his mouth.

"Don't even try to tell me you can't do it, Tails," she said.

Rituals were important.

Every five years, the aristocracy of the Empire would gather at the Egg, the place of birth and life. They would gather at the feet of the ruler, kneel, bow their heads, and open their minds, displaying their submission to the Empress's will.

Sarah knew what it felt like to have her Empress in her mind, but this time she felt the push of the other's consciousness into hers with a nervous rush, a guilty desire to push back that she could do nothing to effect. Kneeling with eyes closed, her many augmentations closed to her and her brain small and alone, she knew that Amanda had of course sensed her reluctance. But her Empress said nothing. Merely welcomed her children home, looked forward fondly to speaking with them of their cities and projects at greater length.

It was a day later, while Sarah stood on one of the high balconies overlooking the black city and the swampy lowlands about it, foggy near the river in the early morning, that her Empress stole upon her unaware, something of which only she was capable. Her bare palm rested on the fur of her shoulder. "Sarah."

"My Empress," she croaked after a sudden startle. Feeling her ears start to burn hot.

"Not the view you're used to," Amanda said. She had visited Winstone and knew Sarah's preference for brighter facades, roof gardens, and long views of mountain and plain through her towers.

"No," she agreed. "But it is still very beautiful."

"The seed-strains you've brought are an interesting choice," Amanda continued, stepping next to her, resting her armored forearms on the railing and taking in the same panorama. At reunions, nobles were expected to bring the Empress a gift from their five years of work. This time, Sarah had brought her genetically engineered, very low impact strains of tomatoes, corn and several varieties of wet-weather spices that would grow well in the central lowlands, things that could replace some of the massive soybean farms without too much loss of production or damage to the soil. "I might have thought you'd bring me one of the paintings in the style your workers seem to have found."

It had grown out of architectural drafting, and normally Sarah would be keen to discuss the nascent worker-culture that was beginning to germinate in Winstone. But not now. "I thought—I decided for something more practical."

"I haven't been having difficulty feeding my city."

"No, my Empress. But it'll let you easily put a bit more variety into the workers' diet."

"Yes."

"If you want," Sarah added stupidly, hunching her shoulders.

"If I want," Amanda agreed with a nod. "I may not give them a weekly day without tasks, though."

"No, my Empress," Sarah said, unable to keep her ears from splaying. "Of course not." She'd known that she would have to explain herself. Many workers were freed from their normal tasks on days of special occasions—long ago, to celebrate victories, now their anniversaries—and everyone, following Miles's lead, had given their scientists days away from their labs in the hope that a mind that lay fallow would be more fertile. But her institution of regular rest-days for workers was unprecedented. And as transport workers carried the news with them to their counterparts in other cities, well, the results should have been obvious to her in advance.

"Henri and Marcel are a little upset," Amanda explained unnecessarily. The Lords of nearby High Demon and Grand Crossing, who had not instituted the same policy, and did not wish to. "They've asked me to have words with you. Lupe has made a point of siding with them. She seems quite disturbed by your decision."

"I . . . ." She swallowed, turning her gaze down to the broad slope of the Egg beneath them, studded with windows and docks for transport pods. "I don't need my animals to work any harder than that, my Empress. It means a lot to them, to give them a day without labor. It lets them think. It doesn't harm anyone."

"Except for Henri and Marcel. And others, should you take into your mind to arm your workers." The Empress took a deep breath of the cool breeze. "I seem to recall you doing that, once."

"Tell me to stop, and I will, my Empress." It was not petulant; it was as close to begging as a warrior noble could come without shaming herself. "I will never disobey you."

Amanda sighed, ruminating. "It's too bad that Sonic didn't live," she said.

The conversational turn of topic was sharp enough that for a moment Sarah suspected the rotational force would throw her over the railing and tumbling down to her death. "What?"

"Nothing. A fantasy. There can only be one ruler. Do you know how tiring it is, keeping all of you in line? Twelve noblemen cyborgs pulling at the leash was more than enough. But it's you and Miles who always tug hardest."

"I'm sorry, my Empress," Sarah whispered.

"My robots all have their strengths and weaknesses," Amanda said. "Your strengths are your cleverness and strategic instincts, and your great weakness is your love for your workers. It was the only way I could tame you." Sarah felt the Empress's fingers, scratching the back of her neck. "I won't deny it to you, now that you're mine. Give them their rest, my squirrel. I'll think of some way to break the news to the others gently."

"Thank you," Sarah whispered. Tears of in her eyes. Gratitude. Knowledge that if her Empress had seen fit to command her otherwise, there was nothing in her that could have resisted. Realization that she had not thought of Sonic in over a century. "Thank you, my Empress."

"Their pictures are nice, too," Amanda added.

Her Empress left her soon, but Sarah remained on the balcony a long time with her thoughts. They brightened as they day did, the sun boiling away the fog until the black towers sparkled at their windows and corners. Everything was going to be okay. She turned and found Lupe standing not two decimeters behind her.

Instinctively, Sarah's fingers grabbed tight to the balcony handrail.

"Sarah," Lupe said, looking at her with artificial eyes that lacked an iris or pupil, but were not sightless. "I hope I haven't disturbed you."

Lupe's appearance always disturbed Sarah. She knew that she hadn't always thought her Empress beautiful, but she had come to; her monochrome carapace had a lovely simplicity to it, and it seemed to make the rare places where organic flesh showed appear more soft. Set off against the smooth armor of Amanda's scalp, her ears were even more expressive.

The other side of that paradox was the Lady Terscala, who had surgically removed all of her limbs and attached robotic replacements of steel and composite to her trunk. That was not unheard of, among augmented robians. What was very unusual was to take the discarded skin, your own gray fur and wear it as a decorative, tanned hide around the arms and legs. The armwarmers—Lupe's arms did not feel discomfort in cold, but there was no better name for the things—cut off at the wrists, where for dexterity's sake fur gave way to black steel hands and fingers.

The sight made Sarah queasy. It made Lupe look like a costume. A wolf suit, with something inside. "Lupe," she managed.

Lupe smiled perfectly, the scar she used to carry on her cheek long since erased. "My apologies," she said unctuously. Sarah remembered how the wolf had sounded long before, when Sally Acorn had fought to become Queen; hard and abrasive. "I just wanted to make sure you know that I bear you no hard feelings over my Empress's decision to permit you to let your workers fall into disuse."

How could she have found out, Sarah wondered, which was undoubtedly what she was supposed to wonder. ". . . . Thank you, Lupe. That means much to me. I don't mean to interfere with the discipline of anyone's workers."

"Have no fear, Sarah. You can't disturb my workers' discipline. No one can. And if your neighbors have any problems, Sarah, well. All they have to do is ask." The wolf's smile vanished. "I'd be more than happy to share my methods with them. Perhaps even Henri will change his tune."

Sarah said nothing.

Lupe turned her snout slightly, looking at the squirrel's fingers tightening on the rail. She smiled again. "Be safe, Sarah," she urged, and then turned back into the Egg.

She'd admitted it. Not openly, in a way that could be proved to her Empress or to others, but Lupe was trying to infiltrate minds that did not belong to her. That should not belong to her. And she wanted Sarah to stop letting her workers grow stronger and smarter.

Henri's executions had not disturbed her. But Sarah's new policy did.

Sarah had wanted to give her workers a six-day week, but it was then that she knew that she had to.

It was only after the fox gasped and closed his eyes that Sarah realized that she had used his old nickname. She hadn't meant to. It had just slipped out, in spite of hundreds of years of practice learning to use his actual name. It was just that when she thought of him guiding her people to the stars, she thought of him as more than Lord Fortune. Lord Fortune was the creature he constrained himself to show the world, out of love for his dead Lady Renee, or out of shame at that love. Her people needed the smart, fearless kit she prayed he still hid in his heart.

The fox sat there, silent, facefur wrinkled, the wince pulling his upper lip and showing the tips of his canines.

"I won't," he said finally, shaking his head. "I'm not a coward. I won't leave you and my Empress here to die."

"Amanda can go if she wants, though I suspect she won't want to. And who says I'm going to die?"

"Lupe."

"I'm not going to leave," she said firmly. "I love my people, but I love this planet. I love the way it smells. I love the way the dirt feels. I could never pull out my roots."

"And what about me?" the fox asked.

"You left the atmosphere today just coming over to say hello."

The fox opened his mouth, but no sound came out.

"I always knew how you'd chase Sonic in the woods," Sally said. "Make him prouder than I have. Show him how Tails does speed."

Kain Blackwood 2012

## \*Chapter 11\*: Near Range Comet Belt, 12 Nivose 3757

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**Near Range Comet Belt, 12 Nivose 3757**

Once again, things were moving fast. Tails and his wingmen—their interceptors were not designed for atmospheric flight, and had struts for maneuvering thrusters rather than wings, but the name persisted—were on a wide defensive patrol, at a relative velocity to the fleet of five kilometers per second.

But to the naked eye, it didn't look like anything was moving at all. NRCBO 13741, a lopsided 160 kilometer ball of methane and water ice, was a smudge of the same gray as the hairs that were beginning to show on Tails's snout, a smudge that had moved about a centimeter in the shockglass of the Tornado's cockpit in fifteen minutes of continuous flight. At fifty astronomical units, the sun was just another jewel in the starfield, a little brighter than most, a little less intense than some. Without checking the maps or performing parallax observations the only thing that gave it away was an invisible but loud little planet, chattering and squealing away in a close, warm orbit around it.

Orient parabolic reflector-antennae to it and the EM spectrum was positively lousy with signal: ionosphere-distorted digital video files, mostly islander trans-oceanic broadcasts of the latest news from the continent; every variety of frightened, crazed audio from refugees stuck in terrestrial orbit, sent out in weak signals from oxygen-depleted craft, prophesying the end and demanding devotion to the gods, begging for a lift to the already-deserted asteroid shipyard. But most frequent were bursts of machine code.

Anticipating this, Tails had ensured that every communications system in the fleet was heavily isolated from intrafleet systems, every arriving message routed through several aggressive firewalls, frequently updated by computer scientists and logicians from Fortune and South Island, that ensured most of the incoming signals were never seen by sentient eyes or even a particularly smart computer. Particularly the machine code. Sometimes, when he was feeling particularly angry, or nervous, or frustrated, Tails would extract a portion of the binary signal and examine it with his naked eye.

There was no safe way to be sure, of course, but Tails was confident that whatever had grown out of Lupe was seeding the far reaches of the solar system with aggressive malcode, looking for them.

In the midst of this garbage the prearranged prefixes of Sally's transmissions would hit their antennas like bottles tumbling in on a beach. The eight hour light delay meant that even as Tails read them, he was already worrying that the information was outdated. That the world was already gone.

The Empire had disintegrated without a shot. For decades the war over Sally and Tails's asteroid shipyards had been fought with words, subterfuge, subliminal conditioning. Lupe had kept to the ground, focused on her neighbors and Amanda, holding her thoughts deep in caverns beneath the desert. It was only when the first of the generation-ships had broke orbit to trek to the guarded rendezvous point on the far fringes of the solar system, beyond the reach of the Empire's terrestrial monitoring, that it realized it had underestimated them. The old wolf Robian had strode into the throne room of the Egg and delivered an ultimatum, demanding that Amanda order a stop to the construction and burn the shipyards, Fortune and Winstone at the first sign of disobedience.

Amanda had broken the wolf's body, crushed its braincase. Deep beneath the desert, what Lupe had become shed both the flesh in which it had germinated and the pretense of obedience.

Sally notified the fleet of each subsequent disaster. It has control of the continent east of Robotropolis, all the way to Boulder Bay. It may have developed an optic nerve hack that can enslave unaugmented mobians at a glance. It has a machine that burns flesh to steel at the molecular level, making true robots of mobians and humans.

It's building a fleet of tiny vessels in the desert, and they probably carry nuclear city-busters.

Two days ago, when a damaged vessel in high orbit had finally managed to fire its engines and put on thrust to the asteroid shipyards, it had blown the craft from the sky with a surface-to-orbit railgun. But there was no news of launches directed outward along the elliptic, and Tails's patrols had yet to locate any drones or other unfriendly craft in their near vicinity.

When his patrol was ended, he and his team returned to the fleet, leaving their ships in the control of the inorganic portions of their minds as the massive delta-vee to match the fleet's relative velocity starved their brains of oxygen. Tails's organic mind regained consciousness just in time to guide the Tornado away from Rotor's massive fusion rockets, down beneath its hull. Each of the fleet's five vessels were modeled in part on the Egg, but slightly more tapered to be more aerodynamic, designed to take the pressure that the interstellar near-vacuum would begin to inflict on the hull at relativistic velocities. Inside each of the five ships were farms for plants that had not existed prior to the construction of the ships, algal oxygen plants, libraries genetic and otherwise, workshops, laboratories, and over fifty thousand mobians and humans. Only about a tenth of those were augmented by Charles Hedgehog's nanites, but another five percent were currently in augmentation or recovery from the process; finishing the entire population would take years.

Tails was about to hail fleet traffic control and request permission to dock with Renee, when Sally's prefix reached the Tornado's antenna. He pulled up the text file in his mind's eye, instinctively pushing the controls back to his subconscious autopilot.

Eight hours ago and fifty astronomical units away, the city-busters were in the air.

Tails knew the nightmare, because it was dictated by strategy and physics. Sally and Amanda's kinetic-kill drones and gamma-ray lasers were—had been—screaming up from the crust and down from orbit, boiling the atmosphere. The machine was bursting its warheads in the air to soften the Empire's robots with EMPs, detonating them in the ocean trenches to trigger earthquakes beneath the human seabases, deluge their cities in tsunamis that couldn't be stopped by any possible technology. The energies were far too massive and terrible to pretend that warriors, bravery, fierceness were of any use.

Seconds later fleet control was hailing Tails, relaying the first message, but he was already receiving a second, very short.

Don't wait, Sally said—had said. Go now.

It would take weeks before they were travelling fast enough to kill the primary fusion rockets and engage the ramjet engines. If people survived, the fleet might still be able to return and rescue them before the long-abused planet's life-support gave out.

But it was with a terrible, final feeling that Tails ordered Bunnie to cut its lines to the water-mines on what was left of NRCBO 32471. He requested fleet control's permission, immediately given, to reroute and dock with the flagship.

Four light-years from their home system to Epsilon Vidavin, Tails thought, the insanity of a phrase like home system and the comprehensibility of the distance of four light-years telling him that for all the difference between them and the monstrosity burning their planet behind them, they themselves weren't truly human or mobian, not anymore. They were living in a totally artificial environment, and over fifty years there was no telling what they would do to it, and to themselves. And then, at Epsilon Vidavin, and then the next system, the next . . . .

Realizing he was growing dizzy, the fox carefully reset his horizon even with that of Antoine and the flagship, plotted his approach path to the docking bay.

There was one thing he could be reasonably sure of: nothing could exceed the speed of light. Whatever was on these ships, whatever followed them, as long as they kept moving, they could be free.

Free of anything but each other, Tails thought as the docking bay's mag-clamps seized the Tornado's struts and pulled him into position on the landing deck. And themselves.

The thrusters flared to life, building to one terrestrial gravity. At the head of the fleet, Sonic slowly began to put on speed.

Kain Blackwood 2012

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Led Zeppelin, "Immigrant Song"

We come from the land of the ice and snow from the midnight sun where the hot springs flow

Hammer of the gods

Will drive our ships to new lands

To fight the horde, singing and crying

Valhalla, I am coming

Over sea with threshing oar

Our only goal will be the Western shore

We come from the land of the ice and snow from the midnight sun where the hot springs flow

How soft your fields so green

Can whisper tales of gore

Of how we come in times of war

We are your overlords

Over sea with threshing oar

Our only goal will be the Western shore

So now you'd better stop

And rebuild all your ruins

For peace and trust can win the day

Despite of all your losing