# Search and Destroy

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**Summary:** Pt. 3 of Persona non Grata. Queen Sarah Acorn II and Dr. Ivo Robotnik fight a civil war for the heart of Mobius and a fox, while on the contours of the fight a street-walking hedgehog with a heart full of napalm looks for someone to save his soul.

## \*Chapter 1\*: Hochteufel, Lachels, 31 Brumaire 3234

Author's Note. This is the second part of a 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 and by reading part one, Gardenia, and part two, Burning Beard. 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

(a rounded image of Sonic Hedgehog rolled into an impervious razor ball, face contorted in vicious joy, pistols in both hands, bordered by a snake desperately seeking to bite its own tail)

Part Two: Burning Beard

(Sally Acorn struggles to carry ball in heavy gloves; a purple stole knotted about her neck; she is turned away to face a bank of trivid cameras, lights casting her in silhouette, a single eye looking back over her shoulder; the image is bordered in a rectangular frame of ornate swords in their scabbards)

Part Three: Search and Destroy

(Tails Prower sits, naked, on a barren white floor, back to the viewer. Tufts of winterfur litter the floor about him and cling to his muscled shoulders, his back, his twin tails spread limply on the floor to either side of him. His arms are held tightly before himself, out of the viewer's sight, as if protecting something. His head is turned and slightly lowered; only one yellow eye stares at the viewer, wide and bright.)

(1) Hochteufel, Lachels, 31 Brumaire 3234. Subject Sonic Hedgehog receives an offer he can't refuse.

(2) Frake's Point, Ostian, 3 Firmaire 3234. Subjects Antoine D'Coolette and Thomas Posniak say a lot about a little.

(3) Frake's Point, Ostian, 20 Firmaire 3234. Subjects Sonic Hedgehog and Snively Kolensky have a discussion.

(4) Royal Court-in-Exile, Fortune Station, 2 Pluvoise 3235. Subject Sally Acorn rules others and herself.

(5) Nouvelle Lit Administrative District, 11 Prairial 3235. Subjects Sonic Hedgehog and Amanda Polgato rest and recuperate.

(6) Hochteufel, Lachels, 8 Messidor 3235. Subjects Joshua Dursine and Kima Griggs have an exciting weekend trip.

(7) Nouvelle Lit Administrative District, 19 Messidor 3235. Subjects Sonic Hedgehog and Amanda Polgato have an antenna-to-antenna.

(8) Royal Palace, Mobotropolis, 25 Fructidor 3235. Subjects Sally Acorn and Antoine D'Coolette dine and consort.

(9) Pocari Administrative District, 18 Vendemaire 3235. Subjects Sonic Hedgehog and Amanda Polgato visit an old workshop of Subject Charles Hedgehog.

(10) Mobotropolis, 3 Brumaire 3235. Subject May Rabbit traffics in beauty.

(11) Boulder City, 4 Brumaire 3235. Subjects Sonic Hedgehog and Amanda Polgato research and conduct experiments.

(12) Boulder City, 25 Nivose 3235. Subjects Molly Lotor and Myron Catalano work on projects of some importance.

(13) Boulder City, 13 Pluvoise 3236. Subjects Sonic Hedgehog, Amanda Polgato and Snively Kolensky rob a memory bank.

(14) Winstone, 15 Pluvoise 3236. Subjects Joshua and Kima Dursine have a party, Subjects Renee Donlevy, Thomas Posniak and Molly Lotor settle who is afraid.

(15) Carbon Flats, 16 Pluvoise 3235. Subject Sonic Hedgehog cares for a sick skunkbot, Subject Sally Acorn plans for contingencies, Subject Amanda Polgato sits too close to the television.

(16) Carbon Flats, 1 Ventose 3236. Subjects Sonic Hedgehog and Amanda Polgato share food.

(17) Dead River Administrative District, 5 Ventose 3236. Subject Amanda Polgato makes new friends, Subject Sonic Hedgehog gets a new job.

(18) Mobotropolis, 20 Germinal 3236. Subjects Sally Acorn and Snively Kolensky revisit old decisions, Subject Amanda Polgato waits.

(19) Terscala, 13 Messidor 3236. Subjects Renee Donlevy and Thomas Posniak experience major changes in employment status.

(20) Port Lyons, 4 Thermidor 3236. Subject Sonic Hedgehog discovers his heritage; Subjects Sally Acorn and Antoine D'Coolette make an unpleasant conquest.

(21) Terscala, 13 Ventose 3237. Subject Miles Prower has a big day.

(22) Mobotropolis, 30 Germinal 3237. Subjects Sally Acorn and May Rabbit have a heart to heart.

(23) Aleton, South Suburbs, 21 Prarial 3237. Subject Sonic Hedgehog has a very unpleasant reunion.

(24) Great Forest, 7 Thermidor 3237. Subjects Sonic Hedgehog and Sally Acorn consider their lives.

Part Four: Immigrant Song

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**Hochteufel, Lachels, 31 Brumaire 3234**

The Parlamantstheater was a magnificent wreck. A marble façade had been ripped away from raw brick by the war—der Grossen Krieg, rather; even in a nation born out of that conflict, Lachels, "der Krieg" was becoming ambiguous as a reference to the ongoing Mobian Civil War. Inside, the plaster was falling in at the balcony, making perfect acoustics for the sonic cruelty of the garbagepunk that had ruled Lachels' largest city of Hochteufel while the Overland Empire's rule over it disintegrated, shattered by its unsuccessful war with its neighbor Mobius to the south. Decay, rage, rebellion, rebirth. There had been a beauty in it, the stark simplicity.

Now, however.

Like anything cool, the Parliament Theater had attracted the money chasing teenage money. Expanding out of punk to industrial wouldn't betray its aesthetic, really, and once you were there drill & bass was right next door. And twenty years later the booking agent for soundboard soprano Mina Mongoose had decided the diva needed a little darker, more serious edge to her next album, so there were a series of fourteen year old girls with little streaks of rainbow dyed in their fur or henna tattoos on their bare human cheeks, waiting to get in to see Mina on a triple bill with True Faith and, sweet gods, DJ Vector. On this chilly day they were staring wide eyed at a leather-clad Jerk (as fans called themselves—some kind of obscure reference to the rate of change in an acceleration vector), a human with pallid skin and eyes so intense they contemned the face around them. He stood over the bloodied, prostrate form of the squirrel he had just laid out, pulsing rather than breathing, grinning down at the "SECURITY" logo on the squirrel's black t-shirt. "Like that motherfucker!" he shouted with an unnerving, automatic flatness, as though his own mind was not processing the words. "Like that!"

PCP tranquilized mobians. It tranquilized hundreds of them every day in the flat southtown slums, refugees in the from the churning lines that bludgeoned their country in two, grinding slowly, so slowly to the east, their fearsome Queen nudging Dr. Ivo Robotnik and his "Robian" dead-enders towards the desert. The refugees found it hard to get jobs; for the past few years new arrivals found it increasingly difficult to get public assistance, but PCP was always around. And then some human would complain about a mobian failing to pass around whatever the hell that stuff was they were smoking and discover a peculiar quirk of human brain chemistry. PCP tranquilized mobians, but it gave humans the power to put a fist through a wooden plank, shattering the bones, without feeling anything. It also gave them the inclination to do so.

The tweaking maniac would not have been able to obliterate bouncers, or have been aimed at slackjawed teenyboppers, without the involvement of twenty years of war and what passed for peace, two nations, two species, and dozens of cultures. This sort of thing happened a lot. The problem was complicated.

But the solution was simple. Another black t-shirt went inside, and he came back with a hedgehog.

His quills and fur were black as the curtain behind a stage, except for a pure white tuft above his sternum and a few streaks of lurid red in his headquills. He wore almost nothing but khaki boots, a constellation of three scars in his hairless belly, and ink. On his left shoulder, a serpent locked in furious struggle with a frothing repenomamus, enclosed with the words WINNER'S CIRCLE. On his right, the crest of Winged Victory, a golden circle with three white feathers extended from either side. On his face nothing, not even a scowl beneath his red eyes.

The human had turned by then and was proclaiming some alien gospel to a semicircle of nailbiting girls. The hedgehog walked up and punched him in the back of the head. The human flinched, face unchanging, and the hedgehog punched him again in the back of the head. The girls, the men, and a good number of bystanders stared in horror as the human rocked down to his hands and knees, making a sound. The hedgehog commenced to beat his fist on the human's skull like a carpenter working a stubborn nail. The human had been on the ground for about five seconds before the resurgent squirrel, holding his t-shirt to his bleeding snout, said, "That's enough."

The hog must have heard; he was only three meters away. His breathing now matched the motion of his fist; his lips pressed tight. The first drops of blood followed his glove into the evening air—

"Shadow!" The squirrel strode quickly across the emptied sidewalk and grabbed at the hog's shoulder. "Shadow, that's enough—"

The hedgehog turned sharply, fist still cocked and jackhammer-ready, something horrible in his eyes—

And his arms shivered as it left them. He dropped the human's collar and walked back into the theater. That was the week's rent.

Inside he turned away from the long atrium and slipped through a door painted into the black wall, still bearing the tattered flyers of disintegrated bands, the paper-thin archaeology of a generation of young lives lived fast. Behind was a flight of red stairs, very old, up to the little door and the room the owners let him sleep in. Clutter all over the rough wooden floor, tiny window over which he had hung the red bedsheet, the hot plate with its wire curled beside it, his bed—

"Hey Shads!"

He drew his arm back in front of his face, fingers curled like claws in their white gloves, eyes blazing over his black fur . . . and he sagged, tiredly. "What are you doing in my room, Amy?"

"Over –sixteen show tonight, Shads," Amy Roszkowiak chirped, twirling her maintenance keyring on a finger. Around the hand's wrist was wound one of the Theater's plastic alcohol-bands, pink as her fur and the quills pressed tightly to her scalp and back. She worked the bar downstairs—got paid in cash, as the fake ID proclaiming her majority was only good enough to buy, not sell. "Nobody wants to drink soda. So I thought you and me could go out."

The older hog's quills gave a soft, brushing hiss as he bent over and pulled a warm beer from the little plastic cooler. "Oh you did," he said flatly, leaning against the wall.

Amy grinned, bouncing her entire body on the squeaking mattress as she nodded. "Natuerlich."

"And what makes you think," he asked, thumb prying the cap off the bottle to bounce by his boottoes, "that I would like to go anywhere with a sweet . . . little . . . thing—" He paused to swig a mouthful of the weak brew. "Such as yourself?"

"Because," she cocked her head coyly, "you got a sweet tooth."

"You think so."

"I know your type," Amy taunted, crossing her ankles beneath her short cherry skirt. "Every night a dozen people on that dance floor wish they were as spooky as you. What was your last girlfriend like?"

He did not blink. "She was beautiful, smart. Wanted to make the world a better place. I beat her to death."

Amy's smile got a little broader. "What's your name?"

"Shadow Hedgeho—" His snout sank, eyes narrowing around his red irises. "Put those down."

"Hmm?" Amy was tossing and catching a little beige plastic piece in her fingers. She looked at it—the case for a pair of contact lenses—and delicately placed it on the windowsill, beside the empty box of a fur-dyeing kit. "Oh," she pouted, "don't look so angry. I already knew you weren't a vampire; I've seen you in the daylight."

"Get out of my room."

"You know how many ways there are for a hard guy to make money in this city? And you just hole up here while the tolkachi muscle eats steaks down on Wirtschaftstrasse. Must be because you're so irredeemably evil."

"Get out."

"You know what this room needs? A mirror! You could stand in front of it at midnight and ask yourself: who am I? The hedgehog? Or the monster?—"

She stopped, lips frozen, as the male brought his beer against the wall in an explosion of wet glass. The short remainder of the neck glistened where it emerged from his torn glove. "You have ten seconds to leave my room. Ten. Nine. Eight."

Amy Roszkowiak would, if ever permitted to speak with a psychologist, be diagnosed with attention deficit disorder, mild dysthymia, and a tenacious attraction to dangerous men. But, although she might not know when she wasn't wanted, she knew when she really wasn't wanted. She tightened her gaze on the mess leaking down the streaked wallpaper and pushed herself delicately to her feet. Swinging her minute hips, she pulled on her loose, deep-red windbreaker and walked past him to the door. "Gee," she said. "Guess you did kill your ex."

"I lied," the hedgehog replied. "She survived. And she was a bitch."

He slammed the door behind her and the boiling crowd downstairs was muted, soft. He pulled the cooler over to his bed and lay there, breathing, thinking, and drinking. He had six beers in about an hour, but it didn't get him drunk; it got him sleepy. No amount of alcohol seemed to get him drunk, but sleepy is good, he thought, removing his lenses, then blinking his sleepy green eyes at the fading room. Sleep is very good.

Only once had a drug had its promised effect on him. Another guy who trained at Knuckles' Gym told him that if you smoked a lot of this mold, you wouldn't just get high; you would actually go to another place. That sounded good. The guy said that you'd meet people—space aliens, gods. That sounded good, too, he decided, and he bought some of it from the guy. He would meet Veronica, Vixen of Love, he decided. He would spit the filthiest words at her until tears streamed down her cheeks.

He'd held his second hit for about twenty seconds before he started crying, little spastic bursts of smoke from his nose turning his tears dry and chalk grey. Oh shit oh shit, do some more, he thought, and he put his lips to the bong and just breathed through it a while, with the lighter near the bowl burning or not, weeping into the cold little watery vase. He was sinking, the whole room around him was sinking from the second story down into the black depth of the earth, black and cold. He closed his eyes and the world spun, he pinched them and it became flat, and that frightened him. He opened them and he moaned, lost in some cold, stinging cave of cool metal and muted, dead light, walls at cruel angles, some hideous cage as big as the world. He wormed on the unfeeling floor, freezing, shivering, until he saw the tall form, standing there with him—

"Oh, fuck," he wept. "Fuck me. Fuck me." It was a god, but it wasn't Veronica to fill his spine with need and his head with blind rage. It wasn't one of his gods at all; it was one of theirs, one of the stupid gods belonging to these hairless monkeys. He had to live among them and breathe their scent and eat their weird, stinking food, and now he even had to worship their gods. It was the light-skinned guy with the glasses and the beard, their sorcerer-thief. Some ridiculously boring name for him, Gordon Freeman or something, like the god was just some guy living in a duplex down by the college. But his beard was trimmed rather than flowing, and he wasn't in his magician's robes: he looked like . . . the hedgehog shuddered, pressing his forehead to the frozen floor: he looked like fucking Amanda Polgato, the hungry botbitch, boxy armor over everything but his head.

"Fuck me." The hedgehog turned his tear-streaked face to the human: "I can't even get high without fucking up."

Freeman looked down, beady brown eyes withdrawn behind his magnifying lenses. He said nothing.

Time had lost its snap. This horrible, alien place with its cruel corners, its endless cold, this faint electrical hum that burned through his muscles every day. He was there forever. He was there for the rest of his life, beating his fists against the ground, breaking his bones, his screams lost in the endless expanse. He shouted, his throat raw, cursing the human's ugly race, spitting bloody phlegm on his boots. The human never responded, never even wrinkled his skin.

"Don't you talk?" the hedgehog screamed.

Freeman shook his head impassively. "Not normally," he said in a low baritone, heavy and hard. In the return of the endless hum after the human spoke the hedgehog heard a soft beep, a quiet, halting female voice with a gentle Corukas accent. It would have been reassuring if it weren't so obviously artificial. "Two—questions—remaining."

He wanted to be angry, but he couldn't. He couldn't feel anything but the horrible cold, the yawning emptiness. Somehow he dragged himself to his knees, his hands, looking up like some needy pet repen. "When?" he begged. "When will it get easier?"

"Never," Freeman said, resetting his glasses on his nose. "It's downhill all the way for you." Beep. "One—question—"

"Oh sweet Trixiana, I can't take it." But Trixiana wasn't here. Neither Winged Victory. His patron god was a filthy goddamned overlander. The heavens were empty. He was doomed. How much longer would he live? He was so strong, so pointlessly strong. He felt like he could live for hundreds of years. "I can't do it; I can't fucking do it; I can't." He mustered enough strength to roll himself onto his back, looked up at the human's upside-down face: "I can't do it. I won't make it. Please." Freeman didn't move. He had eternal, cruel patience. Freeman wouldn't save him. "I won't make it—"

It suddenly occurred to the hedgehog that he was right. He wouldn't make it. Someday he wouldn't amuse himself with his own ridiculous agony anymore, and then there would be nothing. He wouldn't wait hundreds of years. He wouldn't wait an hour. It might be difficult, but it would be hard to screw it up with a gun. "I won't make it," he said, suddenly quiet. "I won't make it, will I?"

The human blinked. Slowly, his mouth curled at the corners, curling down, twisting his face into a—

No, wait. It was upside down.

"You'll surprise yourself," he said. Beep.

And then the hedgehog was a shivering ball of quills in his sweat-soaked bed, crying until morning.

Negotiations to bring a temporary cease-fire in the brutal block-to-block fighting in east Mobotropolis are scheduled to begin Warday. The summit will take place in the tropical resort town of Frake's Point in the neutral nation of Ostian. Queen Sarah II publicly announced her ambassador to the talks today, revealing that "Robian" War Minister Thomas Posniak will meet with none other than her husband, King Antoine I. Both are highly regarded as political strategists and—

"Focus," Knuckles said in his twisted tropical accent, eyes narrowing as the hedgehog stopped working the heavy bag and started destroying it. "Klarer Geist, klarer Wille, klare Seele." The red-quilled echidna was an imposing figure; Ostian emigrant with a sharp snout, scarred hands, arms that clearly held enough power to kill a man. But his words had no effect. Without taking his eyes from the hedgehog he lifted a few fingers and motioned for the only other occupant of the gym, one of his younger humanstudents who wanted to see a guy who'd learned formal Ostian kickboxing, to move away. The kid'd remember the lesson well enough without catching a stray concussion. "Focus," he insisted. "See your opponent. Think of your goal—"

The hedgehog hissed, driving his right again into the growing dent in the canvas. "Fucking radio!"

A different voice. Female. Hard tone, but soft consonants. Something wrong with the mouth. —ough we speak to the enemy, the usurper, the murderer of our children, we do not forget his crimes. And we do not change his fate. For those who hurt us, Mobians will tolerate nothing less than justic—Click.

The high-schooler turned it off, but the black hedgehog was still hearing something. He ground his teeth, barked loud as he used his right, right, right, right, right—

The winch snapped and the bag landed heavily on the floor. The hedgehog leapt forward and stabbed his bootheel into the head of the bag. Into the eyes. He roared, stomping, coarse sand spilling onto the blue mat—

"That's enough!" Knuckles shouted, taking a step forward. The hedgehog drew back, raising his taped fists in front of his face—"SHADOW! LOCKERS! NOW!"

Knuckles gave him a couple minutes. He found the hedgehog hunched on one of the benches back there, arms crossed, head bowed, eyes closed. Curled into a little ball of red and black, like a frightened child. "That kid alright?" the hedgehog panted.

"Goette der Hoelles." The echidna sighed, exhaustedly. "Near to wetting himself. He's alright. You're not coming here anymore or I'll call the cops."

The little ball drew tighter. "You said learning fighting would calm me down—"

"I was wrong," Knuckles said, sitting down beside him. "It brings focus and peace for most people. It does for me. But you've got something terrible in you, Shadow. Angry. Crueler than hell." He shook his head: the echidna was not loquacious, but he'd given the hedgehog quiet chances to talk about his past, all declined. "And I known people like that too, but not anyone who wanted so bad to control it."

"What do I do?"

"I don't know. See a shrink. Go find your family, if you have one."

"It's ten in the morning. Where can I go at ten in the morning?"

Knuckles blinked, wondering if he'd heard the question right. But he knew the answer: "Somewhere else."

The bar was out of Wicked Jamie's Red Label, Amy herself was out of chocolate booze, and she'd already put in her appearance at Hochschule for the month. So when she got up in the morning she showered, brushed her teeth, said hi at her drunk mother sleeping on the couch, and picked up a couple of bags at the Kimzie Biergeschaft. The guy on the counter was new and made her pay him an extra five marks to use her fake ID. So she was a little pissed off when she unlocked the service door to the Parlamant, walked into the dark, scuffed black paint of the main stage, went behind the bar and found the hedgehog sprawled among a mulish mix of whiskey and gin empties.

"Verdammt, Shadow," she breathed, almost dropping the bags. She sniffed the air for the sour of vomit and for a horrible moment wondered if he was dead before the hedgehog moaned sleepily and turned, snapping a quill beneath his back. "Oh gods, Shadow, the owners are going to have you locked up if you do stuff like this." She pulled his sweaty arm over her shoulders and strained, trying to drag him to his feet—

The arm tugged back, and Amy was on top of him. Her cheek was pressed against his clammy face. "'m so lonely," he groaned, working his lips against her skin.

". . . you don't have to be."

It was afterwards, deep in the stink of his own bed, feeling her breath soft on the fur of his neck, that he realized it was all real. Not just the past hour; everything. It was all really happening, and it had happened to him for five years. Half a decade. It had seemed to him that he'd been living in his own mind, and maybe he had been. But he'd been living in this crappy, freezing mountain burg at the same time, too.

Holy crap, he thought. He wiggled a bit, feeling the way the mattress and the girl hugged him. It was all so real, this stuff, as inundated with his scent as anything a guy could have.

He started to take stock.

My name is Shadow Hedgehog. I'm a Mobian but I live in Hochteufel, Lachels. I used to be . . . a soldier, for Princess Sal . . . Queen Sarah II. But she banished me. Then I used to be a prizefighter but—

He stopped there for a minute, circling back. He didn't like his name. It was really pretty stupid. It'd be less embarrassing if he'd had to come up with it on the fly, but oh, he'd thought long and hard about that one, living on the streets in Winstone. He should have black fur and—

Fuck it. You can't go around changing your name whenever you feel like it. You make your bed.

Shadow snuggled closer into the cheap chemical sweetness that Amy tossed on her shoulderfur. My name is Shadow Hedgehog, I'm a Mobian citizen but I live in Hochteufel, Lachels, and I just slept with a sixteen year old girl named Amy Roszkowiak. He tried to see if the statutory rape bothered him and came to the preliminary conclusion that he didn't really have any strong feelings one way or another. Amy was crazy, of course, and kind of stupid, but there was a lot of that going around. She was also kind of cute. Kind of sweet.

You had the love of a Princess; now you're a murderer and a—

The beast in him gave up quickly. It was growing weaker, almost as tired as he always felt. Just a little tremor in his fingers, in the base of his spine, just above his tail. "Was gibts?" Amy sighed, blinking her eyes big in front of his.

"Nichts," Shadow yawned. What was the word for something that didn't matter?. . . . "Nichts ewig."

"Was denkst du daran?"

"Weiss nicht," he replied. He smiled wryly, closing his eyes. "Ich weiss ueberhaupt Nichts."

Amy giggled. "Think you mean 'gantz'. 'Gantz Nichts.' You're getting alright, though."

"Are there twokinds of Overlander?" he asked, propping himself on his elbow next to her. "I'm getting good enough to talk with most of 'em, but a few years ago when I was fighting they were always putting me up against these ugly-ass guys from these bars by the river—"

"Lakolska," Amy said. "Vorlandisch was just up in the mountains until the mountain people conquered everyone. Those guys at the docks call themselves—well, I don't remember the name. But they're all old families. You know the sound, wicz-witz-ewski-owski—"

"—owiak?"

"We came up from Mobius, way, way back; someone decided to change our handle. These guys are a different matter. They really hate the mountain people. Mobians too, but mostly the Vorburgers. Say that until everyone here speaks Lakolska again, they won't really be free."

Shadow grinned, slow and easy. "What a bunch of stiffs." He put his finger against her soft chin, traced it slowly down along her neck, towards the little valley. "Back down south there's twenty-five straight years of war, here they hurt themselves tripping over money, and they got a stick up their ass because they traded one language for another." He shuffled a little higher on his elbow as the thought really hit him, what a bunch of assholes he was living with, a whole country full of assholes: "Amy, how could a guy not know when he's got something that good?"

She just looked at him, a little smirk on her mouth. "Tell you what. I'm going to go pee. And when I come back, you're going to have a very good answer for me."

"Aw. Alright."

He lay back, brushing his quills back with his hands and folding them behind his head, as Amy stood. She threw her shoulders left and right, a lively little shimmy in her hips, running her fingers through her pink quills. "Where's the bathroom?"

"Downstairs."

She shot him a look of sharp, ludicrous disapproval over her shoulder as she pulled on her undercovers and her skirt. "Such a lifestyle!" she gasped, stuffing herself into her top.

When she turned the knob Shadow laughed. "Oh, I know the answer!" Then the door exploded.

Well, it didn't explode. There was an explosion, and the door shattered into chips and smoke, and Shadow was staring out at the smoke and the boots from under his bed, his pistol still sticky from the duct tape that had held it to the wire mesh of the frame. Amy was staring back at him. She had a cut on her neck, drooling deep red blood, and she was staring at him, pink quills pressing hard against the ground, too terrified to move. "INTERPOL!" someone shouted, and one of the black boots stepped in front of Amy. One green eye remained, and it swelled huge as she realized that she'd had him all right and all wrong. "Sie sind in Haft!"

There was a pause. More boots came in, blocking out Amy. "Fuck," someone said. "'snicht darin."

With aching slowness, Shadow got to his knees. His quills pressed one by one, slow and silently against the bedframe as he pressed his toes against the floorboards.

"This skank his girlfriend or something?"

"Scheise. She's got a pretty deep contusion on her—"

"Tear this place apart. Watch yourself; remember Grand Crossing."

As their legs moved he could see her just lying there on the floor. Her big green eyes. They weren't going to move paramedics in until he was dead or down . . . .

His toes tensed. "I'll come quietly if you take Amy t—"

"Das Bett! Schiess das—"

He went for two quick shots at a pair of left feet before he kicked. The bed sailed upright, the mattress ripped to shreds with the cops' long, uncontrolled bursts, then fell onto a pair of local-made submachineguns. Shadow somersaulted forward into a low crouch, pistol lifted next to his head, and realized he couldn't go any farther forward without actually pressing the soldiers onto Amy.

She was looking up at him, holding her life in with a gloved hand, her face a picture of pain and fear. She'd been wrong; he'd been right. He wasn't fit for a princess. He wasn't fit for anyone. The best thing he could do was disappear.

Déjà vu.

The windowglass cut into his forehead as he erupted into the freezing night. He dropped two stories and hit the ground running, breaking two of the toes on his right foot. One of the perimeter positions was quick enough not only to get off shots, but to get them off with a good lead, tearing a clean, screaming hole through his right arm. The hedgehog dropped his gun. He lost his footing in the fresh snow and skidded into the side of a prowler, bruising his femur, and he rolled with it, tumbling over the hood to land on his face. He scrambled and streaked away through a world of pain and snow and muted yellow light.

Fifteen minutes later a naked hedgehog broke into the back door of Knuckles' Gym and staggered into the locker room, bleeding, feet senseless, holding his freezing penis in both hands. He went to his own locker, praying that Knuckles hadn't cleaned it out. His padlock was still there. He rolled the dial and yanked, hissing at the pain in his arm, and it didn't open which was bullshit goddamn it because he'd put in the numbers right, he always put in the numbers right but it never opened, and he sat back on the little wooden bench that ran the length of the room. He wondered if he had left any clothes here at all, or whether the last thing he'd do for Knuckles would be robbing his other customers, and he started sobbing. They had to take care of Amy. They had to. They'd send up medics for the cops anyway and there was no reason for them not to take care of Amy. She wasn't an accomplice. She wouldn't even see him again.

A half-hour later he was lying on his back on the bench, his right arm throbbing on his chest, slowly making him lightheaded with its gentle flow. The cops would probably know to look for him here, eventually, if they knew who he was, and they apparently did. It was just a matter of sitting here for a few hours. It was boring, but there was nothing else to do. Another hour or two passed, gently drifting in and out of consciousness as the pain in his arm waxed and waned.

The hedgehog started wondering what it would be like if he died, before they got here. He considered writing a note, but he thought that everyone would get the basic idea from a splayed naked corpse. Maybe he ought to clean up. He wasn't sure if he could shower, but he broke his padlock to see if his shorts were in there.

They were there, under a white envelope.

Dearest Sonic –

We've met once, briefly, but I'm sure you'll remember the occasion if you think about it. I'm sorry to leave a message here, but I must confess it's hard to get in touch with a mobian such as yourself. Have you considered renting a PO Box?

Despite your ridiculous alias I doubt you want to downright avoid being found, seeing as it was easy enough to locate the sad clown with the empty head and thick muscles. Interpol found it more difficult, but I find it hard to blame them; they have so much on their minds. Whereas I have only one or two interests to fill my days.

I must confess that some might consider me almost obsessed.

I've been meaning to talk to you about a proposition that I suspect you'll find very interesting. Please come meet me; I'm staying at the Gasthaus Seemoewe, 13 Banhofplatz, Frake's Point, Ostian. I know you've been in the doldrums for a while, so I've taken the liberty of informing Interpol of your identity and whereabouts to see if that will get you off your lazy rodent ass.

Looking forward to speaking with you,

Snively Kolensky, Capt. Mobian Internal Security Office (Ret.)

P.S. The proposition concerns a legacy of your uncle Charles.

**Ironlock Prison, Time Unknown**

The food had given out at the beginning of the week, round about. The guards had stopped bringing even the dry oatmeal they'd poured into the prisoners' cupped palms, and everyone's belly was winched tight. The Captain, a quick, clever fox younger than most of his subordinates, barely even alive back in the good old days of the Great War, assured what was left of his SpecOps squad that this was a good sign. Robotnik wanted to feed his prisoners. He hadn't given up trying to convince Mobius that he was good for it, that the coup and the civil war had all been some terrible mistake on the part of everybody else. So, the Captian figured if the prisoners weren't being fed, that meant that Robotnik's army was collapsing. Somewhere in the world beyond the cinder blocks of their cell, Mobotropolis had been liberated. The Robians were pulling back to a last line of defense in the barren desert; Terscala and points farther east. That meant that the front would pass Ironlock, and they'd all be rescued. Their patience would finally pay off.

And about time, the Captain thought privately. Hadn't been easy. The mange was so bad among the prisoners that you could scratch yourself anywhere and you'd come away with a good tuft of fur. And for the Captain there'd been an additional privation. Specialist Helen had developed something for him, it was clear, and it shone at him in every look. But he kept telling himself that it was just one or two years in the cell, however long they'd been packed in there, breathing each other's stink. If they had each other that way he'd stop being a superior, the Captain, and his squad would fall apart; if discipline fell apart his troops would sicken and starve and die. He did his best not to think of her, spent most of his days with his arms hooked through the gaps in the bars, staring down the guards in their senseless ISO and MMA uniforms as they patrolled the hallway.

His lips drew tight at the sound of the door to the block opening. Non-feeding time. As usual every snout up and down the hall turned to watch as the guards—

They weren't guards. The one in charge was a pine marten. She stood tall, hair cut invisibly short into her brown headfur, regarding the starving prisoners in their little cages with acid blue eyes. She and two buff wolf underlings were levered into uniforms that weren't ISO, MMA, or anything the Captain had seen. Stark black with red epaulettes and trim, recently pressed, the only thing within view that wasn't cheap and disintegrating. And around the neck of the marten, weirdly, the links of some sort of tight metal necklace. Featureless, save for a little colorless brass emblem—the sideways figure eight, the infinite, the symbol of Mobius. The wolves carried submachineguns.

The marten stopped before the Captain's cell, smiled. She turned her eyes to the little hole at the shoulder of his camo jacket, where he'd torn away his namejust before going on the water plant mission—he'd had a bad feeling about the water plant mission. "Captain what?" the marten asked him in a clean alto.

He watched her eyes, keeping his mouth shut.

The marten snickered. "Obstinate fox." She lifted a finger by her head, circled it: "Turn around."

The Captain heard Helen give a defeated little groan, setting off a little shuffle of movement throughout the cell as everyone stared at their boots. Whatever, he thought, and turned. It had been a long shot, anyway, trying to hide his identity, when anyone who knew the first thing about the Queen's inner circle would know to look for—

"There you are, Miles!" the marten cried as she got a good look at Captain Prower's ID, sprouting from the base of his spine. She sounded almost playful. Creepy. Tails had disliked being confined since age four and he had grown to viciously hate it, but he almost appreciated the guards for their brusque callousness. In its way it was businesslike and straightforward; a little clear opposition was even useful, helped keep the squad together. Whereas if this marten had shown up on the first day after they were captured, he wouldn't have known what to expect.

Just that it would be very bad.

One of the wolves undid the door to the cell, sliding it aside. "Step forward," the marten said, waggling a claw.

Tails fixed his face, set his shoulders, walked past the bars and stood sloppily at ease in front of her, hearing the wolf slam the door home behind him. It broke his heart, but it was alright. His squad could take the last few days on their own. He'd miss them.

He missed a lot of other people, too. It would be like a knife in him, if he let it be. But he didn't. Freedom demanded it.

His squad mumbled encouragement, but they were crushed. They understood what was happening. Most prisoners could be lost. But one close to Her Majesty? You don't just give that away. You put it in your safe deposit box, Tails thought as the second wolf produced a heavy canvas straightjacket and ordered him to spread his arms. Careful with it. Don't want to break it. His squad tried to not watch as his arms were wrapped around his torso and the wolf buckled a muzzle over his snout, as though he were some dangerous mental patient. Tails cursed himself for not speaking when he had the chance: It's alright, this is a good sign. Biggs is in command. Helen was the only one still looking at him, tiny tufts of fur from the sides of the vixen's neck between the fingers of her balled fists. I'll be fine, Helen; Herm'll work something out. 'Herm' being grunt for 'Her Royal Majesty.' Don't worry about me.

The marten came up to Tails, pulled on him, testing the buckles of the jacket. "Good," she said. "I've known of you for a long, long time, Miles—parts of me have. You are a remarkable mobian, and a ferocious warrior. It's small wonder you came to the attention of one of us. I am glad I grabbed you first. I'm the Lady Renee, of Martens. And you will be my fox."

"Lady," the first wolf asked. "Do you want any others from this cell?"

The marten showed a flicker of annoyance at the interruption, but answered calmly. "Miles of Foxes is the only one from this block." The wolf saluted sharply in response, grabbed his submachinegun and sprayed bullets through the bars. Tails roared, the leather muzzle biting his face. He threw himself at the wolf, felt the marten's arms seize him roughly. "No."

Ironlock was dark from constant brownouts and Tails's eyes couldn't take the rapid white starbursts at the end of the gunmuzzle. Everything disintegrated into brief snatches, pulled apart like individual frames of a movie: fur pressed to a wall; a single empty eye dusted with gray brick; a pair, wide and still luminous; all mixed with the anticipatory roars and screams now erupting from every cell in the block—

The pine marten grabbed the front of Tails' straitjacket with her left hand and lifted him free of the floor. He felt the air on his fur through the holes in his worn boots, stared disbelievingly down the creature's sleeve at her annoyed frown. No mobian could—

Certainty hit Tails like a falling sky: it didn't matter that she wasn't covered with armor plate and weapons implants; she was a robot. The evil Doc had unboxed his soul-deprivation tank and was spending the last of his resources to roboticize what was undoubtedly a small sliver of his remaining captive population. He had a second to puzzle over what strategy could justify such a bizarre tactic, when one thought crowded out all the others: the robot was under orders to bring him back alive.

"You'll fight later, Miles," she said. "For now, you sleep."

She punched him, and he slept.

Kain Blackwood 2010

## \*Chapter 2\*: Frake's Point, Ostian, 3 Firmaire 3234

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**Frake's Point, Ostian, 3 December 3234**

In junket diplomacy destinations, two things were essential: a magnificent recreation and photo-opportunity, and a comfortable but boring place as isolated from the first location as possible. Frake's Point, the northernmost city on the continent, at the far edge of Kap Bittersee, was the place to go for blinding white sand and blinding white sun, wealthier and more legal than the island settlements with their questionable status under the Climate and Mercantile Treaties of 3105. No agreement had been reached, so no one was shaking hands; they simply stood on the beach, brows squinting above their sunglasses, two clumps of men with briefcases crowding awkwardly behind their chiefs.

King Antoine stood with his legs planted wide and his left wrist clasped in his right hand. The stance made him look vaguely commanding, as though he were standing on the peaks of a pair of mountains, surveying the world. He'd fallen into the habit because it avoided a fine balance problem that intermittently hit his prosthesis on malleable surfaces, but you couldn't see either leg, hidden behind the royal blue robe that hung down from his narrow shoulders to the sand, silk so light it was barely there in the airless heat.

Across from him, Thomas Posniak's pale skin was clammy with sunblock and runny with sweat as he baked inside a jet-black suit, as much a prerational gesture towards civilian control of the military as it was his own preference. He didn't look at the sea before him like the King; his head was turned back toward the hotels crowded to their right, as though at some honking car, or in an unerring search for the nearest air-conditioned space. His black hair was longer than it had been when he was first appointed head of the War Ministry, curving down over his ears, arcing stiffly down over his left forehead. If it weren't for the haggard hang of his cheeks he could have been fronting an emo band.

Headline: CAN THEY STOP THE WAR?

The first session was scheduled to begin at eleven, coinciding with peak sunburn and furbleach period. The ancient and lovely Schloss Mersehn lay on the cliff overlooking the windward slopes of the Cape, its magnificient Esszimmer, with its so-frequently-photographed walls patterned in white and rare red marble, looked out through the tall pewter-framed windows toward the sunbaked lawn of green grass, a lush multicolored stew of flowers straining at the stones regimenting their beds. Beyond, the sea had turned a gentle, warm blue with the changing angle of the sun. The garden was empty, and the sea was, too, sailboats warned off by coast guard cruisers out of view beyond the curve of the cape. Tiny black plastic buds had been fastened to the windowpanes, vibrating with a hum inaudible even to a canine, blocking any attempts to eavesdrop with IR bounced off the glass.

The first of the entourage were beginning to set their bags down at the table when Posniak announced, "Everybody out. Just me and him."

The King looked up from the far end of the table, where he was drawing back his chair. "I beg your pardon, Secretary?"

"We talk, just you and me. By ourselves. We bring them in later."

A pained sigh as the coyote grabbed marble and wood, taking pressure off the nerves in his fake knee as he lowered himself into his chair, but the voice complained more of an inexperienced negotiator than a missing foot. "It goes against protocol for any negotiations to be conducted without a second party present to verify the contents of the discussion, even in secret—"

"GET OUT!" the human barked at the few of his staff that hesitated when the King complained. He dropped his shoulder-bag on the table before him with a bang, twinning it a moment later when he followed with an armful of binders. "Humor me, Your Majesty," he added a moment later, scratching through his hair. "Please." A bit of pink scalp showed itself as he nudged a gel-stiff spear aside. A feat of hairdresser prestidigitation.

Antoine sat motionless a moment, looking at the human; then lifted a gloved right hand and waved at the door behind him. In a half a minute they were alone, the doors closed and Posniak in his shirtsleeves, his Mobian flag pin left with his lapel on the back of his chair. He walked the full length of the massive table, dropped himself tiredly in the armless seat kittycorner from the King, and planted his elbows on the table.

"Okay," the human grunted. From a meter's distance, without a photographer to handle his light for him, he was clearly exhausted—deep human 'bags' of purple under both eyes, losing hair like a winter field loses grass. "How do I kill him?" he asked.

The coyote blinked. "Who?"

"Robotnik."

"I'm sorry?"

"He's a maniac." Posniak spoke with the authority of an expert. "Word from the personal guard is he doesn't trust any of them; keeps a gun on himself at all times. A dozen more are taped under the furniture wherever he sleeps, just in case. And if it weren't for that, the arm."

"Mr. Secretary!—"

"One of the guard tried to take him with a steak knife. It's true; that happened. Dog ripped it away from the table and went for the face. 'Botnik grabs him by the wrist and the arm snaps. Grabs him by the neck." The human shook his head slowly, feeling the motion of his vertebrae as he signaled the negative. "Just holds him there making noises with the throat. The dog's throat, I mean."

"I am here to seek an agreement on an end to the war, not to aid an ambitious tyrant in the conduct of a coup d'état," Antoine said, slowly finding his reasonable discussion tone again as he realized that the War Minister was entirely serious. "I do not wish to know about your relations with your superior any more than I wish you to ask me how things are between my wife and I. That is beside the point; we are here as agents, to seek an agreement on behalf of Queen Sally and Director Robotnik."

Posniak sighed. "Fine," he continued, voice dropping to a low, flat affect. "Robotnik is more than willing to talk peace. As a preliminary matter we'd like an immediate and universal cease-fire while we further discuss—"

"Ah, but Mr. Secretary," Antoine said, smiling, "your troops are exhausted and barely holding on to Mobotropolis east of the river. Ours are more fresh, and they have the benefit of fighting for a ruler they do not despise and who does not despise them. A cease –fire is something for which Robotnik must pay."

"Name a price."

"An exchange of prisoners, according to the standards set forth in the Second Conventi—"

"Okay, so you give us whatever prisoners don't defect to you upon capture so they can go back to trying to desert; we give you a bunch of people who will go right back to your lines, then, oh dear, negotiations break down and you come back at us with a bigger army. No deal."

"Do you expect Her Majesty to field less than the entire army she can place at her disposal?"

"It's only fair that any Mobian be permitted to fight for what he or she believes in," Posniak recited from prepared PR materials. "But maybe, given that both parties are eager to demonstrate their patriotic commitment, we could agree to a prisoner exchange if both sides could put an end to intrusive, questionable foreign influences within national borders, starting with foreign mercenaries—"

"Absolutely not," Antoine said with a dismissive wave. "The Lachels military advisors stay; the nation remains one of Mobius's most important—"

"Acorn's most important."

"—allies. Truly, on what basis do your propagandists keep referring to them as mercenaries?"

"Where do you get off calling them advisors?" Posniak shrugged. "They're Lachels soldiers, yes? They draw a salary, don't they?"

"Well, without some sort of willingness to compromise, the government of Mobius—" Antoine continued without pause over the human's sigh. "—will not agree to a cease fire simply so that Robotnik's rebel forces can have an opportunity to regroup and fortify eastern cities so he can longer terrorize and starve their inhabitants."

"Okay. No cease-fire." Posniak slapped his hand on a large laminate political map that had been placed on the table and dragged it toward the startled King. "Guess we have to start talking a permanent settlement while the blood is still flowing."

"Well, uh—"

The Minister grabbed a dry-erase marker, licked his lip and freehanded a line down from the mountains, doing a couple of deviations from the Great River and cutting through the encircled star of the disputed capital, letting the line get sloppy and stop as it reached the Great Forest preservation areas. "Here's the current lines, roughly speaking."

"We obviously cannot agree to a permanent settlement along those lines—"

"Obviously. The peace treaty would be unfair to you and it would just get tossed out the window in five years anyway. So what do you think about something like, hmm, this?" With a pair of loose strokes Posniak cut away the rest of the northern swamplands and plains, along with the entirety of the Forest, leaving only the desert and rising badlands toward the sharp mountains cutting off the eastern coastline. He drew a star on top of Terscala and then scrawled EAST MOBIUS in big block letters. "We get a practical monopoly on Mobian mineral resources, which gives us enough international cachet to not spend all our time getting kicked around. There's not enough of an agriculture base to get a serious popular army going—"

Antoine tugged nervously on the lapels of his royal robe. "Mr. Secretary."

"—so Acorn stays safe," the human ignored him, writing WEST MOBIUS in the heart of the Great Plains. "The territory and population are small enough that Robotnik only needs a fairly small cadre of reliable supporters—which I can assure you he has—to keep the population in check, including the wolves, even after he gives up on any gestures at any kind of political or economic freedom, which he will. So it's a very stable settlement."

"Mr. Secretary."

Posniak capped the marker and rolled it toward the King. "What do you think?"

"Mr. Secretary," Antoine said, ignoring the marker, "the Queen might still be willing to consider some sort of temporary cease-fire, if we are able to come up with an alternative advantage that Robotnik would be willing to cede in exchange for the short-term benefit of a lull in the fighting."

"Acorn didn't give you permission to agree to a permanent peace, did she?"

The coyote sniffed in offense, lifting his snout and cocking his ears forward. "She imposed no such limitation."

"She won't agree to a permanent division of the country, then. We can listen to those radio broadcasts too, you know. Nothing can change his fate. Nothing less than justice. Robotnik's a weird man—much weirder than you'd think, before you actually have to eat a meal with him, listen to him talk about his dreams and mystic synchronicity and heavy metal—but his weirdness is not the kind in which he'll agree to die to ensure the end to a war. As far as I can tell, it's the exact opposite."

Antoine was a statute. "I am of course not going to discuss private advice or discussions between members of my diplomatic staff, whether they are the Queen or a mere intern."

"Doesn't matter. Robotnik won't divide the country either. He runs that way. So how about at the afternoon break you go talk to some people in your Royal Guard or your Secret Service or your Army Rangers and start thinking in terms of how one man with little combat experience could assassinate a seven-foot paranoid human tank?"

Antoine sighed with exasperation. "You can't think of a more useful way to spend the next weeks?"

"We could talk about you killing your wife, instead." Posniak was surprised at the amount of hatred in the coyote's glare, and winked. "Come on, why should I have to do all the work?" The gaze continued. Posniak coughed, shifted uncomfortably. "We could, uh, go swimming. We could uh, go through the motions, get everyone else back in here—"

"Let us," King Antoine hissed.

Evening at the Hotel Kaiserhof was a death march. For some reason the hotel staff had placed a bottle of Kleinod brandy with the neat rows of cola and bottled water; Tom started in on it when they were an hour into their strategy session, getting ready to go back to the palace the next day and approach the second of the options that he had addressed in his first five minutes with the King. The rest would be worked through over the course of the week, after which they would spend another week approaching the same problems using only synonyms. This would occur for, at minimum, a pair of weeks, because it was important for both parties to create the impression that they wanted the war to stop.

Drinking in front of his support staff would mean that the Fat Man would get a report that he was visibly careless of the details of the negotiations. The Fat Man and his mongoose kept a system of spies totally independent of the ordinary chain of command and there were at least a few on Tom's own staff at War Ministry. But it wasn't the end of the world if the madman didn't think he was trying particularly hard to end the war.

The work was pointless and occupied Tom's entire life. The war was lost. Robotnik did not have the kind of support he needed from the people and could not get it. He was antidemocratic, he was an obvious usurper, he was a foreigner, he was not the same species as the vast majority of the people he was trying to rule. He didn't have the resources or the foreign support to push Acorn out. He did have the kind of internal population-control apparatus necessary to dig in and tighten down behind razorwire and massive, ridiculously elaborate bunkers, bunker-palaces from which to conduct the business of murder, lies, and balancing the proper ratio of front-line cannon fodder to elite troops frightening enough to keep them on the line, while popping Vitamin D tablets and sleeping under sun lamps.

Alternatively, you could carefully craft a walkout powder and enjoy a solitary, pleasant, moneyed retirement in international waters in the tropics, kept company by books and a few loyal mercenaries. But suggest that and you get hit with a chair until you scream.

Alternatively, you could try to offer bad advice sufficiently sophisticated to make it past the Fat Man's unerring tactical and very impressive strategic military instincts. Interesting fact: in the Fat Man's native tongue, bad advice is Verrat, and the giver of bad advice is a Verrater. These words are normally translated to Mobisch as treason and traitor. Assuming that your role in taking down the Robian resistance were detectable, you would probably find yourself the victim of a most gruesome execution before seeing a day of peace. By contrast, if you could successfully conceal your role, you would survive long enough to be hung by Acorn.

Tom worked through these mental loops often enough that he sometimes found himself spiraling into philosophy, like now, in his seaward room on the twentieth floor, the sunset gone and the sea reduced to a black emptiness outlined by stars, sparsely dotted with the glow of massive transport ships heading to Boulder Bay and the occasional blink of a sailboat, an island of drunken coitus in the unseen waves. Isn't there a sense in which everyone's life is like this, that unavoidable generic ending, that slowly narrowing margin between the various deaths?

Well, there's a depressing outlook. Keeping the lights off, he managed to grab the glass out of the bathroom—he always thought of it as the Mouthwash Glass—and filled it up to about three quarters with room temperature brandy, then sat in a creaking, stiff chair pointed out at the balcony. Taking out his phone, he clicked over to LOTOR, M. in the address book, set it on a small, round table, and looked out at the night.

He had discussed the subject with Josh years ago. "I don't want to hear from you. Don't call me," Josh had said. "I'm done with all your crazy—"

"I think I'm in love with her. I'm worried we're going to fuck."

"That's disgusting!"

"Yeah. Oh gods, shit."

"Are you drunk?"

"I gotta go home and sleep. What if I get her pregnant?"

"You're not even the same species. This is sick—"

"What if the baby's all fucked up?"

"Look, just call the police and—"

"No, no way."

"Well look, just don't— fuck her because I'm sitting here thinking about it and think you've just put me off of sex for—"

"I don't think that'll work. I—"

"What the fuck do you mean, not fucking her won't work?" Josh had roared. "Why the hell did you even call me?"

"I don't know," Tom had replied. "It's pretty disgusting."

"It's very disgusting," Josh corrected him.

It was.

Five years later and they still couldn't figure their shit out. Molly's loyal work in the sting operation against Acorn—the few of Snively's disparaging comments about her that remained extant in various emails were considered suspect, given the massively treasonous source—had gotten her all the Robian security clearance a scientist could want, and in the new fully wartime economy she, working on armor, was a scientist rockstar, or would be if Robian society had any kind of functioning civil society that allowed for the recognition of scientists as any more than helpful adjuncts of the military. She had her own place, a good one on her high (for wartime) salary.

Because she had her own place, no one would suspect. The anger bordering on hatred that they felt for each other for months at a time also helped people not to suspect. As did not calling her and leaving phone trails for any of the Fat Man's spies to start wondering about. The Fat Man considered himself broadminded. Tom liked to think his hair didn't look so bad. Sentient life was pretty proud of itself. This did not mean that civilization was a bed of roses, that Tom was not going bald, or that he or Molly would be alive a month or two after a scandal hit the papers.

Tom picked up the phone right as it began to shake in his hand. He looked at the lack of caller ID, ground his teeth, and put it to his ear. "You're gone?"

"I'm extending my stay," Snively said, voice flattened through his servant's encryption-hiss. He didn't bother to make specific threats anymore. It was understood that Tom would do whatever Snively required or Tom would be disgraced before Robotnik and killed. It would be interesting to find out what particular information Snively would disclose that would achieve the result, but not that interesting.

"Anything else, sir?" Snively had demanded that Tom call him 'sir.' Why not.

"I'm receiving a visit from the hedgehog, too. Keep the cops off him."

"You're insane. He has blue fur—"

"Please. If your security people are as up on his current look as you are, it should be a snap. Keep Robotnik's dogs off me or you pay."

Snively hung up. Tom emptied his glass.

**Place Unknown, Time Unknown**

Tails woke up.

He was on a thin, damp mattress that smelled like sweat and fox. Air with a cool, fine grit and the distant hum of HVAC. His face hurt. The fur of his arms and chest had the tight, pulled-at feeling of having worn too many clothes for too long, but he was in nothing now but white cotton hospital shorts. He blinked, ran his tongue along his teeth with an unhappy, muted growl, pushed himself up and looked at the room.

Jail again. But the walls here were smooth white, a little scuffed nearer the floor. No windows. Halogen tubes above a gray grating in the ceiling, giving a kind of muted, gray-reflected dark light. Small but dense-bodied wide-angle cams were stationed in the corners and behind the light-gratings. The front of the cell wasn't bars anymore, but an iron door, a food slot low, a look- and talk-window about the size of a palm at head-height. Both opened from the outside, and both were closed.

The door itself, however, was open. Behind it was a white hallway, buzzing with the sound of electric lights. Beside it was a brown-furred pine marten in a strange black soldier's uniform, her brighter-furred face smiling. "Good morning, Miles."

Tails threw himself to his feet, drew his fists to ready, then quickly lowered his arms and looked feverishly down from his orange shoulder fur to the dirty black at his wrists. He ran his right hand along his left arm, the reverse, felt at his chest and sides, his scalp. Nothing. Fur. No scars.

The marten snickered.

He tore his brain apart, looking for changes. His name was Tails Prower. He was eightee—ninet—he couldn't remember his birthday, gods, he—No, he'd never known his birthday, that was right. Captain, Mobian Army Rangers. He loved freedom and Queen Sarah as much as he hated Robotnik. His favorite color was yellow. He was a person, a fox. Machines are different from people. He didn't feel particularly mechanical. He didn't feel any sort of affection or loyalty toward the creature before him.

Matter of fact, she'd murdered all his friends.

With a scream Tails leapt at her. She stepped nimbly aside, grabbing his waist and arm and slamming him into the wall, then throwing him back across the room. He stumbled long enough not to fall on his ass, instead landing against the far wall, arms spread, eyes wide.

He took one step from the wall as she walked toward him. "What have you done to me?" he growled.

"You think I've done something to you?"

"You brought me here to make me into a robot," he said. She slapped him in the face with her open hand. It was like a punch, put sparks in his eyes and sent his back to the wall.

"You have done nothing to earn that honor, mobian," Renee snarled. She flexed the fingers of her hand, frowning at Tails, eyes sharp with offense. "I brought you here because I desire you as my servant. It is here I will train you until you are ready for combat."

"You think," Tails said slowly, feeling the flesh in his cheek start to swell, "that I am going to be your . . . slave? Your combat slave? I'm hearing this right?"

The marten smiled softly. "Get on your knees," she said.

Tails silently continued to stand. "What the hell is wrong with you people?"

She grinned wider. "You are going to be my favorite, Miles. Every other animal I have made mine knelt the first time I asked. They all thought they should save their strength. Fight me more slowly, as though the tempo of conflict belongs to the weak. I asked my dog why she was so quick to shame herself: what's kneeling? she says. Who cares? So I commanded her to get on her hands and knees. She did. So I commanded her to kiss my boot." The marten giggled. "And then she was proud, and would not kiss my boot. But it kissed her, all the same."

"I'm going to kill you," Tails said.

"You will address me as 'Lady.'"

"Lady," Tails laughed, "I'm going to kill you."

"No, fox. You will refuse to get on your knees when I command it. And then I will punish you for disobedience."

The fox licked his teeth.

"Get down on your knees."

He leapt again. His best chance was to go for something very soft and painful, genitals or eyes; something vicious made him choose eyes, fingers extended to rip them out.

Renee didn't step aside, she punched through his guard to his face. He fell down, on his knees, arms pulled tight in front of his stunned, lowered head. She punched him and it was as though he wasn't there.

Blank.

Tails was on his back, looking up at the ceiling, the light haloing around the marten's shadowed face. He opened his mouth to speak, lifting his arms to guard his face, and she punched him in the head.

Blank.

Tails woke up slowly, dragged from unconsciousness by the marten's vicious grip on his nose with the knuckles of the fore- and middle-fingers of her right hand. It was as though she had sunk an iron ring into the damp black flesh and then heated it to glowing. He began to struggle, limbs moving with quicksand slowness as a violin whine screeched from his throat—

Renee released him and stood.

He lay on his back, watching her, panting with the tip of his tongue just over his lower teeth. His legs and arms lay heavy around him on the cool floor, palms up and toes out, tails tucked between his knees.

The marten looked down, studying the rise and fall of his chest. She walked slowly to his right side, boots cracking against the floor in the quiet, then knelt down and ran her left hand lightly over Tails' chestfur. Her right hand she made into a fist and sank into his navel.

His jaws parted wide, silent, lungs paralyzed. After a moment an inhalation that sounded like water being sucked down a drain, the fox's chest rising up under the marten's palm.

Renee punched him again, hard under his ribs, twisting her knuckles down into his belly and driving her fist at the base of his stomach.

Her left hand grabbed Tails' face and pushed his right cheek against the floor as he vomited a thin gruel and coughed it out on to the tile, brownish-yellow, acid and tooth-clinging. A moment later she unknotted her fist and lifted his entire body onto its left side, where it slowly curled into a ball.

He lay, panted, the pain pulsing in his core.

A hand brushed his right arm, rubbing the fur softly. "Bad fox," she said.

Kain Blackwood - 2010

## \*Chapter 3\*: Frake's Point, Ostian, 20 Firmaire 3234

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**Frake's Point, Ostian, 20 Firmaire 3234**

As the weeks passed, Snively's life had settled into a slow, steady rhythm. Up an hour before dawn, apply a heavy sunblock and insect repellent, ingest two liters of water, go for a run, starting at fifteen klicks and working his way up as days passed, out of the third-rate tourist district with the rotted wooden erosion-controls and chowder-and-eis joints sunk into the beaches and up into the boiling swamps further up the coast, either following the boundary of the railroad right-of-way or the paths of one of the nature preserves. Return after dawn, drink another liter of water as he cooled, then a cold shower to cut the sweat and the day's rising heat.

He was looking good. He had enough free time to shave his head and enough sunlight to bring a touch of color to his cheeks. If he were still alive in another seventy years, he would be dying of skin cancer.

After the shower he'd get a leisurely breakfast at one of the better chowder joints, the meat-heavy meal popular in the former Empire lightened a bit by the substitution of fish for heavier terrapod. That would be a few hours, sweating underneath a sun umbrella. Then some variances—maybe a movie, maybe a walk along the beach, maybe an early return to his rooms to pore over his finds again. At any rate, that's what he would generally do for a couple of hours before dinner at the Gasthouse itself. Afterwards, a walk to the best part of the worst of the tourist section and a chain gym open to the wee hours to work himself to sleep. It was a simple, pleasant, unvarying rhythm that a child or an ignoramus could learn to follow.

Which was the idea, of course. When finally one night Snively turned his eyes briefly away from the silent expostulating head on Kimex International displayed on the wall above the treadmill and saw, almost lost in the reflection of the gym's interior lights and the shadows across the street, just a flash of red in the gap between a darkened burrito joint and some sort of hybrid store for souvenir t-shirts and football jerseys, he was not surprised. But he had to let things happen, so he kept it up on the treadmill, sweatdrops cool where they weren't picked up by his damp-dark grey wifebeater ("MOBIUS TACKLEBALL") and gym shorts. He turned his eyes to another screen which had a close-captioned, dubbed and syndicated old episode from the first season of Persona non Grata. Fiona Fox was in a black wig and lace and leather and spikes, required by the necessities of National Security to infiltrate some kind of nonspecific goth leather dance club thing, and to look very good while doing it. The painfully unnecessary remixes of rock favorites blasting from the speakers timed with the thumps of his toes on the treadmill as he watched Fiona put a hand very noticeably to her ear, so the audience could tell she had a transmitter in there. Her lips moved and white block capitals appeared on an expanding band of black at the bottom of the screen.

CONTROL, I'M IN.

DOCTOR EGGMAN'S AGENT SHOULD BE AT THE TABLE WITH DESCHENKO. WHITE FUR AND—

I SEE HER.

Snively could hear the man watching the gym's door: "Excuse me, sir, I need to scan your membership card—sir—"

Snively tried not to tense as the man dropped suddenly into silence. He focused on the screen, where [-TECHNO MUSIC-] the audience could enjoy the first appearance of codename Rouge, in perfect three-point lighting in the middle of the flashing dark mayhem of Club Whatever, camera tracking up slowly from the big ankles of her boots—that had been the fashion six years ago—then along silk pulled tight as skin over the fur of her legs and hips, high-speed photography deliciously slow as the viewer's eyes approached her massive—

"Someone might say you got an unhealthy interest in her," Sonic said.

The hedgehog's fingers wanted hair to grab, but they settled for the friction that resulted when he mashed Snively's face into the treadmill's control panel. Even perched on the thing's running-board Sonic had enough leverage to keep the human down, and a great view of the human's legs kicking wildly as he stumbled, feet landing at every conceivable painful angle, hands tight on the machine's steel grips. He kept making a noise that sounded like fuck.

"Hey, Snivvles," Sonic laughed, "'holding handgrips while running is not recommended—'"

"You punk! Who the fuck do you think you are, you dye-job tool!"

The hiss of Sonic's black quills matched the hiss of his laugh. He got a little exuberant and Snively gained intimate knowledge of what cheese felt like as it entered the grater. "I'll be right back," Sonic said before he loosed him and jumped away. "Gotta train the personal trainer."

Sonic's hands no longer on him, the treadmill threw Snively backwards, breaking his grip on the heart rate sensors. Almost as soon as his face hit the rubber tread his toes caught the floor behind the treadmill with enough traction to flip him to his back, bruising his ass. Rainbow halos diffracted around the ceiling lights above him. Someone nearby let loose a shriek of pain.

"Private workout!" Sonic bellowed. "Get out! Get that other asshole out! Move!"

Retreating feet. A different pair of heavy boots gripping and releasing the dimpled plastifoam floor, slowly approaching. Sonic's face, shadowed by the lights and the black dye that still clung down to the roots of his fur and quills. His smile, the fine points of his canines.

"I still don't like this look," Snively coughed, "but as long as you're working at it you should wear your contacts. Those gentle green eyes just look ridickkll—"

The hedgehog grabbed the straps of Snively's shirt and dragged him down a lane of controlled-weight machines, burning the bared skin of his back. When Sonic jerked the human to his feet he was surprised to find the human's right fist snapping sharply against his jaw. Sonic took the punch and fell back, quills cutting the glass of the mirrored wall, and stared. Snively ground his teeth, nose askew, and pushed close to Sonic in a boxer's guard, delivering a right to the hedgehog's taut, scarred belly. Fuck this, Sonic thought; he took another shot to the gut as he grabbed the human's right shoulder and threw him face-first into the wall, producing a satisfying symphony of brittle cracks, bone and glass.

Sonic pressed his cheek flat to the cool mirror and put his wet, black nose to the human's swelling red one. It was the second time he'd seen the mug and the first time he'd made any changes to it himself. It was almost difficult to connect it with the disasters that had ruined his life, repeatedly, since he was too young to remember. But the connection was there, and now the human was retired down here—Sonic had gone to the library and looked up "Ret." The human was hitting the beach and getting in shape and acting like he deserved to live.

"You should've known better than to think we had something to talk about," Sonic snarled.

Snively gave a wet, bloody snort against Sonic's bareskinned face. "Shuddn you lock the door behind you?"

Sonic grinned wide as he gave the human's broken nose a slow, forceful butterfly kiss, shaking his head no. "This won't take long."

Amanda silently agreed and swung precisely with an empty barbell she had lifted from a bench press station near the door, connecting with the hedgehog's chest. A meter of length and forty kilos of mass in the weight mount snapped ribs, pulled Sonic off his feet and over the bench of a leg extender. The floor snapped headquills and wrenched his right arm, but the pain kept him from sinking into the headblow as he somersaulted backwards onto his heels.

Snively groaned, slumped against the red-streaked glass. When Sonic put his eyes on him Amanda javelined the barbell between the two of them; Sonic flung himself away to the left as it hit the bench of the leg extender and somersaulted up, slapping into one of the metal light fixtures and crunching it with a light pop of aluminum and glass. He found the balls of his feet, bent low and propped on his hand.

"You too, huh?" he asked. He should've guessed. Probably would have, if he'd been thinking about anything other than murdering the ugly furless bastard: why would Snively go anywhere without the robot slave he'd put so much work into constructing? Maybe he thought it would be hard for the 'bot to get around; hard to miss a brainwashed skunk with everything but her face and tail hidden by black armor grafted into her flesh. At the moment that armor was mostly hidden under loose silk clothes, white gloves, a hood drawn back. He giggled, wet in his throat: he'd learned how much people could learn to ignore on the streets in High Demon. "Isn't your boyfriend a little old and hairless for you?" he asked.

She drew her pistol and fired.

Sonic dodged left and left again. His black, painful fury submerged, and he snickered as the old, animal sensations of flight and fight flooded him. Five years and she hadn't learned a thing, the bullets singing behind him as she failed to update her lead. Too slow, too slow, you're too slow! Up onto an unmoving treadmill and then a sideways leap as the skunkbot kicked one of the bulky padded benches at him, getting close enough to her to snatch a dumbbell from a rack and bash it into the side of her skull-armor as she grabbed for his arm. They went down in a tumble beside a big frame that held weights for a bunch of lifts, Amanda sprawled along his legfur; he bashed her in the side of the skull, drugs shitdon't let her touch skinget her off get her off kick—

He kicked her off his leg but she clung to his boot, wrenched it, bashed the thin edge of his shin against the bars of the frame in a shock of agony. She did something else to his ankle as he kicked wildly with his other leg, then planted its heel squarely on her head and snapped her back, off of him. He scrambled away—

The handcuff holding his ankle to the frame clinked sharply as it went taut.

Sonic jerked deliberately at the chain, trying to break it, as the skunkbot got to her feet, walked without haste to the free weights and picked up another barbell, this one with a pair of ten kilo weights still clamped to it. She took a long lumber-splitting grip, one hand on the butt of one of the weight mounts, the other at the middle of the long shaft. Sonic wrenched his boot hard against the cuff holding him to the frame, but not hard enough to break the chain or the frame or his ankle as Amanda took a solid stance and lifted the barbell for her first downswing. Not fair! something in him screamed. Not fair!

"Hold still," she said.

He came to.

He wasn't sure who he was. He didn't care.

He was blind.

The world was an eggshell expanse, flat, featureless. Sometimes it was. Sometimes it was pain, without space and without color. The empty white was better. He tried to pick at phantom colors, a hint of green, a snow texture of shifting, shadows in his empty retinas—

No. It was paint, on drywall. It was a ceiling. He was in a room. Some time after this realization had permeated his thoughts, his eyes turned and there was a corner, wallpaper. Ugly, old green wallpaper, peeling. An ugly place. In the stagnant, lazy stream of his breath it smelled ugly. Mold, old food and old stink of people, faceless and furred and skinned.

He was on his quills, his arms spread wide legs straight and stiff. Mattress. Cheap, damp, soft. Not the good kind of soft, the kind that took you, remembered you, sagged into ruts. He moved his arms—

"Awake?" Amanda's voice came from the same direction as a squeak of wooden furniture. Amanda. That was Amanda.

Pain woke up, still entwined with her lover from the night before, hugged him soft and tight, smothered him, kissed him endlessly and wouldn't stop. He tried to will himself not to move, didn't move, and tried harder, as though he could will the pain away. His legs were broken. His chest was broken. His face was broken.

"Don't move." She appeared in her naked armor, sideways, leaning over him with the uneasy displeasure reserved for looking at hairy spiders under glass. "Bad damage."

He reached instinctively for his anger and found a frightening sensation where he thought one of his lungs was. A little cough in his throat as he moved his tongue to speak and licked the soggy sock she had duct-taped into his mouth. A wave of revulsion turned to pain as it twisted his cheeks over broken bone. Don't throw up. Don't throw up.

"Quiet," Amanda spat. "If the police come, I'll either kill you or leave you for them."

He turned his eyes to the ceiling, closed them, and was still. Amanda watched him for a while with her eyes, then sat on a small wooden chair with a wicker seat, closed her eyes, and watched him with the small fisheye webcam aimed at the bed, listening to public radio broadcasts in the silence.

Xxx

" . . . another pillow under his head."

The motion and the pain woke him. The pain was not as bad as before. Every part of him that Amanda was not moving felt rigid and plastic. The pain was hot and hard, rather than wet and drowning.

He found that he was holding his eyes closed and let them drift upwards, baring half of his pupils. Snively stood at the bottom of the bed, his right cheek a deep red around the stitches. The pain in the cut seemed to dampen the limp amusement hinted at by the rise in the opposite corner of his mouth.

"Knocking on my door and having a civil conversation would have been easier all around," Snively said. "But I knew you wouldn't listen to me until you were lying on your back. I'm not angry. It's who you are, Sonic."

Sonic. That was his name.

"Everything I told you in that letter is true. I do have a pressing matter to discuss with you. It's about your Uncle Charles, and how he invented roboticization."

Sonic made a noise that sounded like a small dog barking out of his nose. His face worked, very slightly, beneath the duct tape.

"No, I'm not insulting him. You knew your uncle. Better than I do, although I almost hesitate to say that after studying his notes and his handiwork for over a decade. You know who he was. What you don't know is what he intended for his technology, for Mobius. Not even I know that. Not yet. But I'm going to find out. There are black sites Science Ministry used for their highest-classified research during the war, places nobody has bothered to dig up since the coup. I've wanted to for the past five years, but I've found it difficult.

"That's why you are going to help me. Together, you and Amanda will—"

"No!" Sonic felt the bed shake as Amanda stomped her foot. "I won't!"

Snively sighed in exasperation, then clapped his hand to his stitched cheek with a grimace. "Amanda, we've discussed this."

"He's horrible! We should kill him! He stole my Sally! We should—"

Steeling himself, the human bellowed. "Amanda! Time out! Sit outside!"

Shaking with rage, glistening eyes rooted to the floor, Amanda mumbled something that might have been yes sir and shuffled out the door. It shivered in its frame when she slammed it behind her.

Snively shook his head, walking out of Sonic's view, to his side. With a gentle flap, the human held out the first page of an old Mobian Science Ministry personnel file.

Sonic hadn't seen him for fifteen years. Hadn't even seen a picture.

"Matter of fact, Sonic," Snively said, "he just might still be alive. I'm offering you the closest thing to a family that you've got left."

Seeing the huge, goofy moustache, his gentle smile, was like riding in a time machine.

"Do you want to come along on the search? I don't expect an answer until you've—"

The hedgehog nodded, slowly.

"—healed . . . but I'll accept that as well. You need to go to the bathroom?"

The hedgehog nodded, slowly.

Snively pulled out a keyring and started sorting through its inventory. "Amanda, time out over. Come here and carry Sonic to the bathroom."

**Place Unknown, Time Unknown**

They established a series of ground rules rather quickly.

Tails came to think of Renee as The Lady, as she ordered. He didn't feel that this was some kind of capitulation; it was fact. It was her title, like a female aristocrat, except that instead of being an inheritor to what used to be huge amounts of land and a High Mobian accent, she was some kind of slave mistress for Robotnik. Using the word didn't mean that he endorsed it—you'd call the Overland Empress the Overland Empress, and an underworld leader a Boss. Tails had a lot of private other names for her to go with it—"bitch," so forth. He guessed "Lady" was close enough.

As it turned out, he wasn't going to call her anything, because on what he thought was his second day—there were long periods when the lights in the ceiling dimmed noticeably—the Lady forbade him to speak. This occurred after he'd thrown the pet food in her face, and she had him muscled up against the wall, her half-nelson straining ligaments and threatening to pull his left arm from its socket, and she was giving him a slow, steady series of agonizing punches to his right kidney. "If I want you to be a repen, then you'll be one," she snarled. "If you have thoughts other than 'Yes, Lady,' I no longer care what they are. If you want to let me know how you are feeling you can growl and whine and yap like any other dumb animal."

"You're insane," he began, and then she threw him to the ground and kicked him in his tender belly, the blue bruise a shadow under the white fur.

"Eat them!" she shouted, her boot-toe urging him towards the dry, smelly pellets that had burst into a galaxy of brown stars on the gray-tiled floor. "Clean up your mess! Eat!"

He didn't eat them. She rolled him over and slapped him in the face. She did that for a while, then put pellets on his tongue and made him taste them. Then she picked him up and carried him to his bed and locked him away, alone.

At some point while he was sleeping, coughing with pain, lying motionless, and dreaming about his friends being locked safely away in a cell and then shot to pieces by people outside of it, Tails decided that he didn't really have anything to say to the Lady anyway.

He also decided to eat the food going forward—there probably wasn't going to be anything else coming. There wasn't anything else the third day, at any rate, just a bowl of the pellets. It wasn't pet food in the sense that it wasn't called Kibbles or Healthy Coat. It was pet food insofar as it was reprocessed offal protein from terrapods, chicken and fish, together with soy carbohydrates. That was what the Lady told him it was on the second day, while putting a sour pellet on his tongue and clamping his jaws shut around it. Tails bet it probably came from the food factory in big sacks.

The Lady insisted, with violence, that it was notrepen food. It was worker food. Worker chow, Tails thought. Lateral thinking from Robotnik, who had figured out how to feed his starving population after all. Very creative.

"It's very healthy," she said. "Everything an animal needs, and nothing extra. Your kind doesn't grow fat on it." Tails, she explained, got particularly rich worker chow, with more protein than normal, and vitamins. Soldier chow. "For muscle strength." She smiled.

It came in a stainless steel bowl. The Lady did not require that Tails crawl to the bowl and bury his snout in it—she presumably could see everything he did on the cameras, and made no complaint—so he ate it like popcorn, stuffing a handful into his face, chewing and washing it quickly down with water from his sink. He tasted very little of it that way.

Tails spent the third day eating, crapping, and sleeping. The cell door did not open except when the food slot slid open for the worker chow in the 'morning' (comparatively early on the light-cycle) and 'evening' (late). The hands that delivered the food did not belong to the Lady, but whoever the guard was did not speak. The air was silent aside from the distant HVAC hum and sounds that Tails made himself.

Day four was the same. He was still aching, but got up to stretch his bruised muscles, make sure he was getting lymph circulating to the damaged tissue. He did a severe abridgement of his normal routine—pushups, crunches on the floor and off the edge of the bed, a series of acrobat stretches—and occasionally added to the resulting aches by pushing his fingers into the center of the hematoma and massaging in small, gentle circles, gently speeding the healing process.

When he woke on day five, it hurt slightly to breathe, but he could move without wincing if he tried to. He wasn't stiff. He felt almost mobian. After about an hour the doorlatch slammed and the Lady walked into the room, again in her onyx and scarlet uniform. Tails was standing.

"Get on your knees," she said.

That was the first time Tails let himself feel afraid of her.

## \*Chapter 4\*: Fortune Station, 2 Pluvoise 3235

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**Royal Court-in-Exile, Fortune Station, 2 Pluvoise 3235**

Of all the various drugs one could put into your head to make it faster, caffeine was probably one of the worst. Methylphenidate's cool alertness and precision was the closest thing to a pure intelligence enhancer, the only penalty from overuse being the gradually tightening ring that drew down around the soul, the blinders behind which more and more of your mind would slowly disappear. Dextroamphetamine and levoamphetamine were near misses, but why bother when you have access to methylphenidate? Compared to it, ginseng was small beer, nicotine a joke with nasty delivery systems.

Caffiene.

Vidavin Vulanis.

Caffiene was the alcohol of stimulants. Rapidly habit forming, with a tendency to aggravate the underlying psychological conditions it was meant to counteract. That slowly spreading paranoia that jerked you back from rest, stamped on the subconscious, until finally that constant anxiety was the whole of your mind. Then finally the crash, the twitching semi-sleep, the fever and the dehydration.

Two advantages, again similar to those of alcohol: tasty delivery mechanisms and social acceptability. Advantage two was not to be underestimated: would you care for some coffee? The benefits were even more extreme when compared with busting out pills in front of the entire cabinet. Or in front of the cameras, and there were so many cameras. All she had to do was walk out of a building and someone would have a telephoto shot of the royal amphetamine derivatives, and the tabloids would have a full list of the nightmare side effects running wild in her brain. Openness was an essential aspect of her government's public posture, probably more important than the ultimately marginal aspects of domestic policy that had been surrendered to Parliament, and that to a parliament half-packed with personal appointees for districts still under Robian control, pending liberation and elections. Seeing her in the papers, trivid and nets every day made them feel like they knew her, feel that she was a friend who could be trusted. A photograph every day keeps the domestic opposition away.

It had made her face possibly the most well-known in the world—Robotnik himself was probably neck-and-neck, but hers was certainly more pleasant to look at. The finest reconstructive surgeons had plied their wiles on it, and had restored as much of its natural shape as they could. And the rest was an inspired improvisation: the Queen's mien was wry, ruminative, like an old country squirrel with a nut tucked in her cheek. When you looked at her dead on, and when she talked, the asymmetry was more noticeable. She'd been developing an instinct for presenting herself in profile. In public, she also sometimes let her long hair out of the complicated knot that pulled it taut to the back of her head, so that it would spill down over her left eye and cheek. Here, in the presence of no one but her senior ministers and generals, she didn't bother with such vanity. But she still kept her chair slanted to the left, regarded the room askance.

Sally lifted the china to the corner of her lips. The right corner. Coffee fierce on her tongue, cardamom, just a touch of lemon. She held it, let the warm scent drift up to her nose.

Antoine's voice continued, tinny, bands of light flickering through his visage above the tabletop trivid protector. ". . . will conclude in the next three days. The Crown already has to begin positioning itself relative to the failure of the talks. As I understand it, the War Ministry is eager to begin a hard push to seize eastern Mobotropolis and bring the capital firmly under control. If—"

She closed her eyes a moment, let her thoughts drift as the first of the caffeine began to trigger her neurons, gently inflating her against the constricting pressure of the methylphenidate. Antoine had already explained the situation to her the night before—four hours ago, actually, at two—in much less reserved terms. She hadn't been expecting much to come out of the peace talks, which was why she'd dispatched Antoine. The reason the talks had dragged on as long as they had was the rather unexpected and unusual personal offer from Robotnik's War Minister. After a week of having milintel and her personal oppo researches build a dossier on the skinbag she'd basically decided to let him hang. It was as likely the human was trying to draw her out as some sort of psyop as that he was legitimately offering to kill Robotnik, and even if he was, consultants with Army Rangers said there wasn't much Mobius could do to help him short of wiring the proposed assassination venue with electronic surveillance, which he'd strenuously protested was far too dangerous to himself.

So, let things go. Maybe the human would pull it off without any help. Maybe he'd get caught and throw the Robian war machine groaning off the rails. Or maybe the war would continue to grind along. No downside.

". . . necessary, but the delegation should be able to delay the end of the conference another week without breaking any major diplomatic protocols or providing Robotnik with an excuse to unilaterally abandon the conference." Antoine scratched the bridge of his nose, dipped his snout deferentially. "I suspect that we can probably manage to avoid any change in public perception regarding the Crown's negotiating strategy in the same timeframe, thought it would be wise to verify my assessment with public relations operatives that have their ears closer to the ground."

"Thank you, Antoine," Sally said. "This has lasted far longer than anyone could have anticipated. For a month and a half of daily meetings with those hopeless traitors we ought to give you the Order of Valor."

A twitter of approving laughter ran down both of the legs of the arch-shaped table, from the Queen at its apex. Only one face didn't smile, eyes naturally luminous as an artifact of the projection but a hint of anguish in them nonetheless. "I'll see you soon, love," Antoine said.

Sally smiled. She nodded. She killed the connection.

"I've read the ministry reports," she announced. In this she was not lying. She had not kept to the executive summaries for this. The meetings over the next three days would set the tone and pace for the close of the war. Proud, arrogant Robotnik had agreed to talks because Mobotropolis was a natural break point. SAM technology was effective and cheap enough and her economy was such a shambles that manned aircraft were by and large a losing economic bet; even with Lachels support the Great River was a difficult barrier, with every bridge up to the border blown by the retreating Mechanized Army. After that, there was nothing to stop her, all the way to the coast.

Cabinet-plus today, more than could be properly packed into the conference room of the Fortune Station Endicott Hotel: all her ministers and high level Crown officers plus Generals Connell (rearguard), Lowe (forest, irregulars) and Rock (front line), as well as Colonel St. John, the special operations liaison to Alpha Lupe Almatrican. The wolf was there, too, of course, sitting in a far more prominent position than most of the cabinet proper with Reynard behind her. Neither Polanski, the Deputy Chief of the Lachels Defense Supply Agency, nor Lachels General Berg were in attendance. Her friends to the north were increasingly unenthusiastic about the war, convinced after five years that the conflict her people had endured for almost thirty was pointless and without end. If they didn't wish to play, they could stay home. She didn't want them to feel that she needed them.

What's more, she didn't need them.

"The Robians will expect us to push hard right at the river, to keep them from reinforcing." Sally grinned, her thin lips parting to show a flash of tooth. "That's where you come in, Alpha. We'll need your warriors to hit hard: supply lines into the capital, city infrastructure—the fourth and fifth water redistribution stations, too; we'll need to coordinate with intel to see if there's any working electrical grid left to take out.

"At the same time, our front line troops hit hard outside the city. We'll need river crossings north and south. If we cross the river, We're where we want to be. If it's enough to convince Robotnik to redistribute his forces, out of the city, so much the better. We're more than happy to take it sooner rather than later.

"At the same time, we need a relatively small deployment into the Great Forest itself. A long march and an attack from the south requires us to spread forces far more than we would like, and gives Robotnik plenty of time to fortify the river. But totally failing to prepare for a worst-case scenario won't avoid it."

Sally sipped thoughtfully at her coffee. The sound of ceramic on ceramic was loud in the room. All eyes and ears were turned to her, waiting, listening.

"Maybe another target farther behind the lines, if you're feeling up to it, Lupe. Psyops rather than a hard target. Maybe a comms tower in Terscala, maybe—"

"Ironlock," General Rock nodded eagerly. "We could dedicate special forces to that, as well."

The Queen turned her eyes on the wolverine. Her mien was cool, her features smooth, statuesque. "What would be the value in attacking Ironlock Prison?"

No one could be completely trusted. Anything she said even in a highest-security war council could be on the front page of the Times, if someone decided it was the right or the just thing to do. Rock locked eyes with her, afraid of how much fear and shame he would show if he dared to lower his gaze. He seemed genuinely taken aback; perhaps Her Majesty's mention of an attack on the east Mobotropolis water stations had made him suspect her mind was turning to her prior, failed attempt to have a team of Army Rangers destroy the pumping stations and starve out Robotnik's defenders.

What would be the value in attacking Ironlock Prison, indeed.

"Well, Majesty," the General continued haltingly, "it might be a very valuable propaganda victory, to be able to free prisoners of war and—"

"General," Sally interrupted, voice cold and smooth as polished granite, "We've discussed this matter already with Ian"—her Press Secretary—"and the Minister of State. We believe that unless the peace talks produce a general prisoner exchange, an action of the sort you describe has the potential to greatly harm popular support for the offensive. Ironlock is so far behind the current lines that we do not believe that any attack can be mounted that will have a successful chance of freeing any significant number of prisoners for at least a year, and probably more. If we were to conduct a surgical strike to free only a few prisoners, we believe that the primary response of the public would be to feel envy for the lucky few families whose loved ones were freed. Our people would resent these lucky ones. Calls would grow for an immediate prisoner exchange, which could only be granted on terms which would cost us the advantages of our current position and throw the entire future of the war into jeopardy."

"I am sorry, Majesty," the wolverine replied. "It's clear that you have given far more thought to this matter than me."

"We have. If you have further thoughts on the matter, please take them up with the Minister of State."

"Yes, Majesty—"

"Now," Queen Sarah said, folding her fingers, turning her body squarely to the table. "Details."

**Place Unknown, Time Unknown**

"Take, for instance, the ceremony of knighting." Tails did not hear the Lady move behind him, but his fur tingled in anticipation until he felt the touch of a pair of fingers to simulate the flat of the sword. Tap on his left shoulder, tap on his right. "I dub thee Sir Miles. Twenty five reps."

Tails tightened his grip on the plastic handles of the shoulder press, feeling his palmpad slip against his warm sweat, inhaled, locked and pushed. One hundred fifty kilos. After the first week, for two months now, every day, two unspeaking mobian guards, maybe twenty regular faces but nothing sufficiently frequent to become an individual, would order Tails to the door of his cell, shackle and muzzle him, and take him to a prison gym. Not the kind of gym you would find in a prison, whatever that might be—Ironlock didn't have all the amenities—but rather a kind of cross between a gym and a prison, short lengths of chain fastening padded medical wristcuffs to the grips of the bench press, the lat pull, the rowing machine. For when pumping techno and two rows of televisions just aren't enough to distract you from the burn.

But here there were no televisions, and no music. Just mirrors to reflect the scowling, muzzled fox, muscles moving under his unkempt back and armfur like the suggestion of snakes undulating underneath desert sand, ears burning hot, eyes like cold cut agate under the tangled mess of his uncut hair. And behind him, one day per week, the pine marten in her starched black uniform, arms folded across her chest, mouth snarling as the fox's arms began to fail. "Twenty. Twenty-one. More. Fight. Fight. Worm! You're pinned under a damaged bot. A human is coming to kill you. You're dead. She just killed you. You've failed your Lady, and your fellow warriors are dropping like flies. Push. Push!—Twenty-three. More. Should I spot you? Should I call you Sir and bring you tea? Do you need a kiss between your ears? Push!"

Slowly, his arms obeyed and punched through the last centimeters. Twenty-four. When Renee was not marking the week with her presence, her warders would bark the number of sets and reps and then stand silently as Tails did as many as he could, then carefully restore his shackles, lead him to the next of the day's stations, and bind him to the next machine for more lifts. They would spot him as he began to falter; if necessary, they would do negative reps. At the end, one of them would make a tally of the workout on a sheet, make marks as he performed some quick calculations and translated his underperformance into strokes with a length of gasoline hose on his back.

It made Tails stronger. Thirty reps at one hundred fifty kilos was, ha ha, a little insane. It was steroid bodybuilder weight, the sort of lifting a soldier would only rarely have to accomplish and didn't have time to prepare for, because he was fighting in the service of Queen and Country and did not have four hours per twenty-four to spend with arms and legs locked to weights.

Tails wasn't permitted to look at the records, but he thought he did better when his personal trainer was there. Her scowls, her insults, her fingernails pinching his ear, angry spittle in his neckfur: motivation.

Come on, Tails. Twenty-six. Kill me. Twenty-seven, all the way up, kill me. Kill me, Tails. More. More. Fight, slave. You've found a stray moment without your shackles, and you're punching me. A hundred and fifty kilos worth of force into my face. You can see in my eyes that I know. I've screwed up. I've given my slave a loaded gun. I've planned my own murder. More, more—

She would talk while he worked. Insane talk about the future, some world beyond the walls assembled from bits of conversation, wrong words, dark pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that didn't fit—

He didn't want to know about it. He didn't care what she said, didn't understand her and didn't want to. Didn't care about worker dormitories or the Twelve Lords and Ladies or the Great Teachers.

And her little history lessons, like today. Tails hated them. There were fewer and fewer stories about the recent past—the Great Dawn, industrialization—more and more about distant history and even prehistory, the first dynastic period, the early centuries of the Mobian aristocracy, before the formalization of the councils and the dominance of the house of D'Urisne. He wasn't sure if Renee's tales were historically right—history had never been Tails' strong suit, he liked engineering and science more—but there were little details, horrible details, that went against what he'd picked up over the years, always horrible, horribly wrong. Always plausible enough to scrape against your teeth, stick in your ears when you were trying to sleep in your cell, repeating and looping while you drifted off to sleep.

Today it was knights. Tails knew that in the old days they had been landholders and warriors. He also knew the TV shows he had watched in Knothole as a child, War-era movies and before, stuff to set a boy to building couch-castles and snow forts. He had a memory from when he was about twelve, when their war had begun to grow, of a complete stranger kneeling to his Aunt Sally, and feeling his heart beat faster, because the movies were true. He lived with Kings and Queens and heroes. Sally even had a crown, and big gloves! He would lie under his cover and wonder if Aunt Sally had a sword. He thought about Sonic kneeling down before her, feeling the cool metal touch him so lightly, one shoulder, then the other, changing you, making you different and special. Tails would hold his covers tight around his shoulders and neck, imagining it. May these be the lightest wounds you ever receive—

"That was a later addition as the aristocracy turned weak and decadent. The lightest wounds. Death is the stuff of war; pain and injury are its currency." Renee walked Tails like a repen, letting the chain dangle lightly from the fingers of her left hand, swinging loosely back to the ring from whence it anchored his wrists and ankles. His palms and feet were soaked, his ears burning hot, his nose sticky from trying to pant through it; more than a third of the way into her routine he was in no condition to fight. The blows she would give him at the end of the workout would not be a fight, just a beating, as she so often told him. "The lightest wounds is not a well-wish. It is a promise given to a slave: if you obey, there will be no more punishment. A Mobian Lord who made such promises would lose his land and his warriors.

"The knighting ritual was a formal submission rite, practiced by one of the sons of our great King Vodavin, when Mobius Major was being forged. Kneeling is the act of making oneself helpless before a superior. Remember?"

You've only told it to me about a million times, Tails thought.

"In the early, forceful days of the Kingdom, the King did not make the meaning of the act implicit. Every new knight and lord was a possible rival for the throne. How to trust them? They would kneel before the King."

She pushed Tails to sit in a leg adduction machine, then stayed behind him, resting her hands lightly on his shoulders. "And the King would swing the flat of his sword. And dislocate one arm—" Renee squeezed his right shoulder. Not hard enough to actually hurt. ". . . and the other. A difficult feat, but he would practice on peasants and criminals.

"The knights would bite their tongues, or vomit. They would weep. And the King would reach down, scrape their bones back into place, stand them on their feet, knowing that he possessed a new creature. That is what it is to be a knight, Sir Miles. My brothers and sisters aren't changing Mobius, fox. We're restoring it. We're the highest expression of its most ancient genius—"

He kicked against the footrests, trying to—he didn't know what. Trying to drive his skull into her chin, but he had no angle. She clubbed him in the side of the head with her fist, woozy dull ache blossoming in his brain and ear, and then her fist slammed into the side of his neck, and he shrank like a bug in a flame, spasming, muscles locked tight, grimacing snout pressed against the site of the blow, wet sounds coming from his throat.

Renee leaned over him, studying his agony, and drove her fist sharply against the top of Tails' right pectoralis major. The blow was not crushing to his ribs but the muscles were already aching and at failure, and they were tied to those in his neck. The fox wilted further, twisting halfway off the sweaty black cushion, his right arm hanging limp and dead, tails immobile and askew.

She grabbed his left shoulder, digging her fingers into his underfur, and clamped him against the seat. Two more punches, the same spot. Exactly the same. Then she threw him to the scant padding of the floor, dust and furoil and sweat. Tails rubbed his face against it, his canines, trying to crawl away, trying to do something.

He felt her fingers rub between his ears. "The more you fight, the more I want you," she said, her voice soft but close. "You understand that, yes?"

Kain Blackwood 2010

## \*Chapter 5\*: Nouvelle Lit District, 11 Prairial 3235

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**Nouvelle Lit Administrative District, 11 Prairial 3235**

Sonic's legs cut desert like they'd been made to do it. Good form in his spine and arms, good point of impact in his soles. Nothing to throw off his strides, his head level like it was balanced on gyros. His eyes picked out a distant rock chimney against a swell to the north—a zit on the landscape—and locked on it, made for it in a sprint with his arms spread wide and his head down, the wind yanking in minute vortices against his headquills.

In a minute or two he reached the thing; a sad-looking, minute failed mesa, about as wide at the bottom as at the top, no more than two meters. He slowed to a trot as he came into a dry wash descending from a crack in the swell, then to a walk just as he reached the base and scrambled up the thing, pebbles and dust hissing down the side of the chimney under his new sneakers as his fingers grabbed holds. Finally he reached the top, took off the backpack and went belly down on the hot red earth, smelled the ripe tang of the meager dirt in his nose. The sun beat down on his quills and his sweat slowly dampened the dust.

As soon as he'd been able to get around outside on his own two feet—well, one foot and a length of capped, tempered steel pipe that he used as a cane—the long days and the hot air had instantly touched the summer spot in him and cracked his winter fur. He still had that insatiable spring urge to get it off, to get all that itchy stuff off, but his black coat was heavily splotched with blue, like some shirt that had gotten a bad dose of bleach in the wash, and the basic friction of motion constantly pulled the broken, old hairs into thick, loose black mats on his chest and shoulders that he would idly scratch free and throw away. His quills were longer-lived, but there were little pools of blue on his back and head, still inside a continent of charred black and smoldering red.

In short, the hedgehog looked like shit.

The land around him did, too. Sonic knew from an ad he'd seen once for the Nature Channel that actually Deserts Are Beautiful and Fragile Ecosystems and filled with lots of life that you can't see. So what? What's the point of a bunch of life that you can't tell is there? As far as it mattered to Sonic, there was nothing alive in the desert but the big, tired-looking lizards that didn't bother to scurry under rocks before he passed, and the distant lines of Robotnik's supply caravans, staining the sky with boiling clouds of dust and octane smoke.

That and Amanda, back at the Bot Cave. Hiding down in the rocks like a scorpion.

In spite of everything, though, he felt kind of good. His heart lightened about five minutes into his run today when, suddenly and mysteriously, almost nothing seemed to go wrong. No bone strain, no complaining ligaments. The quadrates muscles in his feet had beefed up and there was no more of that sharp stab between his big toes and the rest of his feet when he got his speed up. There was still a click in his right shoulder when he wheeled the arm, but only near the top of the arc. He'd been worried about heel spurs, since it had taken godsdamned Snively so long to get him the shoes he wanted, but his bones behaved a lot better than he expected them to after the beating they'd got. He felt really, really, almost impossibly good.

Oh yeah: normal. He felt kind of normal.

Sonic frowned, groaning through his nose as he closed his eyes. When you put it that way, things had just taken a turn for the worse. He lay as he was until he'd killed all the water in his pack, then started back.

It wasn't much to look at: a concrete box with a roof of corrugated steel laid over tar. The exterior had been hit with a coat of paint to give it an adobe look a long time ago, but there were large patches of pitted gray by the time Sonic saw it. Enough was left to see the large number 4 on the windowless wall beside the door, much larger than the tiny sign by the door itself. Behind the building was a chemical toilet and the rusted skeleton of a microwave relay tower, tumbled lengthwise over the chainlink and razorwire that had once held it on its concrete foundation. The beams were still blackened and shredded from where some hardpack explosive had taken it down.

Inside it was dark and cooler, a feeling of damp that would sometimes brush at your face like a surprise kiss. There wasn't much to the room. The only original stuff was a steel table, a steel chair, and a raised cement stand with a pipe rising out of it in the middle of the room. It was originally Durango Deep-Level Aquifer Monitoring Well Number 4, but Amanda had cut off the piezometer and built a pump onto the top; the two of them were stealing water from the Durango River to the west before it got there, but it didn't look like environmental concerns were at the forefront of anyone's mind anymore. Along the wall were a couple of crates of Lachels Army MREs and a sleeping bag. These were for Sonic.

Amanda sat across the room. This was not only what she was doing as Sonic entered, it was what she was doing almost all the time. Neither of them went outside very much. Amanda didn't because Snively had told her not to. He didn't seem worried about anyone from the Mechanized Army or even what was left of the Interior Ministry showing up, but he'd warned the both of them to keep out of the eyes of the wolves, who could be operating anywhere at any time.

But Sonic had another good excuse for not going outside, which was that Amanda had beat him up worse than he'd ever been before. Amanda just sat there, all day, most days. Sonic thought she was meditating. Instead of eating, she drank a white sludge out of some kind of scientific-looking containers, lots of little numbers and letters written on the outside.

He remembered Bunnie talking about her milkshakes. The stuff smelled like cough medicine.

She opened her eyes and turned to him as he came in. He went straight to the well and propped his leg up on it. The damn hamstrings weren't as good as they were beforehand; a mysterious tightness up to the back of the knee made him want to turn sideways before he could get his leg to straighten out. He fought the urge and kept pushing it, counting off the seconds.

All this bullshit at twenty-three. He didn't even want to think about what life would be like when he was a crumbling fogey.

Twenty-eight—he shivered.

"You ran well today," Amanda said.

"You watched?"

"Yes."

He didn't bother asking whether she watched him watched him or hacked into some human satellite watched him. Thirty-nine, forty . . . .

Sonic hissed in pain as she put her soft palms on his shin and thigh and pushed. "All the way. Don't fight it."

"Fuck," he spat. Fuck you. He liked Skunkbot Supreme better when she hated him. That at least kept her away. But like the burned baby avoids the flame, the baby who kicks the everliving shit out of the flame touches it whenever she wants. It had done wonders for her self-esteem and she'd quickly developed an annoying, offensive familiarity with him. Do you feel a pain at the femur? Any blood in your stool this week? Do you want to have some of my milkshake?

"You're trying too hard; that's tensing the muscles. Relax."

That's not the point, bitch! She squinted as she felt his knee push back against her hand, and he saw her squint and before he knew it his quills were up.

She pushed down harder, inching her thumb up on his patella. A memory of shattered bones made him loose his leg, slowly. He grimaced, closing his eyes as the muscle stretched and pain blossomed in his calf and the top of his gluteus.

"You're only hurting yourself if you don't," Amanda said.

"I don't care."

"Proper upkeep of your—"

Sonic jerked his leg out of her grasp, scraping the heel of his shoe off the well, and fell on his side. "Fuck!" he rolled to his bag, leaving tufts of black fur that floated in the dusty sun from the filthy plastic-patched windows. He sat on his haunches. Already his calves seemed to be tightening up along the outside of his ankles. If he didn't stretch after a good thirty klicks in the desert heat, his pushups tonight were going to be agony, and were going to finish before he had what he wanted.

They were going to be agony. He wasn't going to get the reps he wanted.

Amanda followed, feet scraping and scuffing the cement, and sat with a crunch on the well casing. "You looked good today. You're much stronger than you have been."

"Whoop-de-shit." He hugged his knees, lowered his forehead to his crossed wrists, smelled his sweat as it went stale.

"You'll be able to fight soon. Another month at the most."

"Great." Without looking up, he waggled his finger at the side of his head, just below the ear. "Call your boss and tell him the good news."

"I already did. And my antenna is in my spine, not my skull."

"Great."

"And he's your boss, too."

"No he's not. And you're not my commander or my programmer or my mechanic. And I'm not your robot." He sat back, a pair of old quills brushing loose against the wall, and looked her in her eyes. "Or your friend. If I take care of myself or I don't, it's not your business. I'm here to find out about my uncle and that's it."

Without a word, she got up and returned to her seat on the floor. She folded her legs and closing her eyes.

"What do you do all day?" Sonic asked.

"Mostly watch television," she replied with calm equanimity.

He watched her a moment longer, silent and alone on a dusty cement floor, then lay belly-down on his sleeping bag. He lay on his neck funny, to spite her.

**Place Unknown, Time Unknown**

Two months. Or four, maybe. Back in Ironlock, he'd tried to discourage counting the days, had to quietly give Jimmy the chipmunk a direct order to stop carving lines in the wall. He'd kept the habit with him once he'd been brought here, to the white cell, but he'd just now begun to wish he hadn't.

Sixty days being her punching bag. Or one hundred, or a hundred twenty. Then a new data point. He closed his eyes, drew the slowly ascending curve.

"Your head must be unusually clear today." The bedsprings squeaked slightly as Lady Renee shifted her weight, resetting her bootheels a little closer to Tails' arm. "I left it alone so we could speak of deep matters. Your dossier says that you studied particle physics. Not studied in the technical sense, but that you were well-read about it. You read so many things."

Tails breathed. The Lady had kicked him in the knee so hard he was almost certain it was broken. Now, he wasn't so sure. The pain and hot edema around the patella were equal to that around his shoulders, where she'd wrenched them behind him, pushing him down to bare his bent back to her. The welt above his tails where she kicked him like she was trying to break him in half.

But she hadn't broken him. Only bent him, bent him so far he didn't think he would walk tomorrow.

"Particles. Their dance. Everything so precise, so—well," she said, raising her brows, "We could discuss the uncertainty principle, and different interpretations of quantum mechanics, until the world should die of old age. But that would not help you in your training. Warriors do not concern themselves with things so small. And once they join to one another, those small measures no longer matter. The dance retains its energy, but the dancers learn discipline. They have their tasks, set to them by nature, and they perform them, without pause or indecision.

"They are machines, Miles."

Tails didn't want to hear about discipline. He wanted to sleep, but the pain wouldn't let him sleep. Nor the noise. Nor the thing between his fingers.

"Nanomachines." The marten lifted her hands to her cheeks, brushed the fur to the back of her neck, spreading her elbows, stretching to feel the pleasant afterbattle in her limbs. "Molecules. They are in my blood, in my cells, in every part of me, strengthening me. Dancing with my proteins, my carbohydrates, precise and proper. Molecules is all they are, molecules that are very good dancers."

The tile was cold under his back. He wanted the cold like a lover. He wanted to press it into his spine and into his shoulder and knee and make them cold and dead. But he couldn't move. It was like a fault line in him, stretching across his middle, and the slightest movement would set loose an earthquake. So he sat and tried to think of something else.

He listened.

"And my proteins are molecules, too. Who leads and who follows in the dance? Why do we not call my proteins nanomachines? Do you know?"

He could already see where she was going with this, of course. But he listened anyway to see what it would reveal about her madness. Not the big picture she was painting, but any stray information. Useful bits he could cling to.

"Of course you do, Miles. My proteins are much larger than the nano-scale."

Like the tuft of fur he had pressed between the index and middle fingers of his right hand.

"The earliest astronomers said that the universe is a machine. They saw its order and they loved it and they worshipped it. First building temples to the sun's comings and goings and offering it the lives of virgins and slaves for its dance. And then their offerings of their own lives in study. They loved the stars so much more than they loved their furred brothers. So much more beautiful and perfect."

Tails had torn it out of her body. He knew he had. He didn't dare clutch his fist or she would see and she would take away all the evidence, so he wouldn't know. He was certain. He had felt his finger brush her fur as she dodged and his hand had grabbed to pull her arm into a throw and her wrist was gone but her fur was there and he had ripped the hairs out of her body and if he were to lift his hand to his face right now he would see them between his index finger and his middle finger.

"The universe is a machine, Miles. And everything in it is a machine, for how could a machine have parts that aren't machines? How could a machine make something that is not a machine? The particles are machines and the stars are machines and the planets are machines and the robots are machines and the plants are machines and the animals are machines."

He'd know it was her fur because it would be a different color, a deeper brown than his most toasted orange, brighter than the black of his hands. She hadn't reached as though she'd felt a clump of hair being ripped from her flesh, but maybe it had been loose fur, ready to come away—maybe it was spring! She was shedding! Of course! It was spring outside! The rain was soaking the leaves and washing the alleys and making the dirt smell deep and rich and—

"You are a machine, Miles."

Tails turned his eyes to the Lady as she slid off of his cot and knelt on the floor, by his hip. She laid her hand on his belly, felt the tension of his unbruised muscles as he breathed, the way the fur bristled and the flesh pulled from her touch.

"You do not agree with me, I know, because you do not understand yourself the way you understand the stars and the planets and the particles. You do not know you are a machine any more than an atom knows it is a machine. But I understand you, Miles. Lying here before me you are like an atom under a microscope, your nerves activating your muscles and pulling your belly from me. Then relaxing, because mammals like being petted."

He tightened his stomach muscles again and the cramp hit the ganglia around the base of his tails. It was like a livewire had touched them; they both locked hard at his sides as his back lit up with pain. He had to fight to keep from moving, had to keep the pain away from his knee, had to keep the bruised muscle alone and undisturbed in its cocoon of swollen flesh, had to keep his thumb and forefinger pressed together, because he had to see the fur there, had to hide it beside his mattress, had to keep it as a reminder.

The Lady continued to trace her fingers around his navel.

"This is high doctrine, Miles, a deep mystery of the Empire. Work animals know nothing of it—they do not need to know much. I generally teach my warriors after they have knelt before me and have my collar about their neck. But I am not afraid to tell it to you. Because I know what it will do to you, Miles. You're a clever beast. Foxes are clever by nature, but you are exceedingly so. The way to your heart is through your mind."

She took her fingers from Tails' belly. He felt them wrap around the fingers of his right hand. Lifted his arm, limp and loose-jointed, and held the hand, massaging his wrist with the thumb and fingers of her left.

"Everything you do brings you closer to me, Miles. Everything you think. Trying to kill me as soon as I open the door, while tiresome, brings you closer to me. It is not a waste of time, because it is something you must do. It doesn't matter whether you see it or not, but the sooner you see it, the sooner you will be healthy. Well. Well-programmed."

She lay his hand across his chest, stood, and walked out of his field of vision, to the door. It closed and the bolts slammed.

After a few minutes he lifted his right hand and lay it on his snout. It slid up the bridge of his snout, over his eyes.

There was nothing left in his fingers.

Kain Blackwood 2010

## \*Chapter 6\*: Hochteufel, Lachels, 8 Messidor 3235

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**(6) Hochteufel, Lachels, 30 Messidor 3235**

After each car went down the ramp into the shadows of the garage, the police cordon would pull back into a solid green line behind the sidewalk, making a cube, as they also lined the cement barriers that cut off the ramp from the West Parliamentary Office Building's lawn—otherwise, some nut might try to jump down into the dark and necessitate "countermeasures" from an MP's security guard. The existence of these black-suited "goon squads" was one of the things being protested. REPRESENTATIVES NOT ADMINISTRATORS, said one of the more restrained signs. DEPORT ALL FUR-LOVING TRAITORS TO VORBURG, said another. Administrators had been the local mobisch title—Rechsministerin—that the Overland Empire had sent to mind its provincial possessions prior to its disintegration. So far as Joshua Dursine had been able to find out, the men of the security details had been pretty much instructed to die rather than take offensive action against anything short of a gun, let alone to hassle citizens or bully some perks out for the MPs. There had been reports of beatings in both the pro-war and anti-war press, but the events either involved activists or proximity to protests that could have had any hot-blooded bystander throwing themselves at the nearest official.

"Hey big guy!" A cold thunk against his legfur and the bear looked down to see a human but almost big enough to take him in a fight, PRESS in big white letters on his black tee above the bulge of his belly and, again, a Kimex logo on his baseball cap, a huge, multi-lensed portable trivid camera rig on his shoulder. The human glanced quickly at the thick barrel he'd struck against Josh's calf, no damage, and said "Off, we need a shot of the crowd."

"Get lost!" Kima shouted over the sea of chants. The man reached for Josh's leg and she squatted down wider on the rim of the raised bed of ruined flowers they'd staked out earlier, planting her sandaled feet wide on cement and the broken stems of muddy tulips. She leaned right in on him, getting ready to club his head with an open hand, and drew the attention of a cat and a dog in identical ballcaps, a human cop with his hand on his truncheon. . . .

"Give us a minute," Josh said. "One minute."

The human instantly turned his eyes to his watch. Kima got up and wrapped her arm around Josh's shoulders, her lips to his ear. "We should get out of here," she said, in a voice that didn't belong to the fierce face of a moment ago.

"You're right." Josh had seen many of these protests, first as a guest and speaker for antiwar rallies, and then as an observer once they realized that he wasn't categorically against aiding the Acorn government. They could be forgiven for the mistake: he'd published a journal article in the academic press that was extremely vicious in its conclusions regarding the rhetoric surrounding the government's Mobius policy. And they had a confusing, shifting background against which to judge him: the growing Lachels death toll in the war had not only broken up the alliance between the nationalist and radical blocks that had made the revolution and kept politics calm for a decade, it was tearing apart the blocks themselves. The radical warriors wanted to free eastern Mobius and see Robotnik in an international dock—Josh could see hands holding chains aloft, a sign of an atrocity legend circulating the net news involving a desert town (where?) with its population walked to a factory (what kind of factory? why would some small desert waterhole have heavy industry?) in chains (that was the phrase that always got repeated: legirons? manacles? when do they get put on and taken off?)—or they wanted to knock out Robotnik and then go to war against Acorn. Or they wanted to discontinue war funding and send down private political activists to encourage the overthrow of the monarchy. Or they wanted to stay at home and let foreign cultures develop organically. Arrayed against them were nationalists that couldn't decide whether to save Lakolska pride or Lakolska lives.

"I'm right?"

"You're right. Shouldn't have brought the riot gear. Just encourages them." He'd been to enough of these to have a feel for the mood of a crowd, the subtle differences between a bunch of the earnest purehearted, a mass of people who wanted to make some noise, a crowd of angry, frustrated, frightened people, a mob looking for a fight, and the way all of them overlapped. The vote on the national budget was tomorrow, and no one in power wanted to have less than twenty-four hours to get into the parking garage with its underground tunnels to the parliament. They'd drawn a tremendous crowd, because under the Republic's written constitution, discretionary military expenditures could not be authorized for a period of more than twelve months. The pro-war contingent had the votes for reauthorization locked up, especially with the rest of the budget in the bargain.

Josh and Kima were in town because it was summer quarter for both of them—for some obscure reason possibly having to do with an ugly departure from the Foreign Affairs Department, Josh had a hard time getting picked up for grad literature work and was working nights teaching creative writing at Winstone County College—and because OLR wanted him for the fourth head in a roundtable commentary at the Hochteufel studios. They'd blown a good portion of their discretionary income on a long, leisurely breakfast in one of the downtown Gasthause, mountain-men style, all sausages and sausages and sausages until they'd had to practically push each other through the paces dictated by the architecture-walk pamphlet, skyscrapers to limestone and back again. Then before he had to go to work, Josh decided to take Kima to one of these protests he was always going to.

Dress to move. Yes, this means dressing auf Mobisch, both of them in light polyester summer shorts, Kima in a vest jacket and enough cloth to hide her breasts (a not insubstantial amount). Yes, this will mean a fight with weirdo Lakolska racialists if you run into them, but there are fewer of them than you think, and they're easy to spot.

And now the time to move was almost at hand. The distribution of hotheads and potheads was skewing hard as people snaked forward toward at the latest arrival, coming in low over the treetops and streetlights without the thrum of a VTOL. A Bryson Summerwind, limousine black, even its windows and windshield tinted until you wondered why the tiny little black hole didn't have an accretion disk, the quiet hum of its antigrav lifts inaudible over the shouts of the protesters. MP Pawel "Pav" Pavlovski, money in arms and financial instruments, his district fed by the tax base of Stern Mayer Waffen's plant and its voters heavy on his own employees. Rich, untouchable, and making money off the war. Easily the most hated man in Lachels politics.

The eggs started flying.

"Follow me," Josh said to Kima, leaping down off the glorified flowerpot, landing with a loud huff. The cameraman was already climbing up to claim his vacated spot, one of his crew holding up a phone to catch the way the eggs arced away from the gravity drives but smacked into the minute round wheels at the end of the extended landing stalks. Josh felt Kima impact beside him, grabbed her arm and started barreling forward, ignoring the shoulders and keeping his steps short enough to ignore the ankles until he ran straight into a human that wouldn't yield. They tumbled forward until the Josh was practically lying on the human, his left hand pressed to the cracked brown leather on the human's right shoulder, feeling the squirming support from the bodies behind him.

He had a sickly beer-drinker's face, a memory of fat in his cheeks that made the flesh seem to run like wax, thin strands of sweaty, almost translucent black hair straining down from his crown in an effort to hide the shame of his forehead. "Go home, fur," he grunted, or maybe it was something else. His meager voice was strained with exertion and having a bear on top of him, and he swung weakly with his left hand and hit Josh with something right by his eye. Josh roared and Kima's hands were pulling him back to his feet and his right arm out of its socket. Blood was in his left eye, but with his right he could see the human in his leather jacket and jeans, too hot for the summer air, and he could see the two humans supporting him. In leather jackets and jeans not quite uniform, like they hadn't just come from the bar, but had originally talked over what they were to do today there. It took a moment for Josh's mind to process what the one in front had in his right hand: the handle and just the beginning of the haft of an aluminum baseball bat, the bloody edge looking like it had been cut away in a machine shop.

Kima was ahead of him: "MURDER!" she roared back at the cameramen. "OH MY GODS, HE'S DEAD!" By the time the fat guy got them painted with the lens light, her desire to keep upping the ante had her screaming, "THEY CUT OFF HIS HEAD! GODS ABOVE,THE BLOOD!"

The humans were running now—well, pushing away, anyway. Set for a beatdown, but not for a spot on Lachels' Least Funny Professional Videos. Josh thought there was more danger from the disappointed news crew, so after Kima screamed "BLOOD EVERYWHERE!" he grabbed her and dragged her past a slow-rolling car, terrified faces shadowed by tinted windows, into the middle of the street, where the mob thinned.

Recovering twenty minutes later at a hotel bar a couple of blocks away, a hotel they could never to afford to stay at, maitre dee backed up with a couple of armed guards for Budget Week. Nothing but sportcoats, business skirts and a string of three cosmopolitans for Kima's shattered nerves and shaking hands. "Why would you go to any of these?"

"This one was the worst I've—"

"Why do you go outside?" she asked, looking at her drink.

The sick part was, part of Josh wanted this. He'd expected to spend a couple of years saving the world, not to throw away the faint beginnings of a career and wind up working catch as catch can, listening to the turgid prose of disappointed Jimmy's countermen for six thousand marks a year, living off Dr. Kima Grigg's Assistant Professor's salary at Independence University. She published articles in Nature and International Journal of High-Energy Physics. He once got the Allgemeine Zeitung to publish a letter to the editor. And now she was remembering—imagining—that he'd stared down as bad as this when he was working for the Lachels Foreign Affairs Department in the embassy in Mobius. Admiring him. Depending on him.

Afraid to go outside.

He grabbed her by the wrist, squeezed. "You can't stay inside just because some people are angry. And not only was that the worst I've ever seen, I can tell you those guys weren't protestors. They were just out to hurt someone and thought a riot would be a great place to do it."

"You don't—" Kima leaned forward and whispered. "You don't think they were after you, do you?"

"Kima. I'm some guy who's talked on TV two or three times."

"The cable access—"

"Ten times."

"You know things, though," she hissed.

Josh knew things. Such as: that the government of Lachels had done its best to sabotage anti-Robotnik rebellions in Mobius as often as it had supported them; that it had attempted to assassinate the Queen (while she was still hiding in the wilderness); that key members of the current Robotnik regime in eastern Mobius that the government routinely denounced as using mass murder and slavery as instruments of national policy were acting as cover-agent spies for Lachels during the run-up to the civil war.

But he had signed documents that, in the event he ever spoke to anyone in public about these things, gave the Foreign Affairs Department the legal right to ruin his life. And, more importantly, he didn't think anyone would believe him who didn't want to believe it already. You didn't need to hear Josh's secrets to know what the government was thinking, you only needed to see how support for Acorn's war had dwindled in the executive the closer to victory she got.

"I'm about as much a threat to anyone," he said, "as that guy who hangs out on the quad with the KING ANTOINE: STOP RAPING MY WIFE sign."

"Ugh," Kima grunted, wrinkling her nose. "That guy who got busted for taking his pants off to the undergrads?"

"He took his pants off?"

"Oh, gods." She smiled, shaking her head. "Welcome to the ivory tower. Seriously, though, you ought to run for office."

He scoffed. "No!"

"Announce your candidacy on the show."

"Bartender." Josh poked his index finger down beside his empty.

"C'mon!" She laughed. "You could . . . well, you can't boast about your experience, I guess."

"Legally, no."

"But it would lend you an air of mystery."

He stared, again, shook his head.

"Who was that masked MP?" Kima said, before she killed her drink.

**Place Unknown, Time Unknown**

The bolts slammed to and Tails was still pulling up his shorts, nowhere near ready for combat. He still had a startled expression and his thumbs on the elastic band of his prison shorts when the Lady opened the door and narrowed her eyes. The only sound in the air was the slight gurgle of the water in the toilet bowl.

"Wash your hands," she said.

He obeyed, turning to the sink and gluing his eyes sheepishly to the wall. As he finished up he heard the clink of metal and turned to see her twirling a length of fine chain in her hand. "I was thinking," she said, "that you might want to have a look at your home."

Tails turned to her, stood tall, expectant, ears forward.

"Good." She tossed the knot of chains onto the floor before him, leather cuffs in the bundle. "Shackle yourself."

He lowered his eyes and sniffed. Scent of oil; they were well cared for.

Humiliating, but everything was humiliating, and the intelligence was worth it. He picked them up and tried not to notice her eyes and the slight smile in her lips as he plucked the strands apart, four chains passing through a ring to a single lead, and sat to buckle them on his ankles and wrists.

When he was done, she strode forward to collect the lead before he could stand up. "Good fox. Follow."

Down the white hall of doors, no sounds. This he was deeply familiar with. He didn't think all of the cells were empty, though he doubted they all were full. She couldn't be training tens of people here. On this floor, if there were more than one floor. There were other Lords and Ladies, she had said. Then the security station, the small square cell about two meters a side with the camera watching from above and the guard in black watching them through the glass, but not touching buttons as the barred doors opened before them, closed behind them. When the Lady was with him, the doors opened and closed, locked and unlocked in a dance of convenience. Now the gate to the left opened and she led him to the gym—

Bolts in the steel door beside the security window clacked and set off the buzz of an alarm as it slid open. Tails followed the lady into the security room. Panel of buttons before the wolverine guard, one for each cell. "Sit," the Lady ordered as he stood and saluted with parade ground precision, but Tails' eyes were on the monitors, a flat panel wallscreen divided into tiny screens. Hallway, hallway, gym, room with long row bench tables, uniformed guards sitting—cells. All of them Tails' cell, all of them the same. Empty. Empty. Someone sleeping in Tails' cell, lumps under thin army surplus blanket. Empty. Empty. Empty. Empty. Tiger doing pushups in the center of Tails' cell. Empty—

"The jail was built for a society that imprisoned its enemies," the Lady said, giving a gentle tug at Tails' wrists and ankles. "We've been left with a wealth of space for warriors in training."

Another door and they were in a hallway, not as stark and terrible as the one for inmates. Firepulls. Posters on a corkboard. THIS WORKPLACE HAS GONE \_ DAYS WITHOUT A LOSS TIME ACCIDENT. SEXUAL HARASSMENT: KNOW YOUR RIGHTS. Both covered with dust. Tiny empty holes for pushpins where other posters had been removed. A junction with a long hallway. Bars at one end.

Elevator at the other, white hallway reflected dimly in the silver of its doors. It looked so normal to Tails that it was weird, like some turbolift out of Starfox—

The Lady jerked harshly at his chain. "No. Follow." Tails couldn't help but look back at the little red EXIT sign glowing above the elevator, by the dormant emergency lights. When he looked back at the marten's swinging tail, she snickered. "You look at that door like it's a vixen."

He said nothing as she turned through a doorless alcove into a wide gray room. Tiled. Round, white laminate tables, ashtrays set in their centers. Along one gray cement wall. Tiny potted trees between the thin-slit windows, like the one in his room. But unblocked. Slivers of blue.

Tails ran. She let him slip the leash. Blue skies, pressed his nose to that cold sliver of glass about as wide as his head, recessed in a hand and a half of smooth concrete, so perfect and deep and blue like the ocean, marked with little wisps of motionless cirrus cloud. He breathed deep.

With effort, he rent his eyes from the sky. Buildings. Tall buildings, a large city—

"No. Not a good look, yet." The lady had grabbed the chain again and jerked hard. His wrists shot down toward his hips, his feet lost their purchase and he fell hard onto his ass, turned halfway from the window. It added a little to the dull ache in his legs, but that was nothing.

He could still see the sky.

"That is your home, fox. Out there."

He didn't look at her, just kept watching.

"This isn't your home. It's not a home for anyone. This is a place of training. I want more for you than this, so much more."

Tails started to shake. No. You will not cry in front of her. He forced his eyes shut to stop the burning. He took a deep breath to calm his chest. No.

He killed her—

"No." She pulled the chains tight before he could move, forcing him to press wrists to ankles between bent legs. "No attacking me today, fox. You're going to try a week without being punished. I think you'll find you like it." Digging her bootsoles into the floor she dragged him away from the wall, his shorts bunching up at the tops of his thighs and cutting hard against his underfur. When he was a meter away, too far too look at the city, she stopped and snapped her fingers. "Up. Gym time. You like the gym, don't you?"

Tails got to his feet and followed.

Kain Blackwood - 2010

## \*Chapter 7\*: Nouvelle Lit District, 19 Messidor 3235

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**(7) Nouvelle Lit Administrative District, 1 Fructidor 3235**

"It rests on your neck." Amanda put her fingertips to the rounded front of her neck-armor, drew them softly to the side, marking its curve. Because of all the dust in the desert air, her fingertips did not squeak. "It's sticky."

Sonic had wanted Snivvles to hurry his ass up after months in the desert shack, but now as he brushed his own neck he wasn't sure. His gloved fingers could feel the contours of the neck-apple and the hollow below, between the tendons. Tiny, almost invisible hairs quietly complained. "I don't need to . . . shave, or anything like that, do I?"

"No. It will stick."

"Can't I just use some kind of ear headset or—"

"No. It would be a major tactical disadvantage."

Sonic picked up the black latex pad and twisted it in his hands, leery. About three centimeters wide, ten centimeters long, a couple of millimeters thick, very flexible. It made him think of some kind of long, flat leech. He didn't understand how there could be an antenna in there. That reminded him of Amanda's spine.

Before he could think of anything else the throat mic reminded him of he pressed it to his neck. Then he blanched his ears and swallowed, working his apple against the pad. The hug against his skin made it worse. "It's—" he swallowed the words too tight.

"It's not too tight, it's just right," Amanda said as she stepped closer, grabbed his wrists and kept his fingers just off of his neck. "Most designs use a strap around the neck. This one is special for hedgehogs and porcupines. Just let it rest. You'll get used to it."

Sonic sighed, closing his eyes. It had been forever since he'd had a cold, but he was willing to bet that this was the mechanical equivalent of those nagging sore throats he'd heard so much about. "Alright."

"Now speak silently. Breathe, but make no sound."

He kept his lips closed but worked his tongue against his teeth as he sighed through his nose. If you cover a skunk with armor plate, does it still stink? The right side of his mouth twisted into a grin as he brushed his fingertips over his new throat slug. "Hey you get that, Mandy-gal?" He blinked.

Her ears were folded and her cheeks fallen. "I'm sorry," he said, automatically. The old skunk-scent thing was—it was a joke. Most of them didn't care. Much. "I shouldn't—"

"Please don't talk about my skunkparts," Amanda said. "My organic brain has gone on the fritz, in the past."

Sonic's mouth was still twisted in disgust at that word—he'd originally taken the word to refer to her cooter, which idea he had a hard time throwing away (surgery! wince!)—but he staggered through enough to say another "I'm sorry. I didn't mean . . . anything."

"I try to be a good robot."

"You are." He shrugged uneasily, weight back on his heels. "I guess."

She put a small translucent plastic earplug into the palm of one of his gloves, glanced up at his ears, and said, "The right one is best, probably."

It didn't go too much deeper than a standard headphone plug, although Sonic wasn't eager to try tapping on the little portion that protruded. Hard to believe you could fit an antenna in there, either. Amanda was doing her meditating again, but with her head lowered rather than lifted and blank. It's in my ear, he whispered silently. See if it works.

"Testing," Amanda said in his ear. "Testing, one two three."

I hear you, he whispered, unnerved. He was actually happier that her face was turned down, but he could still see enough of her jaw and cheekbones to see that he mouth hadn't moved. It was like telepathy. He had the uncanny sensation that the skunkbot had just reached out into his head, and part of him wanted to rip the thing out of his ear and stomp on it.

Sonic had just realized that he might seem to be doing the same thing from her perspective, when she asked, in his ear, "Did Sally ever tell you about my troubles, with my brain?"

A wave of nausea. No.

"Did she speak of me at all?"

On the off chance that the queasy lump in his chest was heat stroke, Sonic grabbed one of the water-bottles and threaded the hose from the pump into the tip. . . . No. Not much. Combat stuff, before missions. She didn't like to talk about being your prisoner.

"An organic brain on its own is so weak. So quick to confuse itself. Sally needed so much help—"

"No she didn't," Sonic growled, aloud. "She wasn't your robot. She was your prisoner. Get that through your head, finally."

"I am not so foolish as you think," Amanda said tiredly, still speaking in his ear. "Even then I wasn't foolish, but my world was so small: my programming, my Commander, my bots. It was so simple, so full of love—"

"You can't love a machine!" Sonic cried in exasperation. "An android, fine; you wanna call yourself a robot, fine; but you can't love a washing machine. You can't love your car. You can't love an automated gun."

"No, you do not understand them. You speak to them with your mouth or your fingers on a pad, pressing buttons, one after another, seconds and tens of seconds. You hear from them ACTIVE, INACTIVE, ERROR, TASK COMPLETE, and you think you understand them, while they wait and wait to hear the commands they lack the power to guess, more information in their buffers than you could ever hope to use. My bots fit me, hedgehog. They leapt and danced to my thoughts, processors lit and glowing. Their antennae sing. When I dropped my receiver noise-cutters and pressed myself close to their exoskeletons I could hear them, hear the sound of their thoughts. They opened themselves to me the way they could not open to another. The way that you cannot open to me even if you would. That is what I wanted for her.

"And now I sit here in the desert, hiding myself from my owners that have been tricked and turned against me, hiding with the hedgehog that took them all away from me, who has nothing to say to me, and I turn my thoughts to Devin and DJ's Morning Zoo and reruns of Nights of Fire and Lemon Island."

Sonic kicked his toes along the floor with a loud cement scrape and stomped outside. "Sorry you had to face reality," he shouted into the white sky over the anvil of the desert. His shorts were stiff with the salt of dried sweat; by evening his face and arms would be burned, his lips chapped, his flesh tired to his bones.

Just as he leaned forward on his toes to sprint, he heard her reply, whispered on waves to the depth of his ear: "So am I."

**Place Unknown, Time Unknown**

The bolts slammed, the door open. Tails shifted his stance slightly, ready to move, fists squeezed tight, the half-eaten bowl of the day's kibble on the floor beside him. He saw the appraisal in Lady Renee's light-furred eyes as she hesitated in the doorway—yeah, that's right, bitch, I'm ready for you. She'd said a week off would do him good, and yeah, she was right. He hadn't been punished for two whole weeks, and his body sang like a—

Well, there had been the beatings in the gym. Not very many; without fighting there hadn't been much of a shortfall for the guards to correct. That was punishment, but he found he didn't think of it as punishment, because it wasn't dealt out by her. She was the enemy. The guards were just her puppets. He didn't want to hurt them. He would probably have to, just as much as he'd have to knock out a security camera or break a . . .

He wondered if she wanted him to think that way.

Okay, so he'd just been beat a little. He felt great. He was ready to rock. He was ready to kill.

Come and get me.

The Lady leaned leisurely against the steel doorframe. "And what have you done to provoke me, fox? Why should I bring the fight to you? Do you intend to offer me a provocation?" She hitched her right thumb into her belt, tapped her fingers thoughtfully against the buckle. "Maybe I won't punish you for disobedience. Maybe I'll offer you a treat for obedience. Beat a guard of my choosing in a fight and you can have a candy bar. Tell me how my warriors can assassinate the Acorn Queen and you can go for a walk outside."

She stopped as he growled at her, like a beast. It was more vicious than any profanity he had.

"Your devotion to her is appalling," she spat. "Do you know how long you've been in my training? I doubt you do, without any marks on your cell walls. A bold thing, to forgo them." She smiled thinly. "Do you know how long it was before her soft, pliable will bent beneath that of the Empress? Did she tell you? Hours, fox. She begged for a ruler's command. And a creature like that wins a warrior like you, with lies and poison, and your tender age."

Tails sniffed, eyes narrowed. Empress Amanda Skunkbot, his mind had filed away, but he found he didn't care about the revelation, not at the moment. Just about the insult.

"It always is easier to train an animal, when you capture it young. You still don't understand me, do you? She struck you the way I do, didn't she? To teach you, to train you. When you treated her with disrespect, when you made use of something that didn't belongto you, when you fought with others your own age—"

He cut her off with a bark. Shut up. Sally had never laid a hand on him, never even spanked him.

"Mmm," the Lady mused, cocking her ears. "Perhaps she didn't strike you."

Tails really wished the Lady would stop reading him like that.

"No dessert for a bad fox?" A sudden light came into her eyes, and she raised her brows. "Ah. Perhaps you had to go to your room. A time out."

Come in here, bitch! Fight me! Tell me to do something so I can shove it in your face!

"How very enlightened of the Queen," the Lady smirked. Then she turned and left. The bolts slammed behind her.

She didn't come in the rest of the day.

The next day, Tails' food was delivered. The guards did not come, so he didn't have to go to the gym. He just got to relax in his room. Boring, but he felt even better.

The day after that, the guards did not come.

Nor the next.

Nor the next.

## \*Chapter 8\*: Mobotropolis, 25 Fructidor 3235

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**(8) Royal Palace, Mobotropolis, 25 Fructidor 3235**

Antoine did not feel at home in the King's robes, or the royal living chambers. The duties he could perform with ease, but part of him still felt that he did not deserve the office, the honors. They had left the crowns and authorities in their safes, but the royal blue fabric felt absurdly broad on his shoulders, especially narrowed to his waist as it was by the sash.

Sally had more flexibility in her dress, despite being the true heir to the throne, rather than her consort. For formal occasions the queen had traditionally borrowed human fashions, and for the first formal dinner to celebrate the liberation of the city Sally was dressed in a blue dress, slightly deeper sapphire, thin straps over her tan shoulders holding taut to the chaste bosom that gently pressed her breasts to one another. It flowed like water to the leather straps of her heels that wound about and about her calves, slits at her thighs gently opening closing as she turned from her mirror, walked to him. It was almost too beautiful, drew too much attention to her left cheek—she couldn't just keep looking to her left all evening. Some of the cameras would undoubtedly be hunting for the most perverse shot they could find.

She normally disdained gloves as an affectation, but the hand she laid on his cheek was silken, the blue of her dress flowing from fingers to wrists to elbows. "Ready for a wonderful evening, love?" she asked.

They both chuckled. The dinner was going to be hell. Plenty of industrialists, MPs, military brass, and four reporters. It was work at which Antoine was skilled, but it was still work.

"It is strange," he said, "what the humans have discovered. You hide more of your body than you ever do, but all I can think of is what is underneath."

"We have much to learn from the humans. And not just from their military advisors," she purred, letting herself for once say the phrase with all the contempt everyone had for the Lachel's governments patent obfuscation of their soldier's role in the war. "Although we shouldn't forget about them."

"Lachels Defense Secretary Janos Kilenski, two seats to my right."

"What would I do without you, Majesty?" she asked, and her lips were so close to his that Antoine could feel them.

He sighed, laying a hand at the small of her back, feeling the nub of her tail under the fabric. "You're too beautiful to touch, Sally."

"Before dinner, anyway." She took a deep breath through her nose, stood taller. "Game face."

Antoine flicked his ears hard forward, smiled a little less gently, did his best to feel stronger. Sally blinked into a wide, friendly smile, and tilted her head almost imperceptibly to the left.

"Let's eat," she said.

Sally was on top. Just enough brownout city-light from the windows to see her eyes pressed tight in concentration as she pounded down on him again, her breath a raw cry from the depths of her throat.

Antoine was a skilled lover. This was not self-flattery. This was simple fact. The first minutes were the time of his desire. Afterwards, he had to hold back, he had to go to work. He wore protection because she could not endure a child, with her duties—the doctors said she was much worse than she looked, racked by stress, insufficient sleep. Pregnancy would mean either a drastic step back in activity, handing over the war to him and her generals, or it could mean a miscarriage. Better to wait.

He also wore it to delay his own release.

Her pleasure awoke in her loins, and would then flee at her approach. They would hunt it together, to lips, to breasts, to tail, to legs, full of heat and sweat, mouths wide as they panted.

She was riding him now, pounding her hips against his as though she were trying to hurt him, hurt herself. With a creak of servos in his prosthesis he planted his feet higher on the mattress, shifted, pushing her up above him as she gave a screech, planting her hands on either side of his head, mouth snarling like an beast on the hunt, so close, so close she could—

He darted his head upward and took her right breast into his mouth, teeth pinching.

She screamed. Shuddered, legs squeezing, mouth hanging open as she gasped for air. Sank onto him, slowly, melting. Her tears started as she panted against his cheek.

Always tears, afterwards. He would slide from her, hold her while she shook, while she sank slowly to sleep. He could not speak to her—he had tried. He could speak to her, but she would not answer, so she would not.

The last thing he heard before the darkness was her breathing, and the distant hum rattle of military vehicles on the street, beyond the walls.

Antoine sat at the window, smoking. The morning fog was rising from the river, slinking over the walls and dispersing among the roses and violets in the garden paths. He had been up for about an hour, checking the incoming messages on his phone—none of the VOICE ONLY messages that would indicate an emergency. He had his flight delayed out of Dassin AFB to two in the afternoon. He looked over at the grandfather, which displayed the same time as the large digital Sally had installed next to it: seven.

Sally rolled once, under her bedclothes, at a quarter past. At half-past she moaned, legs shifting as her fingers stretched out toward the bedtable. The stone shrines to their parents were on it—Antoine had decided to comply with her old customs, though he had paid for sculptors to create more accurate likenesses of Pierre and Isabelle than Sally's rough-rubbed shapeless stones—as well as a small shrine to the national patron, Vidavin Vulanis. She mumbled her prayers quickly as her hand grabbed the lighter and lit the nubs of incense that the servants had set out the night before.

She must have noticed the rising sunlight during her recitation, because as soon as she concluded she rolled over to look at the clock and gave a pained groan. "You just let me lie here?"

Antoine rounded his lips and blew a last stream of smoke under the glass, then smiled as he dropped his butt into his coffee cup. "You looked too lovely to disturb."

"I missed my briefing!" She sat up, but she only collected the pillows behind her and lay lazily back against the headrest, closing her eyes as she sighed. Antoine was fairly certain she had a mild withdrawal headache. "I missed the conference call with the liaison colonels—"

"I have warned them of your absence."

"You could have woke me." Then she opened her eyes as she realized: "—You turned off the alarm?"

His voice turned half-serious to match her half-anger. "You looked like you needed your sleep. The war can run itself for a few hours." He held up his phone. "Don't worry. I checked."

A deep breath. She spread her arms, sank deeper into the down. "Just one day without running won't slow you down. Just one day away from the weights won't turn you into a weakling."

"It won't," he noted.

"I hate it when you're right and I'm not. Have I ever told you that?"

He walked silently to their bed, sat on the side of the mattress. He was in burgundy shorts, his royal blue jacket hanging from his shoulders, its sleeves empty. She had, of course, told him many times.

"Swimming with sharks," she said.

"Hmm?"

"When a swimmer is in the water during an attack by a shark, they say he should get back into the water right away. If you don't, then you never will. Just get more and more frightened, the longer you hide on land." When his fingers found hers, she said: "Did you know I thought about abdicating?"

He cocked his head. "When?"

"In the forest. Back in the old days." She rubbed her fingertips over his knuckles. "I could have been just another dirt-kicking squirrel. Disappeared. My people could have had a republic."

"Robotnik's republic," Antoine reminded her, eyes turned away to the windows. ". . . . Seriously? You considered this?"

"I considered it." Shrugged, neatly. "But not seriously."

He squeezed her hand. "If you were to disappear, I should not know what to do."

She smiled, sighed. "Another hour. Then to war."

Drew her knuckles to his lips. "Love, then war."

**Place Unknown, Time Unknown**

Day Ten.

Tails had started systematically counting the days at day seven, when it was clear this was not to last just one week. Not only had she not appeared, they started putting little mini-packages of toilet paper and hotel soaps with the kibble. That much she had gotten from him. The reliable weekly schedule had helped keep his mind together more than he wanted to admit.

A couple days in he had realized that without the trips to the gym he was going soft. No reason to kill himself; all the relaxation was reminding him how much he hurt, all the little aches and pains he forgot about during the ordinary rhythm of expecting more beatings. But he needed to keep from losing the one good thing that had come out of it. One hundred pushups, a hundred crunches, and a five minute plank in the morning. Same after kibble. Same in the dark, just after lights-out.

Day Seventeen.

Tails decided to spend the day dining upon his kibble. Not just eating it, treating it like haute cuisine. It was something to do.

He had heard something about how to do wine. He took an individual pellet and rolled it around in his fingertips, feeling the grainy, particulate texture was held together by the slightly greasy patina of vegetable fat that made the difference between kibble and a big bag of protein dust. He held the pellet to his nose, smelled the sour of processed protein byproduct and carbohydrate, the sharp but faint chemical scent of the preservatives. He held a pellet under the tap, felt the slowness with which it shrank between his fingertips until the slightest pressure finally crushed the slightly drier core to powder.

Then, finally, he ate a pellet, just one. Sucked on it like hard candy, felt his tongue loosen the congealed grease, slowly spread the taste to all corners of his mouth: the tip of the tongue, the sides, the beginning of his throat. Then the next, crunch between the front teeth. The back teeth. A whole mouthful. Two, one in each of his premolars. A steady stream of pellets, ingested at timed intervals.

Gods, kibble was fucking awful.

Day Twenty-Four.

He washed himself in the sink.

Normally they got him twice a week. There was a shower room, white tiles, little stalls with chrome pipes, a single button that Tails guessed would release water if you pushed it. He had never seen them work. The guards would chain his legs together after the laborious process of getting his clothes off (lie down on the cold tile, unchain the legirons, guards stand back away from the deadly fox feet, down with the shorts, lie down on the cold tile, etc.), then give him a plastic bottle of cheap furwash, unlabeled, and turn on the firehose. He thought it was there to clean the room. It was cold and every time it hit him it was a punch—a very gentle punch, nothing too bad.

Tails had spent weeks in the forest and slammed central cities before he was captured, living out of his canteen and filling it with runoff from busted gutters, or boiled bucketfulls from storm sewers—and once, when Aunt Sally had been busy, he'd managed to avoid taking a bath for an entire month when he was a kid in Knothole—but enough was enough when he had a ready source of clean water and soap being delivered every day. He'd gone past the nice glossy feeling you got with three days or so of oil buildup in the fur and gotten to the point here he was scratching somewhere on his body about once every minute. His hair was growing pretty far out, too, much longer than he liked to wear it, which was with the exception of some long bangs he kept near his forehead almost blended into his fur, not quite the buzz of the Lady and her guards. It hung shaggy and greasy over and into his ears, falling hard over his eyes no matter how often he raked it back with his fingers.

If he were to be freed right now, the first friend he met wouldn't have to wait until they hugged him and buried nose in fur to take his scent.

The soap gave out once he got into orange fur about the dirt-fur of his hands. The next day he could move on to one arm, then the next, handling his body on a rotation. Although the next day he might handle what was under his shorts first. He didn't know how they could take it, back in the stone age.

To try to take his mind off the anticipation of being less full of itching and heat, he decided to push himself harder in the second half of the day. Two hundred reps in the noon, a hundred fifty at night. His body could still take it—it could take a hell of a lot worse than that, that was for damn sure—and it would help to get him ready.

He was probably going to be fighting again in a week, after all.

Day Twenty-Eight.

Forget about washing. Fighting. He had to be ready to kill. She deserved it after this month.

Two hundred reps morning, two hundred midday, two hundred night. Without weights or machines it was difficult to work his biceps and hamstrings. He did squats, lifting a side of the cot, but it just wasn't enough mass. As he paced his cell he idly did isometrics, The Exercise That Doesn't Work, arms pulling against each other, trying to make real the tension he felt. When things got too much he would do jumping jacks to tire himself out.

He couldn't be certain that she'd come in three days, of course. But it made a lot of sense, a round month. To not prepare for it would be sleeping on the job. Just what she wanted, a month of leisure before she came in and bent his soft muscles like clay. Lazy fox. See how good I am for you, fox? I make you strong.

I make you dead, Lady. He grabbed a handful of kibble and munched it hungrily.

Day Thirty.

He danced around the cell, tossing punches. Nothing too inventive, nothing too likely to give his style away. He'd have to center on punches, for most of it, given that his triceps were in best condition. Then improvise to catch the smug Lady off her guard. Her throat, that was what he wanted to get to. Punching a nanoreinforced face wasn't fun, and there was the chance he'd break his hand on cranium. But the neck. He didn't know what all her systems could do, but Bunnie had always still seemed basically mobian. Ticklish back. Sensitive ears. Presumably a windpipe that would crumple under a good sharp strike and send her to the floor, clutching it, eyes closed, helpless . . .

Tails saw his shadow and struck at it, barking loudly at the sting in his knuckles. He had to sleep, too. He didn't want to sleep, his mind and his body didn't want to, but he had to be ready, had to be perfect. All systems nominal, hell with that. Overdrive. Nitrous. Like a bomb made of flesh.

Day Thirty-One.

As he got up he dragged his cot to fill the back wall rather than the side wall. Gave him more room—just enough space that the toilet didn't get in the way—and gave him a place to sit from which he could watch the door directly. It really made the room a lot nicer; he wondered why he hadn't thought of it before.

He went to the sink. Handful of water, gargle, spit. Again. Then slapped against his facefur, rubbed over his hot ears. Sat and watched the door.

After maybe an hour or two, they brought his food, on schedule. She usually came after he had a chance to eat. His stomach was boiling, so he took a handful of kibble to quiet it down, nothing to make him heavy or tired. Then he sat down again and watched the door.

He had to pace. The energy in him was going to waste, making him too jittery, too observant, every last line in the tile of the cell, the bolts in the door, leaping out at him like they were outlined in neon. But he couldn't go too close to the door or risk a surprise attack. Back and forth in front of the bed, back and forth, trying not to let himself get hypnotized by the regularity of it, the lines passing under his eyes on the floor—

Damn it. He sat down again, leaning forward, elbows on his knees, every bit of his fur itching.

It had to have been at least a few hours since the kibble came. She should have come by now—

At night. At lights out. The whole day was his sentence.

He tried to think. That changed everything. It would be a new benefit for him, especially if the lights were on in the hallway. She'd be in silhouette—like a stage show, just like that megalomaniac—and it would be harder to read her actions. But it would be hard to read him, too. Her eyes would be—probably running some sort of starlight filter, reprocessing the optic input. But it would still be a shock, switching to it. In the darkness she could—

Tails almost reached out for the bedclothes before he caught himself: she could watch anything he did. If he built himself a decoy, she'd know to expect it. He'd have to set it up in a moment: pile the bedclothes, right, squat left. How to make it tall enough . . . . He could see the bed without looking at it, every contour memorized. He could see it as well as the Lady could, without his eyes. He built a few plans for how to do it.

He had a few hours to figure it out. And then he paced, and paced, and paced—

The lights turned off. He had reduced the plan to instinct, and he moved faster than thought. Ripped the sheets off the mattress, tossed them in a heap against the wall at the left side of the bed, tall enough to be him if he were sitting back. Then he squatted down low on the tile at the right, cold under his fingertips and his toes and the balls of his feet, ready to spring.

Nothing happened.

Tails dropped to his knees, lowering his head to the floor. Felt his gorge rise, hot and liquid, scalding his throat. His tails pressed flat to his ass as he retched, gelatinous stomach acids dripping from his teeth to the floor, stinging his nose—

Oh. He breathed deep, the air frozen, cooling his core as the realization calmed his stomach. She was counting the entire month, inclusive, as his sentence. She would come tomorrow.

He crawled to the cot, grabbed the steel frame, let go of it and stayed on knees and hands, knees and elbows. Exhausted. He rolled into bed with an effort that left his arms shivering. Sleep coming unbidden quick.

Or if not tomorrow, maybe the next day. She might be trying to test him, by pushing the sentence just one day beyond what he expected. Kind of giving his mind an eternity of punishment in just a month and a day.

Or maybe two days.

## \*Chapter 9\*: Pocari District, 18 Vendemaire 3235

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**Pocari Administrative District, 18 Vendemaire 3235**

Sonic was sprinting up a hardpacked dirt access road, rising up an old rockslide into the side of a broken old mesa sticking out of the desert like some rotting tooth out of the gum of an old lady. The bombs in his backpack made the canvas slap against his quills as he ran, right and left, right and left.

Behind him, about a klick away, was the old minehead, copper and tungsten. In the cloud-black night it just looked like a couple of wires strung with lights, like some kind of generator party—he'd heard that things like that happened after the war; AWOLs and kids going out with an octane generator to smoke pot and fuck in the exhaust fumes. Once things settled down, bunch of good music came out of it, sold for ten smackers an album paid to whoever paid the guy who'd bought the hard drives off some stoner wreck in Terscala. Most of the big record labels were in Terscala. Most of the musicians were dead.

They said his dad was good with a guitar before the draft and everything. He'd died when Sonic was still real young, but he sometimes liked to think he'd gotten out there. It would have been a good way to go. Said he died in the hospital, but the records were all really crazy right about then. So nice and hot in the summer—

And, he ground his teeth, in the fall night that breeze would sting the hell out of anyplace you didn't got fur. Good enough his target was close. He could see the dish up ahead as three blinking red dots, lights to keep planes off of it. If he squinted, and he did, he could see the fence that boxed it in—

"You're too close," Amanda snapped in his ear. "Get off the road." He'd made it about twenty more meters when she barked, "Move to flank position now. Get off the road—"

With a growl he cut his speed and still almost wrenched his ankle out of the joint as he leapt off onto the rocks. Sometimes she acted almost mobian. Then get her on the job and Sonic could see one of those if-then charts behind everything she said. Finding out what box the arrow pointed to if he just took out the guards and went through the front gate would be interesting, but would also probably involve her screaming in his ear, so the hell with it.

"Your position is off." When Amanda spoke in his ear, it just came. None of the inhalation of breath or radio crackle that belonged there. "Correct bearing thirty-five degrees off north."

Fuck you, he thought. He silent-whispered it into the throat mic, rather, but he didn't even notice that anymore.

"Further right." Snivvles had put up radio spikes around, a few klicks out, for triangulating, though he put up like eight of the damn things instead of three. So Little Miss Skunkbot couldn't just hear him, she could be right there, breathing over his shoulder. Surprised she didn't insist on keeping him in a baby stroller. She was keeping him about a klick away from the fun stuff. Guess that was good enough.

Ground was leveling out, fewer rocks, though there were nasty little rivulets all over the place even better at tripping you up. Amanda said those were from storms, water cutting the rock like a knife. There: on his left, he could see the line of the cyclone fence and the razorwire above it. Little red glints from the airplane lights.

"You're twenty meters short. Keep—"

Sonic set his jaw, pulled a hard left, flexed his headquills and felt the sound of the wire like a breaking guitar string against his fingers as he somersaulted through the fence-links, heard the wave passing left and right along the fence to the posts behind him as he cut for the blue arclight pools around the base of the radio dish. Geez, sister, how hard would it be to say 'you're almost there'?

"You've alerted the guards. I've started my alarm interrupt exploit now. You have twenty seconds to detonate the charges or we'll have to abort before air support arrives."

Those guards are sleeping, skunky, he thought with a sneer. You gotta loosen up a little. He was at the fiberoptic line to the stalk that supported the dish, cut his heels hard into the dirt and chopped a pair of furrows of his own till his soles hit the corrugated plastic of the cable casing. She'd drilled it into him pretty damn hard: first charge cuts the line between the bunker and the dish, second knocks out the rear wall of the bunker and the machines behind it, third cuts the line down to the mine. All three out, no alarms go out to Robotnik Central. He flipped his pack off and pulled out the first shapeless gray lump. Shit stuck to his fingers, but he managed to kind of rub it off on the tube. Then the wall. Kind of smeared it down. In the monochrome of the arc-light, it looked pretty disgusting.

"The fuck?" Sonic looked up surprised that there was a voice that wasn't being blasted straight into his head, but saw the winking, jittery wedges of four muzzle lights congregating around where he cut through the wire. One turned into a bright star. "Contact, contact!"

Contact, Sonic breathed as he darted around the radio bunker, hearing bullets impact in the cement on the other side, his pack swinging from his hand. I need to take these guys out.

"No time. Set the final charge. Ten seconds."

Hey, I'm fast, but come on! He leaned against the wall, resisting the urge to draw one of his guns. How do I arm the charges?

"I've armed them. Four seconds."

For a moment, Sonic looked as though he had just been struck by a sudden bout of diarrhea. Then he pulled a cloud of dust behind him as he went full out for the gate and the access road. Losing his balance and a few kph as he tossed his bag at the next leg of the cable, went onto his toes, gritted, growled, felt a bullet cut behind him as he ducked, quills up—

The pressure wave knocked the wind from him as he cut his exit, the flash frying his vision white as he bounced down the slope. Shoulder, ass, head, thigh, and finally enough feet to stumble to his forearms instead of his face.

"Comms down. Commencing attack. Proceed to waypoint beta."

Get your ass down to the mine, how about. With a groan, he started running.

"Acknowledge," she harped calmly.

Acknowledged! he answered, slapping his feet a little harder against the dirt for the next few steps. Skunky and him were going to have to have a little talk.

He'd loved that backpack!

Xxx

In about two minutes Sonic walked in past the open security gates, into the metal hallway cut into the rock. The fun was all over. The lights were still on and the room looked fine—little metal-grate walkway wide enough for three or four lines of people, little red warning lights along the wall, all off, bunch of telephones with labels like SEAM 1 OPS, SEAM 2 OPS, POCARI RIVER SEAM OPS, GAS MONITOR. On the wall beneath it, fox with a red hole between its eyes, human with his neck at the wrong angle. They both had rifles still loose in their fingers. Looked surprised.

Anybody home? he asked, meeting their gazes, a little unnerved himself.

"Get in here."

He blinked his eyes down the hall and grinned. Frustrated edge to her tone. Looks like she can't turn her skunkparts off after all.

She was in a big box of a room strung with cables for lights and a big shaft in the middle where the elevators went down with a thick cage of bolted I-beams above it. More phones here, dark video cameras, big red-tinted crates with the mobian figure-eight and MMA stencils, all in order. More bodies, bodies all over the place, but Sonic managed not to look at 'em too much.

He put his fingers to a plate on the elevator controls that looked like a recent addition. MOBIAN MECHANIZED ARMY, BOMBARDMENT, RADIATION AND FALLOUT SHELTER. It was above a much older plaque that said this was the Pocari Valley Mine, a Joint Project of Star Circle Energy and Black Box Research.

"Don't touch the controls," she said, without moving her lips. She squatted, armor plate moving around her legs as lithely as a bunch of rigid ablative reinforced ceramic compound can move, and leapt out over the pit. Grabbed one of the struts of the elevator cage, swung herself up and landed with a clang of her feet on steel. Peered intently at the wire spool, almost empty, that lifted the elevator.

Under all that jazz, the sign that you always saw on fusion generators. What's fallout? he asked.

She grabbed the cable and, insanely, tugged it. Didn't seem to move. "Radioactive ash and debris."

Get a lot of that out here in the desert, huh?

She leapt and landed next to him with a solid thump. "Robotnik is refitting the dry mine to be used as a refuge against nuclear weapons. It's probably the reason Charles Hedgehog and Science Ministry used the mine, as well."

Nuclear weapons? Some kind of raygun or something?

"No. Uncontrolled nuclear reactions that cause a massive explosion. Prototypes were tested several hundred years ago, but they were banned by the Climate and Mercantile Treaties of 3105."

His mind worked hard to dredge that one up. . . . City-buster bombs? Like that bomb that made the big cloud that goes up and spreads out—

"This channel is for tactical information only. Stop using the—"

"Blah blah blah blah," Sonic said out loud, kicking his soles at the floor grate and turning away from her. "You know, I don't appreciate you suggesting Sally'd go around blowing up whole cities."

"Robotnik suggests it," she replied, also out loud, getting to her feet. "I'd much prefer it if he hadn't stationed so much infantry here."

"Them too," he said, and his eyes found a rabbit that was lying bent over at the waist. Way too far over at the waist. He turned around tried to keep his eyes on her face. "How do we call the elevator."

She snorted, pink nose winking as she rolled her dark eyes. "We don't."

"It's broken?"

"No. But you made me start my alarm-hack too soon. Nothing got to the dish before you blew it up. But they might know something's wrong downstairs." She reached down to her waist, next to the mount where she kept her sidearm, and pulled off a humongous glove, a palm and four fingers and thumb, black and thick as hell, like three centimeters. "If we take the elevator down, they'll be waiting for us with all the firepower they've got. Or they'll trap us in the car, halfway down, and wait for reinforcements."

Sonic watched with a kind of fascination as she put on . . . . fitted the glove in place over her left palm, locking it to the armor that covered the back of her fingers. "So how the hell do we get down there?

She grabbed him hard around his waist with her right arm before he could get his quills up. Every one that wasn't pinned under her armor went up as she clutched his ass through his shorts and pulled him tight to her waist. "Hey!" he shouted as she pressed him to the smooth contours of her armor. And then he sucked his breath and held it as those fingers dug in and her feet left the floor and carried them into the pit.

He could feel the cable start to give against her mass as her feet found and locked around it, fingers wrapping those thick pads around the braided steel. It slowed their descent in the sense that the tug of the cable kept them from slamming into the walls of the shaft. But rough texture of the rock still blurred in his eyes, support beams flashing past them like stripes on a highway at night. And Sonic clung to her like a damsel in distress, cheek pressed to her chest, watching the wavering gap between his elbow and the steel.

Could you give me a hi-sign before you do something like this? he whispered through gritted teeth.

"Captain Snively could come up with a plan, and we could stick to it," her voice sounded in his ear, close enough to slip in underneath the ungodly squeal of the cable. Her eyes were narrow, bottling irritation, but her cheeks were flushed with anger—

No, that was the reflection of her hand, fingers glowing red against black like bricks of charcoal taking off, rounded between tips and wrist now as the steel had eaten the armor-glove away. A tracing of smoke from her footsoles braced against the cable shot past them and up, up into the dwindling point of the world.

"When we reach the bottom of the shaft," she said, her voice insanely calm, "you will follow my lead. Do not engage except upon my order."

Why did you even bring me along on this rotten—

"Good question. Brace."

Sonic screamed, inaudible in his own ears and his own bones as her knees bent and her hand clenched and the howl became so hellishly loud that he thought the cable had sheared off, because they were still falling like rocks, and the bottom of the shaft was a mote in his eye, so much further away than the river under the Kingsport Bridge, but swelling, going to explode to fill the shaft any moment. He spread his legs to wrap them around her waist—

"No!" the mic blasted in his ear as her fingers dug into his ass so hard it took him a moment to realize that she hadn't torn his flesh off his ass like a big chunk of saltwater taffy. Squeal and smoke and only his fingers against her perfectly smooth back and her arm around his waist crushing his quills to keep him slipping off and down to explode red against that elevator, swelling like a balloon. But slowing, slowing, until it was just a train about to obliterate them, a car about to run them down—

Amanda let go the cable. He had a moment to feel her pulling her arms off of him before the two impacts blended almost to one, her body punching through the roof of the elevator like a cannonball before she landed in the floor like a swimmer in a hot tub, her rump hanging into the shaft subbasement, the floor's steel bent around her grabbing fingers like a blanket under a dreaming sleeper's hands. Sonic groaned, poured like liquid in her lap, realizing that they'd stopped. Going limp had saved him some broken bones. His ass felt as though it must be glowing like her hand. He flexed his quills just in time to be thrown hard into the safety grating that walled in the car as she flexed underneath him and threw herself to her feet.

A black rock hall behind accordion gate of the elevator door, overhead bulbs lighting the place bright as a stage even through the translucent plastic that held back dust shaken loose by new drilling and blasting. More crates down here, stacked along the walls, about enough space for two people abreast between them, although all the people here seemed to be scrambling to get behind the crates, pulling things on over their heads and racking the actions on submachineguns. Quite an entrance she'd pulled.

Sonic felt one of his quills break in the safety grating and that little flicker of rage that had been keeping his heart warm all night set him on fire.

"Stay down," she said in his ear as she simultaneously ripped the ruined glove from her hand and kicked the door off of its mounts to flop loose against the floor and wall. "Defend yourself while I engage the—"

He planted one gloved hand on the floor while the other ripped a pistol from his shoulder-holster, and sprinted toward the first defensive position with a roar. A set of eyes poked around the stack of crates as he got ready to jump and knock them over, fox ears poking up around the insectoid, bulbous black lenses of night vision goggles.

All the lights went out.

Sonic's shoulder and hip hit the stack of crates when he expected them to and he heard the cry of the soldier muffled by the heavy, deep thumps the contents of the crates shifting down to break bones. He cut across the hall toward where he thought the next position was and roared as he slammed his shin hard into the hard angle of one of the crates and fell forward, rolling his body to get out of the way and catching the steel-guard point of one of the corners right in the kidney. He flopped face-down, the invisible floor-grate biting into the skin all along his forearms and slapping rough at his chin. Fucking crates should be against the wall! He planted his free hand, pushed to his knees, and the darkness exploded into muzzle flashes that left him blind as before and deaf and

this is where you die, in the dark

he squeezed himself back toward the wall the way he had come and froze, quills up and head down as a three round burst hollowly choonkchoonkchoonked through one of the crates close to him and then backed up into another crate, fuck, fuck, he

can't run in here can't move can't breathe

struggled, rolled and . . . froze . . . .

shot in the belly all your blood leaking out

Shots all around him now, in front and behind, the high pitched grunt of a soldier taking a round in the chest. Sonic pulled his second gun and heard a whine close to him and started firing, bullets ripping plastic and steel and chipping rock.

"Cease fire. Roll to your right." He kept shooting and Amanda dropped her calm and ordered "now!"

He rolled, arms up, gunbarrels clicking against the floor as the grating bit his belly. The air smelled like gunshots.

"Lift your legs."

Sonic did and felt the passage of something heavy by his knees and the gunshots stopped a moment, then erupted loud and too bright.

"Eyes closed. Stand up and run straight ahead."

He somehow managed not to make any noise as he got to he stumbled to his feet, pushing off his knuckles pinched under his guns, and held them out in front of them as he ran and bullet in front of him right by his nose—

No, the wall, twisting his right wrist as it pushed his pistol flat and his finger off the trigger.

"Flat—" Amanda's transmission cut out suddenly during a loud staccato barrage of gunfire and the chopped shout of a jaw being broken in an uppercut. "Flat against the wall. Breathe deep."

Sonic felt his toes slip off the walkway and onto rock as he leaned into the rough-drilled stone, cold on his arms and belly. The fingers of his right hand were cramping tight, the ring finger, pushing tight against the gunbarrel. His thumb twisted against the release and the weight of the clip disappeared, but he couldn't hear the clack against the floor under the shots and the

"Fall down!"

He let his knees give way and the rock scraped a deep gouge in his cheek. His toes caught against the side of the walkway and he didn't collapse, squatting against the wall as a chatter of bullets hit above him and chips and grit dusted his quills. He didn't think to move further away from it. He felt dizzy.

The cacophony of guns were just a duet now. Someone shouted, weirdly far away: "Holy fu—" A sharp crack.

"Breathe deep," Amanda said again.

Shot. Three shots. Shot. Thump.

Silence and darkness.

"Breathe."

Sonic's whole body ached; his head swam in the darkness. He suddenly realized he wasn't breathing.

Clanks of metal on metal, coming closer, fast. "Breathe."

He opened his mouth wide. Air came into it. It did not come into his lungs. Squeaks from his throat.

Strong hands pulled him away from the wall. They grasped his chin and tilted his head back, his headquills scratching on armor plate. "Breathe."

He couldn't, he couldn't breathe—

Fingers pinched his nose, tight. He snorted against them, choked, drew a huge, belly-swelling breath through his mouth. Panted, chest heaving, muscles limp.

Amanda sighed. Something weird about the voice, somehow broader and reverberant. Took him a moment to realize she was speaking out loud. "You would really do better to obey my orders."

**Place Unknown, Time Unknown**

Day Thirty-Five.

"You bitch!" Tails shouted it at the forward camera, then stomped to turn away from her while he yelled some more and found himself staring at another tiny lens. "You fucking bitch, I get it! You can keep me in here as long as you want!"

He one handed his kibble-dish at the sink; it rebounded in a disgusting spray of brown that felt like it should squelch rather than rattle off the walls.

"Know what else you can do? Cyanide in the ventilation system! Can't help breathing, right? Shoot me from the food-door! Toss in a frag grenade and slam it closed!" He dragged the bed from the wall and with a yap of a scream turned it on one leg and slammed it into the wall with a clang. "I get it! What did you think, I was confused about being in fucking prison?"

The legs of the cot scraped viciously on the tiles as Tails dragged it to the door, the mattress flopping free. It made a wonderfully hollow bang as he slammed it against the door. He could feel the sound reverberating in the space behind it, and in his humerus. They were pricking up their ears at the guard station.

"Guess they still got some work to do on that old AI, huh, Lady?"

His muscles burned as he made a rhythm out of it. He grinned as he saw the groove he was working in the steel.

"I'm" BANG "not" BANG "stupid" BANG "you" BANG "dumb" BANG "robot!"

BANG. BANG. BANG.

After a while Tails' limbs were on fire and he slammed the bed into the cut in the door and fell back the kibble and the floor, arms spread wide, chest heaving. Laughter rasped past his teeth with every gasp, his eyes lingering on the scarred door with a deep, deep feeling of pleasure.

Oh, that was good.

Day Forty-Seven

The food-slot opened . Tails shot his hand out and felt the kibble bowl rock, heard the clatter of pellets in the hall. "Asshole! Fight me!" He kept slapping the floor with his hand as he heard the guard step back. "What a fucking coward! I got one arm, shithead!" He gave a harsh, cackling laugh as he pressed his cheek to the door's steel, pushing his arm as far as it would go—the edge of a boot-toe! And it backed away! "You know, you gotta look out, there's this crazy pine marten bitch with nanites in her running this place, and she loves to fight—"

A heel stamped down on his knuckles. There was a pop and there was a scream as Tails rolled back into his cell, clutching his hand. A moment later the kibble-bowl slid in hard, scraping to the center of the room, trailing pellets all the way.

"Gray fur! I saw gray fur!" Tails shouted at the slot. It slammed shut. "When I break out, everyone I see with gray fur is dead!" He laughed. "Roll up your socks if you wanna live, you stupid bastard!"

He kept laughing through his clenched teeth as he bent the fingers. Hot and swollen, but not the kind of pain that came with a break. Good. He was hungry. He crawled over to the bowl.

Day Fifty-One.

"My baby—hrrgh—got a pair of—hhhrgh—wheels, like you never—hhrrgh—ever seeeen . . . .hrrrgh . . . ."

Tails finished his reps with his right hand, lowered his body to the floor over his palm. Tensing his arm, his rod-straight legs, his trunk, he gave a grunt and launged the plank of his body up into a high arc, pivoting on his toes. Right hand behind his back, left hand beneath him in time to plant hard on the floor under his sternum, muscles bunching up into hard, sweet bundles of force. Fifty more with the left.

"My baby—hrrgh—yeah man I'll take hrrrgh—where she never—hrrrgh—ever beeeen-hrrgh . . . ."

He could keep this up all day. He was gonna, too.

Xxx

Day Sixty-Three.

"Tails, I have to be honest: I think you've got things pretty good right now."

Tails surveyed his cell. White floor covered by scuffmarks, food bowls stacked up in one of the forward corners as high as his head. Mattress crumpled behind the cot-frame—smelled awful, crusted with sweat and fur oil; he wasn't about to sleep on it—which was up on its side, leaning slightly against the wall, so he could do pull-ups and chin-ups on it. Kibble pellets gathering dust in the corners, stinking, but not worth cleaning up; there was nowhere to put them.

He scratched his cheekfur. He didn't have fleas—where could they come from?—but otherwise he certainly felt as parasite-ridden and foul-scented as any beast haunting the woods. His ass itched the worst, though he had enough sense not to scratch it. The most the viewcameras got treated to was him scratching in the oily fur on either side of his scrotum. His shorts were sitting beside the toilet, a kind of angular abstract structure in the folds of the sweat- and oil-stiffened fabric. He was surprised his shorts had not developed sentience and declared independence from Mobius on behalf of clothing everywhere.

"Tough shit," Tails said to his shorts. "We're both in the can. We got to stick together."

"Tails, I'm trying to have a discussion here."

He sighed. "About how good I have it."

"Think about it," Tails said. "Solitude. Peace. You can talk all you want. You can work out at your own pace. You haven't had your ass beat for months."

Tails cut himself off with an exasperated sigh. "You don't need to remind me I've passed the sixty-day mark."

"Well, aside from the time factor," Tails persisted. "Even forgetting everything I've already said, it would still be better . . . ." He paused a moment. "Better than Ironlock. More space. Reliable food."

"Mmm. You know, I hadn't thought about them for a while."

"Well, you've had other things to worry about. You can't help your squad anymore. You can only help yourself."

"They're why I should want to kill her." Tails swallowed. "Shot them through the goddamn bars."

"You do want to kill her," he reminded himself.

"I do. But I'm not going to do it until she comes back."

"Just don't think about it until then. A watched pot never boils. Just turn that part of yourself off, while . . . . heh, heheheh . . . ."

He groaned through a bitter smile. "Just figure out where the fox machine's switches are."

Tails grabbed a handful of kibble, stuffed it into his maw. Thought about getting a drink from the sink, but not yet. Ruminated thoughtfully, listening to the quiet hum of air in the ventilators.

"You know—" He paused, swallowed. Don't talk with your mouth full, Tails. You were raised in a bunker, not a barn. "That's not too crazy an idea. You can't just overwrite the switches, but you can try to build some better habits."

"Hmm. Like what?"

"Well you could stop counting the days, for one thing. It's like picking a scab. You're always going to be watching for the end of the week, the end of the month . . . ."

". . . I dunno . . . ."

"You ordered the cell not to do it in Ironlock. What makes you so special?"

"Different situation."

"And how."

Tails snorted a silent laugh through his nose. "I dunno. I suppose I could just try it for a little bit, see how it works. Just one week."

"How are you going to know when the week is over?"

He sat up straighter, stared around resentfully at the wreck of his cell. "Don't be an ass, Tails."

## \*Chapter 10\*: Mobotropolis, 3 Brumaire 3235

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**(10) Mobotropolis, 3 Brumaire 3235**

HAIR FACTORY, the window said. Technically the shop was supposed to pay money for that, but nobody was worried about things like that with Robotnik's lines still somewhere fifty klicks or so outside the city and rolling back. Clarion said somewhere between twenty-five and a hundred klicks and included the official number of fifty klicks they got from the Palace; after a decade or so as the mouthpiece of Robotropolis, they found that a lot of their readers were thinking fool me a hundred or so times, shame on me. Times said fifty klicks. The Daily Sun, which had been riding the crown like it thought the spurs would stop the saddle from chafing, said probably thirty-five klicks, with a margin of error from twenty-five to fifty and with "loyalist intrusions" reaching as far as fifty klicks into Robotnik's lines near the branching of the Great River and the Little Smoky River.

Funny that even after deciding to get away from it for a while, the war could still have something to say to a hairdresser. Bunnie had her own room in Port Orange, pretty small, little water damage in one of the corners of the ceiling, but with all the military requisitions, there's no question she'd have to room with someone if she wanted something better. And stars and moon, that could be uncomfortable. She wasn't a city girl. And there was no one she knew. Not well enough for no sleeves . . . .

But work was fun. She'd gotten into hair because . . . well, there were a lot of reasons. Companionship hadn't been one of them, so that was a heck of a lucky accident. There were two of them squatting in the store to begin with, and now about five pairs of scissors paying rent on the stations that kept them in water and what electricity the city grid could spare. Lisa had the station closest to the cashier and she sighed again, her feline tail lowering, as more uniformed mobians came in the door, males. "Bunnie, you finishing up?"

Bunnie waved the delicate fingers of her gloved left hand as she switched off the clippers with her right. In a deep pink top today, with elastic wrists to keep the fabric from getting tangled up in the customer's hair—yeah, that was one of the reasons—and baggy blue jeans that bunched up well down over the ankles of a pair of sidewalk-scuffed boots. "Just give me a second, hon." Ejected the clipper guard onto her station, lay the clippers down in the plastic holster bolted to the wooden divider that kept her from Pierre's empty station (he was off today), and deftly whipped the apron from the customer.

The customer was a mole and the blunt contours of her head and her pink nose had made her face jut out from under a long drape of raven hair like it was some sort of wig that was slipping down off a bald scalp onto her face. The mole wanted to look like Mina Mongoose; honey, lots of ladies wanna look like Mina Mongoose, but that ain't no excuse for spiting your own face by trying to paste it on some airbrushed doll with body, fur, hair and eyes about as real as her voice. Bunnie gave her a bob—worried about a couple of slips, but you can't think about that, first thing she'd learned in beautician's school was that about a third of being beautiful was looking beautiful and about two thirds of it was feeling beautiful. A sudden whoops from her hairdresser and even Mina'd need a'couple of slugs to settle her down before lipsynching. Meanwhile, the mole's hair now framed her face, with a couple of pink highlights right down at the edge to make her nose feel a little more welcome. And more important, the mole thought—or knew rather, Bunnie shouldn't oughta knock herself—that it made her look good.

"Go knock 'em dead, sugar," Bunnie said, shaking the apron once more after her, like a slap on the back blown through the air. "Tehn-shun!" she cried brassily. "Get 'em up here. Go in rank order; they'll love that."

Looks like two specialists and a private, so they had to throw rock-paper-scissors. By the time the winner, a coati, came up, the phone was ringing. Bunnie's heart clenched and she felt the tingles all up and down her ears. "Bun-nie," Marco called, "do you know a tiger? He says his name is Andrew, and he seems rather familiar. Should I tell him to go take a cold shower?"

"Oh, shucks." The coati had already taken his seat. "Honey, Specialist . . . Olimander just set himself down and I'm just gettin' started. You tell him that I'll give him a call just as soon as the rush is off, alright? Not a moment later."

The coati's shaggy brown hair almost hid the white of his ears entirely. Bunnie gently tied the tissue at his neck and buttoned the apron around it. She grabbed her scissors, reflexively wiped down the tangs. With the civilian brownouts, you couldn't be too quick of a draw on the clippers.

As she tossed her cloth back on her station, she felt the scissors rub against the nub of the armor mounts of her index and middle fingers beneath the glove of her left hand. Instinctively tightened her fist, winced as her flesh was pinched.

Third date, Andy. Gloves off.

Fixed a smile on her face. "Alright, Specialist. What'll it be?"

He was a male, so: "uh, I part it over here—" Drawing a line with his fingers through the left side of the bush. Given that he might be working the line, she'd have to compensate a little; unless things had gotten a lot better than she remembered they weren't paying for hair gel in the survival kits.

"Keep it kind of long with the winter comin' up?" she suggested.

"Yeah, that'd be good," he said, loosening up a little as she raked a comb through his hair, making it all lie straight down from the crown of his scalp. Good when they loosened up a bit, because it was actually easier to handle a little movement than a fellah trying to make himself into a statue.

"So where were you stationed last?" she asked. Generally didn't know where you were going until you were there. If you were high up enough on the totem pole to know, you probably weren't supposed to say.

"I was on training in Fortune Station, past four weeks. Before that . . . uh, I lived in Wolvesforge."

"Crossin' the lines! We're all proud of you, ain't we, barbers!"

"We sure are!" Lisa and Marco said, in unison. Lisa let a little of Bunnie's drawl into her voice as she said it.

"Head down, though," Bunnie continued, drawing up some tufts even with her comb, then pressing her fingers around them and cutting them down. "What they have you specializin' in? You look like a boom-boom guy to me."

"Really? . . . . They tell me demo is all bears, and . . . you know." Coatis weren't generally that big. Specialist Olimander was not an exception.

"Little guys like it the most. Guys who like it most tend to be the ones to get into it." She worked quick, moving to the right beneath his ear, then working up to his crown. "But no."

"No. I'm uh, a bot guy, actually. I did some electronics in high school. Guess that's enough."

His phrasing froze her for a second, before she realized what he meant. They were only putting together their first tech infantry company when she left the Queen's service, as they said. Most heavy manufacturing in Mobius was out east, where land and hands were cheap, so bot breakers were in greater demand than bot operators. Mechanized Army had blown the Swat factory in the south town and everyone in a couple of blocks of it higher than a sophomore on spring break before they pulled out of the city, the bastards. "They got stock for you?" she asked, not worrying for once whether she was pushing into Classified Info.

"Nah. They say they're putting us out with normal squads, see what we can scavenge in the field."

"They got you practiced on the Swat Twos? I only heard talk, but I hear they look like like a big ol' linebacker, stead of a bunch of stalks and wires think they're a person."

"Yeah. Look a lot clunkier. Are, too, but they're a hell of a lot cheaper to make. Cut down on everything. Just two lenses, too, instead of three." Bunnie stifled a wince as he turned his head more than a little slightly to look back at her. "You really know your stuff, don't you? . . . . What outfit were you with?"

"Aw, can't remember." He flattened his ears at that one. She was shy about it, but she had to explain. "We weren't using numbers and stuff when I got started."

As usually happened, being coy about it only made the coati's ears sink a little lower in awe. And as usually happened, she wondered if he thought she was some sort of show off. "Head steady. May want to close your eyes," she said, combing his forelocks straight down over his face.

"Why'd you quit?" he asked.

She sighed, carefully slicing at a slight angle to compensate for the part. "Bad injury. Got prosthetics, both feet." She decided to leave out the story about the burn on her arm.

"Oh, man, I'm sorry—"

"It's fine. Get around on 'em just dandy, for everyday stuff."

With Sally's help, she'd started getting looked at by the docs. They weren't medical doctors, not all of them, but they had doctorate and they didn't mind being called docs. The normal medtech didn't even know what to look for, just saw a healthy young rabbit with some things in her body that should have her convulsing in septic shock. Getting the armor off was something they could manage pretty easily—well, most of it. The mounts crafted to her skeleton they didn't want to mess with. Too tightly wound up with the nanites in her system to risk trying to crack 'em loose at the roots. Autoimmune reaction, or maybe a localized hypoimmune disorder at the point of removal. The docs had been very good for her vocab, she had to give 'em that.

But she hadn't asked them to get the armor off until they told her they could fix her skin. Yeah, she'd fantasized about cracking the damn things off just so she could scratch all day, even if it'd make it worse, open some real sores where it just felt like she had cracks in her limbs glowing like red lava. But she was used to fighting with them, dropping to a knee to avoid fire with her own cover, not caring what she punched or grabbed with her left arm.

Healthy skin, though! Every moment was heaven. She'd had a mean son of a bitch whose only job was to follow her around every moment she was awake and in some of her worse dreams and tease her with a blowtorch. The docs had put him into retirement. She didn't care if he was lying on the beach somewhere with a golf visor on his head. A body that didn't need a pine-tree airfreshener hanging from its ears, a peaceful mind, and a whole lot of fighting instincts that weren't worth the couple of bullets it would take to blow her straight to hell if she was to react to gunfire by throwing a forearm in front of her face. Snively had always promised her that he and the tank could take care of anything wrong with her other than massive damage to her brain, but there wasn't any tank. Or Snively, thank gods.

So she decided to see what it was like being normal. Sally was okay with it, and after a little talking she was okay with letting her do it on the down-low, though Queen Sarah still didn't seem to get that if you let the Sunday mags do a seven-parter on the robot becoming a civvie, you weren't exactly letting her be normal. It had taken Bunnie about a year to realize that there were two of them: Sally, who was Sally, and Queen Sarah, who was like Sally, but not Sally. Bunnie knew a little something about the way you could be two people. One rabbit for the worms, one for grandma, another for the strangers that come to town. One fox who hangs out with his ma, one who hangs out with his dad. One coyote for the bullets, another for the books. One walrus for the world, and another for himself and his machines—though he'd share it, just a little, when you got to know him.

Queen Sarah was a good queen, for the time. Smart and hard as hell and never seemed to get tired. Wasn't much time to say hi. Last few calls she got a few months ago, in the middle of the night. But they weren't good calls, really. You could feel the function to 'em, Keeping In Touch. Bunnie thought it was partially a public relations thing, and partially as a favor from the Queen to her other self, for when the war was over. Wanted to keep things fairly light. Avoided some topics, such as: How Sally was doing. Antoine.

Tails. Seventy-five more clicks of hard fighting or so, till they cracked Ironlock and had him back and safe. She hoped the Queen'd be nice enough to give Sally a break then, let her visit the hospital for a few weeks. If he needed a place to crash, she'd be happy to put him. It'd feel like old times, kinda.

Sally wanted to hear about things like how Bunnie was doing.

Every third date, like clockwork, take off the gloves. Let him see the furless left hand with the little nubs of ferrocarbon-titanium compound still protruding above skin level. Tell him that the arm is like that, both the legs. I'm chock full of these little machines that are constantly fixing me up. Not as well as I used to when I was drinkin' regular titanium supplements; I think they're why I'm hungry all the time now, but don't get fat no matter how much I eat. And they're why you thought I wasn't a day over seventeen when I'm twenty-two, 'cause they're keeping me in prime condition. Pull up sleeve, to demonstrate that you aren't joking.

Find new boyfriend.

Oh, I'm doing just fine, Sally-girl. And she was, really. Off the lines, safe, working a fun job. One that even taught her why making herself prettier had made her feel so damn ugly. Yeah, there was only one man for her. She couldn't complain, even though it had only been a few months or so when she knew how she was beginning to feel about him, trusting herself to feel that like a person feels even though she was a monster.

Rotor had a full life. Died in the hospital. Har har—

Trixiana, she was cutting it a little close on the left. Moved around right to match. Specialist seemed to be okay listening to the radio.

She owed Rotor a lot, but the thing she loved him the most for was that when she pulled the covers tight up around her neck at night and listened to the critters in the walls, she didn't have to feel lonely for Snively.

**Place Unknown, Time Unknown**

Some Day.

Okay, Day Sixty-Nine. It wasn't like it was easy to stop counting days. He did it every morning when he woke up. It was the first thing that popped into his head.

"Stop thinking, you two-tailed mutant," he muttered, rolling over on the limp mattress, folding his arms under his snout and laying on them. He'd put the mattress out on the floor again. Sometimes slept on it, sometimes under it. He liked the feeling, kind of cocooning, nesting. "How hard can it be? Not doing something. It's thinking that's hard."

Not for you, he thought, it's never been hard for you. But what came out of his lips was a soft, muffled sigh. "Shut up, Tails."

He hadn't been talking as much. The novelty had kind of worn off. And ultimately, he came back to the same thing that had shut him up in the first place: what did he have to talk about, even with himself? Stuff he'd be doing if he were in Mobotropolis, people he'd be seeing. Might as well cut himself. Stuff in the room. Analyze the differences between the different kibble bowls. There were none. Tell himself what he knew about Lady Renee of Pine Martens and her bosses Empress Amanda (of Skunks?) and Robotnik. Not much. She'd never talked about Robotnik. Was Robotnik dead? He didn't know. Did it matter right now? Probably not. End of that conversation.

Talk about what he was going to do to Renee and her silent brutes. Energizing. But kind of . . . repetitive.

He rolled over again, felt the wall cool against his back. Turned his eyes lazily up to the blocked window, perfect and white.

Tails also didn't like the way he sounded when he talked.

He guessed he hadn't heard himself for a while. His voice sounded lower than he remembered. Or maybe higher. Sharper. It didn't sound like his voice.

Maybe it was just that he didn't talk about the sort of things that he used to. It sounded worst when he talked about Lady Renee. What he wanted to do.

He really wanted to talk about it, to think about it. Over and over. Almost as much as he wanted to do it. Over and over.

"Stop thinking, Tails." He clenched both his hands to fists. "Do some pushups."

Tails did some pushups.

Some Day.

The food door slid open. Tails, sitting right beside, pushed a stack of bowls halfway through the opening. Willed his fingers to let go. Watched them like he was in the barracks a few years ago, waiting to see whether the river would give him the spade he needed to take the pot.

They scraped on the tile as they disappeared out into the hallway.

His breath quickened as he grabbed another pile. Put it into place. The guard took the bowls out. Tails was relieved. Stacked up all along the walls beside the door, making the cell smaller. They were driving him mad. Felt like they were going to topple over on to him. He needed to get control over some of the mess in here, and trying to send some of the bowls back out seemed like the best bet. Hell, even when you got sent to your room, they brought you food and stuff, right?

Tails' heart felt lighter and lighter the more bowls he passed into the hall. He wanted to kiss the guard. It was weird, the way cleaning up always took a weight off the mind. Maybe he'd put the cot back together today, too. Sweep the old kibble off the corner and put it in today's bowl, then send it out tomorrow! He grinned at the thought, finally everything in here spic and span. What a good fox, you weren't even told and you've cleaned up your—

His fingers seized tightly around the last little stack of bowls and pulled them back with all his might. They gave, then didn't—guard already had his dirty hands on them—brace against the wall, dammit, he should've had his feet against the wall, not let this bastard pull his hand out through the door, no, no—

He barked in pain as a boot slammed down on his fingers. Drew his hand back in a moment before the day's kibble scraped in.

"Fuck you!" he shouted as the door slammed. "Godsdamned bastard! I'll kill you! I'll kill all of you!"

Some Day.

Tails lay in the center of the floor. Every muscle slack. The time marked by the metronome of his breathing. Belly swells. Belly relaxes. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale.

"I'm dying," he breathed.

Inhale. Exhale. Closed his eyes. Feel where the ceiling is. He had a sense for where he was in the room, a perfect sense of the walls and the floor and the ceiling and the door and the closed window, like he could sense the position of his own body. He could feel kibble and little motes of dust against his floor. He could feel a fly crawl along his celing.

Inhale. "I'm dying in here," the words escaping from him like the air out of a popped bubble of scum.

You're not dying. You're turning into a robot.

No. Shut up. That's not right. Stop thinking that.

"I'm going mad," he breathed.

Very, very slowly, you are going insane.

No. Shut up. You're not going insane. You don't have crazy thoughts. You don't believe things that aren't true.

You're turning into someone else.

No. You're turning into no one.

You're turning into the cell. The cell is you. Like a cell in a body. The hallway brings you food and takes away your waste and. And.

No.

The longer he sat in here, the less he felt like himself. He felt . . . . he felt like putty. Like some kind of liquid, sloshing around the floor. When exposed to pressure, hard rigid, working its muscles.

But why?

Tails thought about rolling over, but he just kept lying. Breathing.

Is this what it feels like, when you go crazy?

Inhale.

What it feels like when you become one of them.

Exhale.

What they feel like, Renee and her slaves. Couldn't be. They're so well-defined, so themselves. Like a rule of logic.

If he tried to pull himself up into an imitation of her, be her good little fox, he would drip back into a puddle. He was safe from her. This was not what she wanted.

She will pour you into a mold, a pressure mold. Big steel plates with the shape of her warrior inside of them. They bake you, unseen, baking you hard.

She pushes a hard mask of a snarling fox onto your face and it sinks into your soft face and it molds you and it becomes your face and

"AAAAARRAH!" Tails pushed himself to his feet and grabbed the filthy bedsheet from the corner and felt the machine stitching part as he tore it, wrapping the fabric around his knuckles so tight it felt like his fist was bare bone, till it cut into his palm, then wrapping again, harder, both fists until his fingers were curled so tight that he couldn't hold things any more and he snapped his fists apart and ripped the bedframe aside to fall with a clang on the floor as he drove his fist into the steel plating of the wall as hard has he could. Left. Right. Left. Right. Bodyblows that cracked the skin under his fur and jarred his wrists until they were rigid, swollen, until the gray rag of the bedsheet was soaked deep red.

Left. Right. Left. Right.

Some Day.

All the cameras could see was Tails crouched in the far left corner of the room on his knees. Half-sitting on his ankles, spine under his orange fur bent to press the crown of his head into the angle where wall met wall.

That and him moving. She could see that. They could all tell.

That didn't matter. They've watched him forever, naked. They've watched him take a shit thousands of times. Don't think about them. They aren't real.

The vixen is real.

The stink, the high male fox stink that was deep into every surface into the cell, that oozed out of his pores and rode on his breath, made it easy to imagine the complement. Drink milk and think of a chocolate chip cookie, the sugar and cocoa. Taste peanut butter and imagine the sweet clumps of jam slipping on your tongue.

The vixen was bare to him, her fur sweet and redolent. She did not talk. She did not ask him if he had two of everything, in which case he would have to slap her across the face. But she had not spoken and he had slapped her across the face anyway, because they were in the Stone Age, he did not speak, he barked. He was a fox and that was who he was, he was a fox in a fox tribe

Miles of Foxes shut up focus

and underneath him lifting she lifted her haunches to him because he had seen her on her knees bent over to drink from the riverbank and he had taken her scent and wanted her and tackled her and held her beneath him until she wanted him and—

Tails' shoulders shook as he panted. The far camera could see his left elbow, peeking out from around his middle, over and over. His tails lifted, slightly, again, and again.

His vixen barked as he entered her, too large for her young, fresh body, tossing her head back, spreading wide the fiery red of her ears. Her tail against his chest, the shocking white brush teasing against his throat, wafting her scent to his nose.

Tails put his right hand out against the wall to steady himself. Cold. Slow down—

He did not restrain himself. This vixen was his. No other males would touch her for fear of his teeth and his axe. He felt her squeeze about him, tensing the muscles in her hips as he pressed hard between her shoulder blades with the heel of his hand, my vixen, mine, my vixen—

A soft cry from his Tails' throat, disappearing quickly in the cell's silence.

An escape of five minutes.

He had no good way to clean up.

Some Day.

The food door slid open.

Tails turned to liquid and ran slowly out through the opening. Slid beneath the kibble bowl as the guard pushed it into the cell. Ran around and under the tread of his boots, following the slope of the floor, till he found a drain. Ran out of the building, into the sewers. Into a river. Sank into the soil, evaporated into the air, lost himself in the sea.

He watched, spine and tails tracing a loose s-curve on the floor, as the guard's boot nudged his day's kibble into the room.

Get me out of here, Tails thought. He would not let himself say it. Get me out of here. Please open the door and let me out of here.

The food door slid close and the bolts fired with a bang. Tails could briefly hear the guard's boots, retreating back down the hall.

Some Day.

Tails rubbed his face hard against the wall. The wall pulled hard at the fur of his cheek. He could feel all the individual hairs about to rip from the heart of the follicles deep in his skin. He moaned in pleasure.

He had run at the wall as hard as he could and bruised his shoulder and his head, and he'd screamed and thrown himself back against it, plastered himself to the wall, chest and legs and arms and face, and he squirmed, whining, and feeling the stimulation all over his body, like someone ripping at his fur with a steel brush, he needed a steel brush because it was spring he didn't know what season it was but he needed to brush his fur he needed to be brushed and feel that ripping all over his body all over his back and front and his tails every bit of him and he was going to rub himself against the wall until his skin was bare and raw.

He closed his eyes, rolled, pressing his tails and his back to the cold steel. Rolled his shoulders, whining softly.

Some Day.

It was late, very late, before Tails realized that the lights were not turning off.

He looked up at them, briefly, stared at them. For a moment it seemed to him that they were dimming slightly, but he was expecting them to turn off. To turn right off, flick from light to darkness and let him sleep. He was tired. He had been working all day. Pushups, situps, standing on one foot, standing on one hand. He couldn't remember all he'd been doing. Why was he supposed to remember something like that?

But now the day was over, and he was tired, and now the lights turned off, and he went to sleep.

The lights did not turn off.

He stopped looking at them. The Lady could see the things he looked at.

He was tired. He lay down on his back, in the middle of the floor, and slept.

The light bathed his eyelids, made blood vessels glow pink. He could only see pink.

Tails opened his eyes. The lights were on. The room was bright white.

Any moment now the lights were going to turn off. They'd just turn off.

They should have turned off before. He was almost sure of it. But the lights were on: that was just proof that he wasn't judging the time right. He wasn't a clock. He could be wrong by a few minutes, or an hour. Or two, even. Any minute now, or hour, the lights were going to turn off. And that was when the day was over.

The lights were not going to stay on forever. They'd turn off, soon.

Tails closed his eyes. Took a deep, long, relaxing breath.

His eyelids were pink.

Tails opened his mouth and screamed, spit flying from his teeth to dapple on his face. He opened his eyes and screamed at the lights behind their gray cage, as loudly as he could. He grabbed his shaggy hair, pulled strands from him with hot pops of pain deep in his head, felt them sliding greasily between his fingers. Screamed, rolling onto his side.

The lights did not turn off.

He screamed, crawling under the mattress, pulling it to the corner, hiding, the light coming in at all the corners as he pressed his eyes tight and filled his world with his scream. A scream like laughter, like water, like feathers, a scream that didn't stop, like bright white light in the darkness.

He opened his eyes. The lights were off.

Tails collapsed to the floor, the mattress flopping loose on top of him. His body shook with a sob that emptied him of air, collapsed his throat, so that air rasped slowly back in with a long, strangled whine.

He was going insane. She knew how to make him insane. If she hadn't before, he'd just told her how.

Tails wept for a long time before there was nothing in him and he passed out.

Some Day.

The bolts slammed, all of them, like the sudden blast of a shotgun. Tails screamed in shock. In a tangle of limbs on the floor he rolled and skittered to the corner beside the toilet bowl, pressing himself flat to the wall in a futile effort to hide and shield himself, staring at the open door from over the corner.

The Lady was standing there, in her clean, starched black uniform, red epaulettes standing out firmly against the black fabric and brown fur at her neck. The stainless steel collar about her neck had no stain. The brighter fur of her face framed a tight black mouth, eyes that narrowed, a black nose that wrinkled.

"You stink," she said.

Kain Blackwood 2010

## \*Chapter 11\*: Boulder City, 4 Brumaire 3235

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**(11) Boulder City, 4 Brumaire 3235**

9.7.16 S Mobobropolis MOD

More pressure from Kodos re. power draw on abot. Wants a fusion generator in there. Doesn't think he gets the "infantry replacement" concept. Fool just loves guns, the bigger the better. Slower the better, too. Avoid relativistic length contraction.

Note: accelerate a simple clock to

Sonic let his head droop, flattened quills lifted slightly from his back as the spiral notebook dipped between his knees: his uncle was writing about clocks again. He once managed to fill an entire college-lined spiral notebook's browned, delicate pages with nothing but clocks. Accelerate clock to .99 c. What would happen? Well, one thing was that the clock would go slower. Or you could apply a T-reversal transformation, which apparently, Amanda said after scanning one of the local university nets, meant time would go slower in reverse. Or you could entangle it with another clock—Amanda said that all these "clocks" were actually hydrogen atoms. The ones that burnt, not the ones that made you talk funny. His uncle was obsessed with beating up clocks. Throwing them into black holes. Exposing them to gravity fields and shielding them from information. Strangely enough, he never lit them on fire.

Time going really slow, in reverse. Slow a hedgehog down to zero. Entangle it with a creepy, hairless runt and his pet robot skunk, in a dark, dank basement that he can't leave. Sonic wasn't sure time was passing at all.

His uncle's lab had been hidden behind the back wall of a storage room, way down in the mine, PROPERTY OF BLACK BOX RESEARCH. Sonic had hustled boxes of paper up to the rickety elevator while Amanda sat by the computers with a wire jammed into a hole in the base of her skull. Storage media had gotten better, she said. They could leave all the computers while she walked away with the data. They met Snively topside where he was waiting with a beer and warm praise for Amanda that she took like a pet repen. Surprised she wasn't wagging that striped tail.

He flipped through a few more pages, almost impatient enough with all the clocks. And . . . oh gods. More of it.

Med-indus apparatus is interested only in augmentation because of consumer pref. But augmentation benefits LIMITED by lack of full body integration. Hi-power prosthesis tears off the joint. Implants integrate better with the developing brain. Real advances require deeper work, earlier work. Measles-mumps-rubella-nanites. But people are cowards, lost in inertia. Need the King to guide them, but he's the same. I can't blame them, after a war the size of the continent, but it's so frustrating.

More: cells themselves need to be improved. Think of inefficiencies in chlorophyll biochemistry. Evolution and docs are just Gescom coders building kluge atop kluge. Need to go back and pay someone to build an OS from the ground up. But people are still fighting against GM crops, let alone a fully artificial food machine . . . .

Sonic had gone into this mess because Snively was going after his uncle's things, but he'd expect him to prove him wrong on Chuck inventing all the robot junk he put in Amanda. But he wrote about it all the time in his journals—ideas for things nanites could do if you put them in a mobian body, ways to make limbs better, how to cut down on immune response to cybernetics. How the King just wasn't listening, how Uncle Chuck wouldn't stop asking.

How could Uncle Chuck have been like that? He hadn't been like that. He'd always had a big smile on his face whenever he picked him up from the palace, and he loved cooking big pots of stew and chili and he'd let Sonic pick the hot sauces that had the funniest names, even if they were dirty ("ASS IN ICELAND," a picture of a walrus with his pants down, sitting in a big snowbank with steam coming out of it; "ASS ON THE MOON," a fox flying up into the sky on a pillar of fire, like he had a rocket in his butt). Admittedly these entries were all dated when Sonic was too young to remember. Maybe Chuck had changed, somehow, something happened that—

Sonic emptied his mind and pressed his nose closer to the paper.

Sonic crying when I picked him up. Didn't want to talk about it, not hungry. After dinner I called Rosie. S. says he "doesn't want to play with Crispin," R. thinks the Dionesca kid and Pierre's boy are picking on him. Joking about his name, poking him until he balls up. Can I help him not to be as frightened. Both his parents are dead and he's moved to a strange place, Rosie, how is he supposed to feel? Broke protocol to show him some elements of the abot designs: we're safe and getting safer. Didn't make him feel better. Looks at them like pictures in a horror book.

Took me a couple minutes to realize that he saw deeper than I did. They're just smartguns, after all. Would he feel safer if I showed him pictures of pistols?

Read him two more chapters of Rocket Knight before he fell asleep. That helps him more; he likes to imagine he's a hero. But how can he take what he feels when he reads and take that to preschool?

May try to read him Dread Sail of Red Tail. Kid away from his parents, has to fit in with a gang of cutthroats—instead of a bunch of stuck-up bluebloods, but what can you do. I think I read it when I was six, but he can handle it a couple of years early, no doubt. Such a smart boy.

About eighteen years later, Sonic still had to roll his eyes. You're too kind, unc. No, really, you are. Sonic couldn't remember reading a book since . . . well, he couldn't remember reading a book. He was pretty sure he had at some point, but the point was that going to sleep to stories about a possum with a jetpack didn't make him smart.

Course, he'd always had a great time in the palace, too, though he hadn't been much of a pre-student, so far as learning went. Wasn't much friends with the coyotes, but wasn't afraid of 'em or anything. Guess he settled in after he got used to living with his unc instead of his folks. But he'd never heard of someone suddenly going from a grade-a bookworm to a dope like himself. Leastways not without a serious love affair with weed, and he'd never gotten much out of the leaf. So Uncle Chuck was just blind to everything wrong with him.

Sonic forgave him for it. He could use that kind of dumb parental devotion right now, even if it was a couple of decades from fresh.

He put a post-it on the page to mark his place and put the notebook back with the others on the table, stack of twenty or so, ninety percent high speed clocks by weight. Beatass oak table, surface soaked with old machine oil, that had been down here when Snively rented the place. He'd brought in the lapcomps that hummed quietly, their lids closed, and had Sonic and Amanda push the junk back to the walls to make room for the mattresses. The junk was mostly duct taped cardboard cartons of crap left by tenants who were probably long dead by this point, or launched into some life where they wouldn't even recognize their old stuff. In the next room was the building's methane boiler; cheap out here on the east coast, and even with Robotnik's army stripping all the civilian fusion reactors for parts and working their new bot factories overtime, they still had heat—well, enough heat that they weren't going to die or anything. Through another door was the staircase up to the land of the living, and through another door Amanda would hang out with her friends the fuses and the telephone box.

Sonic's blanket was in a ball on his mattress. Shook it out, draped it over the cold, thin fabric and stuffing, dropped down and kicked his sneakers off. Did his best to roll himself into a sleeping bag, right up over his nose. Watched through the barred, smoked casement window at the shadows of legs, when people walked by on the street. Every so often, legs and legs and legs and legs, all in a row—soldiers. Or sometimes a whole big bunch of POWs. He wished he could go outside and that there wasn't a war against a big fat evil psycho and that it was summer. Boulder Bay was supposed to be really nice, pretty warm in the summer. He could try surfing . . . .

Fwap as a big stack of printouts landed on the table, the big black square company logo in the upper right hand corner. Sonic rolled his eyes and saw Amanda, her armor gathering a coat of dust like everything else down here. "I have some more journal pages for you."

"Thanks," he groaned, sitting up, letting the cold back into his fur. Unc had kept his notes on computer, too, and Amanda said she'd print out anything that looked like a personal log for him. He didn't trust what she gave him; if Snivvles saw something in Chuck's stuff that would make him bolt on the both of them, he'd tell her to delete it, straight up. And he wouldn't know about it, because Amanda would come out here grinning from ear to ear, feeling like she hadn't done the slightest thing wrong.

"Did you sleep well?" she asked.

"Nnnn." He shook his head. "Been up for a while. Still so much of it to go through."

She nodded, spinning a chair around on one of its legs and sitting. "Any bad dreams?"

He raised an eyebrow at that, but just gave her a simple "no," rather than telling her about that horrible one where he was tied to the chair in front of the stage at the Crazy Rock with her boss up there with his g-string stuffed full of hundreds. Riding her wasn't that fun, she just got upset. And the weird part was, for a brainwashed robot attack slave, she wasn't that bad, really. She didn't have much of a sense of humor, or nuance, or perspective, or personal space, but she was basically . . . nice, Sonic guessed. She was like one of those people at a party who went around making sure everyone was happy: oh do you have enough food? Is the music okay? Do you need to be kidnapped and dragged off to the slave machine?

The main thing wrong with her was that when Snively said the answer to question three was yes, she was fine with that. She really needed to get herself some new friends. "How's the Cap?"

"I talked to him late yesterday. He's well. He's working on our next target." Which Sonic didn't know what it was. There were a couple of places, he knew from listening to the two of them talk. They wanted to keep to places that were behind Robotnik's lines, for some reason that was safer, but there were some other places, too, out west, even something way down in Iceland.

Sonic wondered if Snively knew there was a problem with going behind Sally's lines, too. Sonic hadn't really thought about it until he was already in the desert, but this was Mobius, after all, even if Robotnik was still in charge. She'd said nowhere in her lands, and these were her lands. He tried not to think about it, and he figured he'd be able not to think about it so long as he kept moving east ahead of her troops.

If Snively said they had to hit a target in loyalist territory . . . .

"I want to talk about what happened in the mine," Amanda said.

Sonic sighed. Why not. Beats the alternative. "I know I didn't follow the plan," he said tiredly, letting his voice drone, "I know it was dangerous, I know it's all my fault. I was bored after sitting around in that shack for months. I'm sorry and I won't do it again."

"Thank you," Amanda nodded, "but I want to talk about what happened in the mine. You weren't breathing."

"Yeah, I know, I should have stayed in the elevator, like you told—"

"You weren't breathing." She spread her legs wider, leaned forward. "That's unusual. Why couldn't you breathe?"

"How the fuck should I know!"

She blinked, cocked her head, didn't pull away from his snarling snout. "How did you feel when you couldn't breathe?"

"I felt fucking scared because it was pitch black and everyone was shooting at me! How do you think I felt?"

"That's unusual."

"Unusual?"

"You don't frighten easily. Being shot at doesn't frighten you much. I don't frighten you much, and Captain Snively says I'm very frightening." She squinted, skin wrinkling with worry lines under her thin facefur, beside her armor. "Are you afraid of the dark?"

Sonic laid his quills flat, leaned back, felt the cold of the bricks faintly, lose to his scalp. "I can't believe I'm twenty-three and someone's asking me if I'm afraid of the dark."

"Are you afraid of being underground?"

"Grew up there."

"Not what I asked." She slid off the chair and squatted in front of him. "What happened to you underground? Close your eyes."

He sighed, exhausted, squeezing his eyes tight as he felt a headache start to build. "Amanda, thanks, you know, and all, but—"

"Good. You're underground. You can't see anything."

"Hey, I'm not—"

Before he could open his eyes her armor was straddling the blankets on top of his thighs and her palm was clamped firmly over his eyes, holding him against the wall. "You're in the dark. You can't see. What's happening to you?"

"Gods damn it—" He grabbed her arm, pulled it, couldn't move it. She was too strong.

He was too weak.

"You can't see. You're in the dark. You're underground. What's happening?"

"Stop," he said, and his voice sounded sick, like he didn't have any air in his belly. Like he had a hole in it.

"Tell me what's happening and I can help you."

"Stop it. Stop. I—" He took a breath and it caught hard in his throat, groaning like some corroded pipe shuddering as steam leaked out of the joints. "Oh shit," he squeaked.

"You can breathe. You can breathe and tell me what's happening to you."

"I can't," he wheezed. I've been shot in the belly, I can't talk, I can't run, I can't help her, I can't see a thing in this coffin I can't move I'm trapped—

"Breathe."

Wheeze. The hand was gone from his face but he couldn't open his eyes. Couldn't move. The cold of the bricks freezing him.

"Breathe." A finger pressing into his neck—

He turned to water. Breath poured into him as he slid lower against the wall, quills scraping as his eyelids slid open.

"That will help you some," she said, flexing her knuckles and standing back up. "Your nervous system locks up when it's exposed to that stressor. It's a bug. I've had them too. Associating the stressor with a relaxant will help. Although there's lower-level bug fixes that would work better."

Sonic yawned, lifting his shoulders to ease a sudden knot of tension he found buried in his back. She hadn't hit him very hard, he was coming out of it already, head clear. "Lower-level?"

"Commander taught me how." She grabbed a tiny mouse from next to one of the lapcomps, unplugged it. Held it by the cord before his eyes, swung it slowly back and forth. "You'd have to relax. Tell me what happened to you. Listen carefully."

"Oh, no. Nonononono." He scuttled to his feet, shaking blanket away from his socks. Oh yeah, he was definitely awake now. "I can't do that. I won't."

"I didn't think so," she said, twirling the cord around her index finger, spooling it until the plastic of the tiny mouse whacked against her armor. "I can't make you do it if you don't want to. I'm just glad you aren't angry I dosed you."

He circled the table before he could get too nervous, putting it between her and him. And then he could roll his eyes. "Well, at least you didn't put me to sleep."

"I gave you enough to make a mobian sleep," she replied. "You're very resistant to drugs."

Sonic let himself smirk. "I have had some luck with your hypo-spray, haven't I?"

"You have," she sighed. "But I've gotten over it."

She hated thinking about times he'd beaten her ass in a fight. Maybe she wanted to think about something else. "Hey, Mandy, where's the next hiding spot?"

"I'm not supposed to tell you—"

"Mandy." He spread his arms. "Come on. Do me a favor. I hate sitting around like this with nothing to think about. Where do we have to go next?"

She smiled, closed her eyes.

"Maaan-dy," he whined. "Come on. Where we gotta go next? I wanna know I wanna know I wanna know I wanna know . . . ."

Amanda lifted her right hand and raised one finger for silence. Then she didn't speak.

"Amanda," Sonic said, leaning on the table and grinning, looking up from under raised quills. "Don't make me come over there."

She jerked her raised finger at the ceiling. Pointing, then.

"We have to go upstairs," he said, narrowing his eyes.

"Higher."

"On the roof."

"Higher." She giggled as his brows wrinkled. "Come on, don't you like guessing games?"

"No," he said, flatly.

She shook her head. "You have no sense of humor."

**Place Unknown, Time Unknown**

Lady Renee turned Tails to face the mirror. He didn't want to, but he didn't fight. He couldn't. His strength wasn't focused. Muscles felt like they were tightening at random, his shoulders jerking without warning, his right knee shivering whenever he tried to stand still. His arms felt like cornstalks, like the muscles he had been building weren't even there. But he could still see them, in the mirror. He could see everything. It was like he was looking into another white-tile room, at a duplicate of Lady Renee, the pine marten handling another, bigger fox who was carefully matching his every movement, each twitch of each tail.

"Stay," the Lady ordered, letting the chain fixed to his wrists fall to the floor and pool by his bare feet. The fox in the other room waited, half-still, half twitching nervously as the other pine marten walked behind the fox, unzipped a black duffel someone had left on one of the benches between the fox and the empty shower stalls. The fox looked spooked, haunted. His eyes met Tails', too luminous behind the shaggy fall of his bangs, ready to dart aside, like a suburbanite downtown late at night, a distant gunshot still ringing in the air.

"Your limbs shake," the Lady said, bent over the bag in the mirror, "because your nervous system is rewiring itself. You're learning how to move differently. Energy flows out of you like a river, finding the places it wants to go, the places it is easiest to go. But right now it is confused, flooding you, because you're learning new rules about what you can do. What can be fought." She stood up, sliding a black battery cartridge into the base of a pair of fur clippers, the fine tines of the blades silver at the tip. "What cannot be fought. What must be obeyed." She thumbed the switch, and it buzzed a moment before she lowered it and strode up to him, her partner striding toward the fox in the mirror, every inch of her perfect and polished as when Tails had last seen her months ago. Like an ageless statue of unscuffable chrome.

It was a contrast. The fox was filthy.

Looking at the filth was worse than living in it. The fox in the mirror was bursting all over with loose and broken hairs, thick fur falling off of him in the air. Like an illustration of the stink cloud that followed him. In his cell he hadn't smelled it, not as it. It was how the room smelled, but when he was being paraded naked past the guard station, down to the shower room, his nose would sometimes push its way into clean air and he'd suddenly realized that he smelled like rancid meat mixed with fox scent, fox stink, a smell that climbed into the top of your nose and dug in.

She reached up her fingers, rubbed them back and forth in the mop of greasy orange hair piled up behind the long arc of his bangs. "Let's find the fox in there, hmm?" she said as the clippers buzzed to life.

The first to go were his bangs, tumbling down over his face in long strands. She worked slowly back over his scalp, a short guard keeping her out of his fur, working carefully to buzz his scalp to a smooth orange flecked with black. Generic fox. Cheaper than branded foxes.

The Lady switched off the clippers, rubbed the taut grain of the fur, still smooth with grease. And wrinkled her nose. "Now for washing." Tails blinked at that as she went back to the bag. The firehose wasn't hooked up to the spigot by the door. Maybe he'd get to use the showers today.

She came back with a tiny bar of hand soap, breaking the paper wrapper as she came to him. "You've been abusing your solitude in my absence. I never gave you the privilege of speaking." She reached up and cupped her left hand under his snout, dug her and fingers into the sides of his jaw and pried his mouth open. "So we'll start with your tongue."

The chalky sting blossomed in his mouth as she shoved the bar in, squeezed his snout shut and cracked the soap with his teeth. His arms stayed at his sides. She hadn't ordered him to comply, so he didn't have to fight.

His knee continued to shake as she made him chew.

"Freedom fighter."

The wire brush pushed down into his fur, against the skin that rippled over the bones of his vertebrae. The Lady did not have patience for him and did not want to tease him, she only wanted to tend to him, so without pause the brush bit and raked down through his backfur, clean now from showering three times, scratching hidden red lines of ache and burn into his flesh as they ripped the loose hairs of his white underfur out of his back, long, sharp, straight pulls along the resisting, bunching muscles.

"I love freedom, too. Every creature loves freedom."

Each rip of the bush brought a soft, whine of pleasure and ache and relief to his nose. His neck would go tight, press his chin hard against the wooden slats of the bench, press his palms tense against the floor tiles where his arms hung off both sides. After each rip, the lingering pain of the stroke, and the sweet coolness that sank into the fur, the absent reminder of the itching that she was raking out of him.

"A creature is free when it can move the way it wants. When two creatures oppose each other, they cannot both be free. Only the stronger is free. Freedom is power and power is freedom." Tails felt her grip the brush of his right tail, jerk it taut against the base of his spine and pin it to the bench between his legs. He opened his mouth in agony and made no sound as she ripped the wire brush from just above his ass, down over his right cheek and along the length of the tender, thin tail hiding at the middle of all that fur. "I am going to make you strong, Miles, and that will make you free. Well." Scraping the wire down along the right of the tail, the left, raking loose broken orange and black, the clumps of white hiding underneath. "Not free of me of course. That isn't possible. But free from rulers who misuse you, make you bear their burdens without reward until you're no longer any value to them. Then throw you away. Tell you to go. Leave you to rot in the prison of your enemy."

He couldn't help loosing a whine as she scoured his tail. When most people helped you brush, you asked them to go harder and they said yes but really didn't, because they knew how much it could hurt, and you let them not go harder because you knew how much it could hurt. If he could speak now, he'd ask her to be gentler, and she wouldn't and he wouldn't fight because oh gods it was like he'd had to scratch every place on his body and hadn't been able to touch. He probably would have started biting his arms and ripping the fur out with his teeth.

"Perhaps you should meet one of my other war animals. Alain and Ellen are in the city. Maybe you should see one of them, see what you're becoming . . . ." She worked the brush hard between his tails, scraping at the thin fur just at the base of his right tail. One of the tines did something—caught a follicle too squarely, some knotted fur, and hot pain lanced up his spine. His arms shot up to the sides of the bench, he pressed up to his knees—

The back of the brush slapped hard at the base of his skull, and he went limp. He'd forgotten that full feeling in his skull after a hard blow to the head, throbbing down from the top of his spine into his forehead, into his jaw.

"I'm freeing you, Miles, freeing you of your excess fur. Every freedom comes at the cost of submitting to a higher authority. For everyone but the Empress." Her hand grabbed his left tail, jerked, and the brushing continued. "You don't think I understand that? It was far worse for me, when the Empress bent me to her will. When you break, you'll kneel before me, move your body at my command. When I couldn't scream the pain away anymore, I didn't speak or move. My antenna screamed out the read-write passwords to my neural augmentations."

Her brushing had lost its force, as she talked. She was just stroking the wire along his tail, now, rather than harrowing it.

"My organic brain was still mine, of course, what little that is. She pushed into my mind, like a big wall of other bursting through the door of a room and squeezing me into a ball of flesh in a low corner. She controlled what I saw, what I heard, the vast majority of what I remembered. I could still tell which thoughts were mine and which were . . . . which of my thoughts were also hers. If I concentrated. It was so hard to concentrate . . . .

"Afterwards, my chronometer said it lasted five seconds, and my checks with external records confirmed. If she'd spent days, she wouldn't have had a new Lady to rule her Empire for her. She would have had a larger body. She would have had a Marten, the way you have a hand."

Tails heard her set the brush down on the wooden slats between his feet. "It pleases her, to rule individuals," she said. "As it does me." She got up and walked to the bag of grooming supplies, grabbing the fur shampoo from the floor as she did so. "Get up," she said. "Stretch your limbs. Feel how far they can move. Remember what they can do." She put it inside—the brush, she'd left the brush on the bench. Scatterbrained. She didn't like that. Things were so busy outside the walls of course, with the restructuring of the army, the preparations to purge the higher ranks of the military and the lesser civil service, the continuing question about what to do with the wolfpacks—although, strictly speaking, that problem belonged to the Lady in question—well . . . .

She would never even consider saying it in front of Tails, but it was all a little overwhelming, for a creature a little more than one year into her new life.

But she remembered that, too, the remnants of the old life burned away, the same chasing after problems reduced from the architecture of an Empire to simple drudgery, the insult of the higher-ups living off Renee Donlevy's work like ticks nestled deep in her fur, swelling to the size of basketballs as they did nothing, sat in their chairs and ordered lunch from Building Services and—

The tension in her fingers was a memory from the mobian, the other life, the way her fist would lock tight around the wheel of her car, the side of her desk. But the creature she was now had a simpler solution for it: if there was something that was angering her, it could be punched. Nothing short of her fellow aristocrats were beyond her power.

She picked up the straps of the duffel and turned. "Ready to say hello to the gym again, Miles—"

Her fingers dropped the bag. She grinned wide. Miles was standing next to the bench in a ready stance, left arm before him and lightly cocked at the elbow. He was turned in what Renee's fighting instincts told her were an effort to hide the wire brush that was gone from the bench. His chest heaved as his muscles called for oxygen, getting ready, slightly enlarged under his smooth orange fur.

And his limbs were shivering. Not twitching. Shivering with rage.

"Ready so soon," she said. And even after she had taunted him, taken her jacket off while he washed himself. She was in a loose top that hung from straps on her shoulders and hid her belly, but he could see the armor plates down both of her arms—not nearly as thick or all-encompassing as the ones that graced the Empress, she would not allow that pride to her servants, but firmly grafted along the weak points of radius and ulna, of humerus, curving to guard the elbow and wrist. Here's why it hurts so much when you try to counter my strikes, fox.

Miles looked wonderful with his excess fur gone. Smooth and hard. She could see the tendons of his neck standing out against the white fur of his neck, his canines peeking from under his tense upper lip. The hate in his eyes. Months alone had weakened him, but they had made him forget, as well, by the end. Perhaps the brushing had lulled him to sleep, too.

Perhaps that little slap on the back of the head had helped wake him up.

You were wrong about him, Renee Donlevy, wage slave marten, your stupid belief that you were supposed to protect this beast in his youth is the part of you that was best burnt away from me. If Snively had been careful enough to find him in the mass of stinking fur at Ironlock, there might be an Emperor instead of an Empress . . . .

"But not ready to charge me, are you, fox?"

Not fierce enough to take her bait, not anymore. He watched her as she strode toward him, arms loose, ready to bash his face, dislocate his arm, hurl him off his feet if he was stupid enough to lead with his right. He was trained well and had enough sense not to keep his eyes rooted to her; they were loosely focused, his attention spread throughout the full visual field of his sensorium, so he jumped back to a crouch when she spun her boot hard at his ankle, then dived over the bench when she danced through a full circle, leapt and brought her reinforced heel down on the floor hard enough to shatter the tile into a hole of powder and shard.

He rolled onto his back and kicked the soles of his bare feet against the top of the bench, tumbling it at her, but without force, just buying him time so that when she lifted the steel and wood from the floor with one hand and threw it skidding aside towards the shower stalls, he was on his feet again. "Haven't made much progress, Miles," she said. "Are you feeling particularly energetic today? Think you can wear me down, hmm? I'm a dope to be roped?"

He screamed as he punched forward and no that fucking brush loomed close enough to her left eye as she dodged to make her instinctively reach her mind for other eyes in the jail's security net. He was still running at her and she pulled her arms tight, getting ready to take all of the fox's futile punches against her armored forearms and—

No, something proud in her decided. You will not let the animal touch you.

Kept sliding her body to the right, continuing the motion of dodging the brush. Both fists and forearms pulled tight in front of her face, boxer's stance, but with her left foot still out, as though about to be pulled with. Just a moment more, time slowing down just slightly as her molecule machines amplified the clock speed of her spinal column, his fist trying to hook into her temple, or her throat, his face . . . .

Execute.

Brought her head sharply down and to the right, the passage of Miles' knuckles teasing the fur at the back of her neck. And then that perfect mimic of a defensive posture broke as she drove her armored left elbow into the fox's head as hard as she could.

She felt his feet leave the floor as the force of her blow pushed him over her still-extended right leg. She felt the reverberation of him hitting the floor, her right steel-toe scraping as she brought herself around to the left to follow his fall, right hand lifted with arms extended to handle any counterattack—

No counterattack, today. Miles was crumpled by the impact crater her heel had left in the floor. Balled himself up around it as she watched, flipping his tails up to cover his nakedness, hide what little shame he could still feel. As she came closer and knelt, she could see the fresh shivers sprung up in all his limbs, his fingers gnarled tight, too tight even to make good fists, clutching at nothing, holding the nothing tightly to his chest.

"That wasn't a very hard blow I gave you," she said. "My angle was rather poor. You're certain your body says no more fighting today?"

He didn't move. Didn't talk. Just trembled.

"You are learning," she said. "It won't be long now, Miles. Soon you won't even wait for that glancing blow to surrender yourself."

She patted his shoulder. "Stay. I'll have some guards carry you to your room. Gym tomorrow."

The last thing she saw as she left the room was his back, still curved into a perfect orange ball.

Kain Blackwood 2010

## \*Chapter 12\*: Boulder City, 25 Nivose 3235

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**Boulder City, 25 Nivose 3235**

Lithium. Coltan. Tungsten. All the rare earths she could want, out here in the desert, to make anything a person could want.

"Look, we've been all over this on email." Dr. Winsdale grabbed her ears, tugged on them like a young child. Had to give Robotnik that much: he really did seem to let his military scientists cut loose. Abigail Winsdale was exactly the kind of brain that wouldn't be trusted to run a project of any political significance in the civilian universities. She had unkempt chocolate fur, an aversion to eye-contact, and picked her nose when she wasn't thinking about it in the hallways. And tugging on her ears, for gods' sake, borderline autistic. Her fur-buzzed head-hair, too: the humans had a version of that, the undergrads called it SCIENCE HAIR! The puffy, unkempt tangles that supposedly demonstrated a contempt for the flesh and lack of time for worldly matters. Really a stay-away signal used by the socially awkward. "We can't keep going back to basics with the design over and over again. We're in agreement that the swat-two is a good, solid core—"

"Solid," Dr. Jefferies scoffed. "A solid lump."

There were a couple of laughs around the table, but Dr. Molly Lotor did not join in. She was too tired, too tired of the whole mess, and she didn't care who could see it through the natural tired look other mobians tended to see in her raccoon mask. Yes, the Swatbot Mk. II was an ugly disaster compared to the first: less firepower, less expense, less capable of dominating in combat. Depressingly, the design changes were driven by the need to have the bots more capable of playing a basic infantry role. If you can't have mobians manning the lines, you'll have to make the bots into mobians, so far as you can.

"Given what we have to work with, the bounds of the project, the basic design is good." Dr. Winsdale insisted. Without much force of personality, but that she was right was a big help to her position. "It's good because it's simple. The most armor is centered around the most valuable—though not necessarily the most fragile, parts. Essentially, from a logistical perspective as well as a design perspective, you could regard it as a big ball at the center with four stalks coming out. Two weapons-maniuplators and two locomotive stalks."

"Why not three—"

"An actual ball, with—"

"I'll bring it up, but I've been told that command is concerned about the psychological effect of—"

"Then find a psychologist," Molly sighed, and she heard it echoed around the table.

Including from Dr. Winsdale. "I have been told," she said, "that military command is very much concerned that we preserve the mobianoid appearance of the robot." She didn't bother to pretend whether the psychological effect of mobianoid appearance was to be felt on the brass or the enemy. Robotnik gave his scientists a lot of slack on their leash, but when push came to shove, it was the people who ran the robots and held the guns that were going to be doing most of the shoving.

Maybe that was why Molly was bored. It was truly perverse, that only a few years away from being in prison waiting to die she could, upon returning home to a staff-cleaned government-issue condo in the North Slope neighborhood, with a line of rugged mountains behind and a view of the ocean in between the Winslow Tower (several floors occupied by the military brass) and the tall trees of Drive's End Park if she went to the roof, sit down with her dinner order of ocean perch in lemon and something approximating white wine (very good ration cards for her position, especially if she stuck to the military delivery service) and feel the same listless, enervating fog that had chronically blanketed her room in Port Orange.

A half a year ago, when she had to take a passenger jet to Terscala after the wolfpacks blew out the maglev line for a month, she'd found her heart beating faster in the terminal. Seriously. It was sick.

Science was always like this. You can't pick your project; you go where the funding goes. You get past the fun part and settle into the grind. What she needed was to get past the grind. Get some wine, though this month's box was already dangerously low in the fridge. She could get fucked, though Tom was spending a week in Terscala. Where he lived. He was such a fucking bitch, terrified of talk even though he was easily one of the five most powerful people in the country. She'd gotten him to promise to see about moving to somewhere in the bay city. Once when he was trying to get her to shut up while he took a call from General Gatour on the front, once when she had him tied to a chair with a blindfold on and nothing else. Nothing, though.

Guess that was outside the scope of the game.

Games. The TV had a console with the best graymarket imports that the Lakolska software mills had to offer. The last time Molly had a day off—the national holiday commemorating the end of the monarchy—she'd blasted her way through a fun little humans-versus-alien-invaders shooter, Independence Day. That had been fun. An alternate-world RPG and a dark urban sandbox game (Lawrence of Arabia and Taxi Driver) she'd cracked open, but hadn't put to much use. Just couldn't get into them. She thought about putting in Independence Day again, but it didn't really offer a lot of replay value.

Neither did some other games.

She wondered what Tom would do if she told him to get her across the lines into Loyalist territory. It couldn't be impossible for him. It wouldn't be that risky. He'd kept his distance from her, after all. People wouldn't talk. But Molly wasn't in the mood for an argument.

Not that argument, anyway. Not an argument that could end as badly as that one could.

And it wouldn't do anything anyway, if she went. The problem was her. She didn't even know anyone over there, anymore, that she could be sure was still alive. Myron was probably dead. Dead drunk, she thought, and smiled, but didn't laugh, because he was probably dead.

Or, maybe, he's doing cybersecurity for the Mobian army. And he's got lots of friends and he's a Colonel and he gets to go to State dinners with people who aren't the least bit ashamed to be seen with him and . . . .

He was probably dead.

The swatbots were calling; Molly had her work cut out for her, chopping another two centimeters of their armor plate would be a feat of magic. She needed an engineering plan in place within two days, and she really ought to be cracking.

She put in Independence Day and played it for an hour. Then another.

"Markets open in ten minutes!" the team captain shouted.

"Roger that," Myron "Cat" Catalano answered, and ran the simulated input again. The program was designed for high-volume arbitrage in bonds, in this case Royal Treasury Bonds, which in the past few months had just been declared stable enough to warrant automated high-volume operations by the client, Arilou Investments—Vengas Software Solutions was getting to be a captive contractor of theirs.

"Looking good," Owen said, giving a shaggy, black-furred thumbs up from over the monitor across the table. "System use holding steady."

They were hunting a logarithmic memory leak that started significantly slowing performance after about five hours of continuous operation. Arilou wanted a one-day test run on operations, pulling the plug after five hours. That was three hours in which they could lose a few tens of million marks before someone realized what was happening and pulled the plug—it was weird, Cat found himself thinking in Lachels Marks now. He wanted to go out and get lunch from one of the fry stands at the docks, he had to translate the prices out of the international finance reserve currency.

"Alright." Cat killed the processes manually. "Restarting with the stock index cross-checks." There wasn't enough time to shut the program down properly. There wasn't enough time to do any proper long-term stress tests. Matter of fact, there wasn't enough time for any of this, but Arilou was convinced that they only had a month or so to beat SHP into the markets with a model for high frequency trading in Mobian government bonds, and every day with a monopoly on the trade was about a hundred mil.

Well, every day with a working program doing the monopoly trading. Every day with a malfunctioning program was everybody in the room fired. It was kind of stressful. Imogene, the rabbit, was on medical leave for panic disorder and was likely not long for her job. Owen, of wolf extraction, prided himself on his ability to handle pressure and adversity. He had been taking a half-tab of graymarket alprazolam every four hours, on the four hours, supplemented by energy shots.

The wolfdog's voice was almost neutral as he announced, "excessive system usage. We've got it down to the index routines."

And with a full nine minutes to fix the problem. "Killing it," Cat said, feeling a sudden flush of dry, exhausted heat in his ears. That brought out the feeling of unwashed oil in the lynx's thick, dark cheek fringe. "Start from the front, I'll start from the back."

The notion that they could implement a bug fix to a trading program that complicated in under five minutes was insane. Cat made changes on the fly. He thought he saw it—an unclosed subroutine of a subroutine. He wasn't sure it would produce the spiraling disaster that had plagued the software's earlier test runs. But they may have cut that out in the previous debug.

"Two minutes."

"Send it," Cat said, and almost instantly the crash took him. He fell back onto the ergonomic chair, only the friction on the seat keeping him from melting off, rolling under the desk, only the peaking caffeine and taurine load keeping him locked behind his aching eyes.

He reached out a shoe, pawed his sleeping bag out from the tangle of cables in the footwell. "I'm going to pass out for a while. Wake me up if Arilou starts screaming."

"Like hell!" Cat's eyes pinched a moment as Eggman did his usual barking, back from the fourteenth floor conference rooms. Eggman had an actual name, like Mark or Matt something, but middle management didn't particularly care to be addressed by name, so all the programmers and coders on the High Frequency Trading Team just gave him the handle of the crypto-Robotnik human villain in the old show Persona non Grata. The otter was fat enough. Fuck ought to hit the pool more, but he was too worried about keeping his job and getting higher into management. The only way to do this was to be at the office, screaming all the time. "This is the most important beta rollout we've had in months! Everyone in the team stays awake until COB!" Which would then become whenever people had to be up until to do another debug on the software once they stress tested it against actual market conditions, which would be tomorrow morning. "I'm sorry, but that's the job—"

"I'm going to sleep," Cat said. He slid down to his knees, flopped down onto the padding, not bothering to straighten it out or crawl inside.

"I'll stay up," Owen volunteered in a blank monotone. "I can't really sleep."

"Everybody awake!"

"Can't hear you," Cat grunted, folding his ears. "I'm asleep."

"You're fired!"

Cat took a deep breath, let it out slowly. The signal to slow his heart down, although the signal was lost in a lot of chemical noise.

"You're fired, if you're sleeping while this rollout goes to hell!" Eggman amended, when he realized Cat wasn't going to jump. Should've known better than to push Cat. Not only was he easily the only member of the team over thirty, he'd been ordered around by bigger mobians than this tinhorn tyrant. "Who do you think's going to hire a goddamn sodkicker forest squatter if I cut you loose?"

The lynx hovered in the waiting room of sleep, the boss's pronouncements reaching him from a squawking intercom tucked high in a corner. Gescom wouldn't have him; as an international corporation they weren't particularly patriotic and knew that Acorn had consorted with quite a few Persons of Questionable Business Character on her rise to her throne, no matter how much thanks and congratulation they paid to the Heroes of Mobian Democracy in their press releases. So Cat didn't know who'd give him a job. Somebody. Nobody. Who gave a shit. He could live in the forest, he'd done it before.

Or he could join the army.

He could have had almost any post he asked for, position he was in. Not the Queen's inner circle, but he wasn't exactly on bad terms with Sally, either. He wasn't an administrator, wasn't cut out for Science Ministry or Commerce Ministry, but he could have run one of the early efforts at building tech infantry platoons. Been a barking Sergeant Eggman himself.

Of course, he'd turned any suggestion of that down. He wasn't a soldier. He didn't want to die, and he hated the constant pressure of warfare, the long nights—weeks—conducting psyops computer intrusion, the lying and sneaking needed for social engineering of the panicked state security and communications nets. He'd gotten as far away from the front as he could, all the way back to Corukas on the west coast, with its damp salt breeze and the old stone docks.

He guessed he missed it a little, of course. The people, mostly. Marilyin Postalitas had taken her children to the suburbs and he saw them occasionally. Talked to children, who wanted career advice. Mostly about the army. Which Cat was happy to give, so far as he was able.

And he'd also wound up working in a sweatshop like this, with the same insane deadlines and jury-rigged product and scramble to stave off failure. About the only thing missing was the constant threat of death. The threat of getting fired wasn't really a substitute, no matter how much all his coworkers seemed to think it was. But he could tell the difference, because he'd known it as a soldier, and he didn't like it. Because he wasn't a soldier.

He wasn't.

**Place Unknown, Time Unknown**

Tails was sitting on the floor at the back of his cell, opposite the door. "His" cell, though he didn't think it was the same one as before, just the one next to it. That or the door had been replaced and the room had been thoroughly cleaned while he was being worked on. Every surface in the room as pristine as though he'd never spent a single day in it. It was like his long isolation hadn't happened, but he still felt it, like a weight in the back of his mind, of his skull, hiding behind his thoughts.

He hadn't done much for the past three days. Just sat. Thought. Kept still. When his kibble came he took it back to the far wall, sat on his tails, occasionally munching food with his left hand. The Lady wasn't scheduled to show for four more days. So when the doorbolts fired, he stopped chewing and perked his ears.

Framed in the door was an ocelot, toasted golden fur and white spots beneath the baggy gray-and-black splotches of an urban camouflage uniform. Tails thought she was Mechanized Army, though there were little details—placement of the national seal, colors too dark—that struck him as wrong. She blinked as she looked at him, like he wasn't entirely what she was expecting, then let a faint smile onto her snout as she glanced around at the featureless white walls of the cell.

Heavy pockets on the outside of the thighs down the knee, the bulky gear of the tech infantry, which explained the bot that filled the doorway behind her, in the hallway. But it wasn't like any bot Tails had ever seen. The same two meters and change, but much more humanoid than a swat, cobalt blue, wide chest with layers of armor that mimicked a set of strong pectorals above its abdomen. Its chief processors were hidden somewhere in the upper chest, beneath a broad, truncated dome of a head, spiked on the top, and a pair of thick, raised shoulder-baffles that served more to extend the dome than connect to the arms, which fastened inside secondary spherical armor-structures.

Tails felt a fine, refined pleasure as a part of his mind he hadn't used in years got to play: that's not a very good design for a combat robot, is it? Hand-actuators at the bottom of each arm that reduced the size of the plasma casters that could be built in the wrists, and the thinner legs reduced the raw destructive power you could put into a charge. The optics, too—they weren't optics, not obviously, a broad red swath in the dome of the head, slightly reflective. Maybe some sort of solid state light sensor, but a ridiculously expensive substitute for a set of lenses, especially given the amount of computational power that would be needed to process the input into a picture of the world around it. It looked like someone unfamiliar with war had come up with the idea that maybe a really scary android would be good in combat.

The ocelot spun sharply on her boots and stamped on the tile as she snapped to attention before the taller bot, saluting sharply. "I request to be relieved, Sir. Specialist Ellen Ocelot, ID seven six five, per Lady Renee's command sequence seven-alpha-null-null-two."

And then someone announced over low-quality public address speakers, in a deep voice short on inflection: "You are relieved, Sergeant. Report when task is concluded."

"Yes, Sir."

The bot flexed its limbs slightly, hunkering down, going into a low-power mode as the ocelot left attention, turned back to Tails, grinning at his narrowed eyes.

"Yes," she said, "it can speak. The Empress and her scientists have been helping to strengthen their minds."

Oh, Tails, thought, eyes drifting down to the stainless steel collar around her neck. He realized that for a moment part of him had been hoping to have a conversation with someone that wasn't crazy. But it was not to be. He remembered, now, the Lady had mentioned her. She was—

"I am Ellen of Ocelots, Warrior of Lady Renee of Pine Martens of the Robian Empire," she announced, striding into the cell. But keeping herself squarely between him and the door. And even if he got himself into the hallway, he'd be stuck between the locked security station doors and a powered-down combat robot that would be no doubt reactivating in short order.

But still, this ocelot was just a person. Unaugmented.

Tails squeezed his right hand into a fist, rubbed his thumb along his index finger . . . .

He closed his eyes and sighed, letting his head droop and his chest sag down toward his raised, spread knees.

"Milady said you were fierce," she said, flicking her ears as her snout wrinkled with disdain. "And this is the most exuberance you can muster up for meeting a future sister-in-arms? What do you have to say for yourself?"

Tails shrugged as much by lowering his head as by raising his shoulders.

"You have nothing to say, then. I'm glad you're obeying at least one of Milady's orders."

The fox's snout snapped up angrily, but the tension passed into an exasperated roll of his eyes. "Yip yap," he remarked.

Ellen laughed in spite of herself, lifting a golden hand to her snout and glancing up guiltily to one of the cameras, watching from the ceiling. She coughed, and wiped the smile from her snout, composed once again. "Milady thinks it would be good for you to see one of her warriors. You may not speak, so I will. I was not captured from Queen Acorn, like you were; she found me in the old Mechanized Army. I have been in her possession for a year, and I have worn her collar for nine months. Don't roll your eyes," she snarled, taking a step forward.

His legs tensed—no, only one step, still a meter away. He drew them up higher, tried to scowl up at the ocelot from under his bangs before remembering that he didn't have bangs anymore. But she looked at his eyes, not his legs.

"You know by now that it was far more than being assigned a new commanding officer, don't you? I was ready to obey Milady because I thought it was right, but that's not enough for Robians. Milady wanted me to obey because I had to. And being trained for that was no easier for me than for you. I know this cell as well as you do. I fought. I screamed. I—"

Her iron posture wavered, eyes closed in a long blink as she was held by some memory, very strong, very unpleasant. "I was very disobedient . . . ."

Tails froze, on the verge of moving. But a meter away, and eyes that could open at any—

Ellen's eyes opened, slowly. They were placid now, smooth topaz. Her posture was somehow slacker than before, though she still stood tall. It was like she were being held up by some external force, that she did not want to fight, but that she wanted to test. To feel it hold her.

"But now I am not. She has not given me a robot's full strength and power, but she has given me a robot's force of purpose." She smiled then, letting the mobian subroutine take over from the robot, and lowered herself down on her haunches, so she could look Tails in the eye. "And does roboticization make me look so worse off?"

The fox raised one brow. He still didn't speak, but his silence was less that of a beast and more of a mobian holding his tongue.

Ellen ignored him, plucked at the loose shoulders of her camouflage. "Milady has ordered me to serve in the Technical Infantry, as a Specialist. I have a mobian commander, and he has a robot commander. We help the swatbots find the targets they seek, supplement their tactical routines at the points where they are weakest. The Empress has helped them to grow smarter, but mobian brains are still very useful tools for them in combat."

That was one way to put it, Tails thought. The other way, he suspected, was that the software lurking in the thing out in the hallway was basically a top-of-the-line chatbot kludged on top of a standard bot command structure. He'd heard the ocelot—asked permission to cease her service, then gave a code, which was more likely than not a standby order the Lady or one of her creatures had programmed in it. It addressed Ellen as a subordinate, but he suspected that if Tails were to spit in its face, it wouldn't become angry until Ellen told it to.

Your robot overlords demand that you say please before you put the key in their ignition. But if you believed it, if everyone believed it, if you enforced the rules brutally enough, he guessed there wouldn't be many spitting incidents.

"But I will only serve in the tech infantry for a pair of months. Before this I supervised work details, in factory and out, learning how to command worker animals. And soon I will be reassigned to command. Learn strategy, logistics. The rulers of an empire must know how the empire works. How it eats, how it builds, how it fights. And I am a ruler, Miles, a ruler in training. A tool of rulers and a ruler myself. It's what we deserve. All those years in the dirt, dodging bullets to make them safe in their penthouses and palace."

Tails could hear the I in the we. The anger in her, like an engine humming at her core. He knew that engine, his heart pounding like a piston, the heat of its friction radiating into his limbs. He didn't know if he'd always had it in him. In battle, things were different, more muted. The pressure of danger and the contours of the mission . . . . maybe they hid it. Maybe he had always had a little engine. A lot of things had happened to him that were worth being angry about. But as massive as the pistons had grown by now, it had become impossible to miss.

He wanted, desperately, to kill someone. With his bare hands. He thought about it every hour, every day. Dreamed about it every night.

But his engine's fuel was beatings. Beatings and disdain and the friction of the walls against his fur.

"Robotnik we forgive only because he taught us the way . . . ."

Tails didn't need to listen anymore. The Lady was always trying to turn him against Sally. Because Sally didn't let him have dessert when he was six. How dumb did she think he was? Maybe Sally had no idea where they were keeping him. Maybe the army was pushing so hard that he couldn't hear the gunshots outside the doors of the prison through soundproofed walls. He didn't know. He couldn't know. He couldn't even suspect.

That bore repeating. It was easy to forget.

And even if she had . . . just, abandoned him, left him here in this prison. That wasn't reason to kill her. He'd never forgive her, but he wouldn't kill her. He certainly wouldn't feel the need to get back at her by making friends with the bitch who tortured him day in and day out. It was the robot that did this to him. Her. Her and her smirking snout he'd cave in and those cruel eyes he'd pull out. And her guards, but they were more like robots than she ever was. Silent tools. They barely even counted.

This one, however. Yammering on about how proud she was to be a slave, how she loved having other slaves under her boot. She talked like the Lady, too. Her Lady. And that steel collar—

"You like my collar?" Ellen asked him.

He hadn't only been holding back because she was too far away from him. He had been holding back because he hadn't seen how much like her owner she was. But she was. She had more than a little bit of Lady in her.

The engine hummed.

"My neck has known it for nine months." She rolled her head, feeling the movement of the links against her fur—she probably didn't even feel it, after a while. She wouldn't have to take off stainless steel even in the shower. "Do you think it's meant to humiliate me? To make me feel less than mobian, like the humans think? That's what I thought, until I wore it. When you see the hardened troops blanch at the sight of it, you know the truth. Even my commanding officers are afraid to order me too strongly in my training; I can see their fear. I have to order them to command me," she snickered.

Tails kept his eyes fixed to the collar. Two minutes little badges, affixed to the links at her front right side.

"It bears the mark of the Empress and the mark of Milady," Ellen said. "Would you like to see them close?"

Tails' right hand clenched before he could stop it. A sharp bite of pain against the inside of his index finger, just below the knuckle, deep. Nothing. He ignored it, did not flinch.

He nodded, timorously.

Ellen smiled as she leaned forward, raised her head to let him see the figure-eight, the infinite mark of the Empress and her Empire, and the concentric circles, light within dark, that her Lady had chosen, reminiscent of the bright snout of a marten in her darker face. The ocelot kept her limbs loose, muscles well stretched before she had come to the cell, and waited for Miles of Foxes to attack her. It was strange, helping her Lady in this way, to come back to this cell she knew so well, this fox she knew so well without having met him before. The rigid inflexibility hiding beneath callow efforts to hide his resistance. The twisted arrogance and servility, daring to oppose the robian and the empire that daily proved their superiority to him, all in the name of nothing, lies and fantasies that had enslaved her kind for centuries since the first death of the warrior aristocracy. Her Lady had ordered her to teach him two lessons; one she had already taught him, and now would come the other. Likely he would try to for a headlock, something to hold her hostage rather than kill her, but she was prepared for either attack. From what she had seen and what her Lady had told her, a fight between them could go both ways if he were armed, but with his bare hands—and a swatbot waiting to help her in the hallway if she had trouble—he had no chance.

She heard him sniff as he lifted his snout closer to her neck. Heh—maybe the growling, barking beast would try to bite. "Like what you see?" she asked, her own nostrils winking as she took in his sweat, the faint scent of fear and fight and the tang of—

—fresh blood?

"Yes," Tails hissed.

He struck.

Kain Blackwood 2011

## \*Chapter 13\*: Boulder City, 13 Pluvoise 3236

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**Boulder City, 13 Pluvoise 3235**

"Do we have to listen to this big band music?" Sonic asked.

"Big band music?" Snively sniggered behind the wheel, winter sun flashing off the lenses of his sunglasses as he turned them away from a bunch of cement walls that blocked the street ahead, a vehicle search checkpoint. They were all over the place in Boulder City, army soldiers and swatbots scoping out cars, opening up the trunks. "Does this sound like a zoot suit riot to you, my boy? This is a full orchestra, playing a march by Claude Audilet. The Triomphe de Fortune, if I'm not mistaken."

"Well it's got all the horns in it."

"That's martial music for you. You're lucky that you don't seem to like music very much. While you were in the desert the government switched the bulk of their pop stations over to classical music of the right persuasion to keep the people in the mood."

"I love music," Sonic sighed, putting his hand on the dash heater. Snively seemed good at cobbling together stuff to kill with, but he drove them around in a brown beater with one cherry-red door that had drafts like it didn't have a chassis. At least it didn't look too out of place on the street. Most of the civvie factories in Mobius had been reconverted back to military production. "And stop calling me boy."

Snively hummed a little along with the music, his bald scalp dwarfed by a massive leather bomber hat lined with fake fur. "It's a simple, transparent trick," he said, tapping his thumbs on the wheel in time with those big kettle-drums, "but people aren't very complicated."

He doesn't mean anything by it, Amanda said in his right ear. It's just how he talks.

Sonic didn't turn to look back at her in the backseat. Talking to her didn't require eye contact, didn't require talking. He flattened his quills and pulled the hood of his parka up—dark navy blue, Snively said, and it made sense, that it would work to camouflage the blue fur that still managed to show—let his snout sink into shadow and warmth. You're too nice to him, he whispered. He means things more than anyone else I ever met.

She went quiet, didn't defend him. They were in the downtown, now, and the buildings looked like the buildings in every big city. But lots of soldiers. Patting people down, opening bags. People in business suits, which was a change; otherwise it'd make him think of Port Orange.

Snively slowed the car to a roll as he turned right into a bus stop in front of a fake marble tower with an ugly green Burrito Palace awning strung all the way around the first floor windows. "How do we do this, kids?" he asked.

"Fast and hard," Sonic and Amanda replied in duet, Amanda taking soprano and eager, Sonic tenor and footdragging.

"That's the spirit," the human replied, grinning teeth gleaming white in the winter sun, and it seemed to Sonic that he was taking ostentatious pleasure in ignoring Sonic's effort to ruin the mood, until the car stopped moving and he turned to Sonic with a hard snarl imitating mirth. "And stick to the script, boy," he warned. "There aren't many uplinks and if we don't download the package on this try, they'll be onto us. Those files will be lost permanently."

"Yes, Cap'n," Sonic replied. He'd heard sailors bite off the word like that, in the movies.

"So no little side-trips or theatrics or anything that deviates from the plan. You're a bank robber who means business and building security has exactly one chance to catch you, and that's to give you their undivided—"

"Yes, Captain," Sonic groaned with disgust.

Something about the answer satisfied him. "Synchronize your chronometers," he ordered. Sonic pulled up the thick sleeve of his parka and Amanda leaned forward to watch him start the stopwatch function on a cheap plastic wristwatch above the loose opening of his glove. As he pushed the button, she blinked her eyes. "Three minutes, hedgehog," Snively reminded Sonic as he opened the passenger door and climbed out onto the curb and into a shockingly cold gust that the endless row of buildings did its best to channel directly into his face.

Sonic slammed the door and stomped off up the sidewalk, drawing the bottom of his hood tight against his snout with both hands, which apparently served to force the wind to blow up into the hood and inflate it into a cauldron of freezing air to chill his ears. Behind him, he heard the angry, brassy honk of a bus. A moment later the most recent Snivelymobile rattled off past him up Fifth Avenue, trailing a billowing, vanishing cloud of water vapor out its tailpipe.

You hear the "rodent" in that "hedgehog"? he asked Amanda. But she didn't answer. This channel was for tactical information only, because it was time to go to work.

At the end of the Great War, Snivvles said, Max Acorn basically had jack shit left in orbit, but the Overlanders had jack shit left in their anti-sat armories, so backing up necessary and classified archives to an orbital data haven had seemed like a good idea. Lachels had been wild enough that a couple of private companies with satellite access had agreed to put some heavily encrypted information into storage. And some of it belonged to Sonic's Uncle Chuck, with the name on the account being Black Box Research. Amanda could get it if she got access to a terminal recognized as part of the network. The easiest way to do that was to rob a bank.

Say what?

Look, rodent, you don't need to know all the details, you just need to work. It's a secure network for large commercial institutions and the military. The military buildings make for the hardest target; Robotnik even had his expropriated media companies bottled-up tight, protecting his propaganda capability.

So banks were the softest target?

You'd be surprised. Well, Snively had no doubt that Sonic would be surprised.

With a bitter sigh, Sonic had admitted to himself that he had been surprised. And now, he was walking past DANGER: FALLING ICE signs to the black steel DES Tower. There were a pair of big bank companies way upstairs, or something, and though he couldn't see them there were a big farm of sat dishes up on the roof, facing the north to the equator like flowers chasing the sun.

About ten in the morning, the lobby was still doing a decent traffic, though not the full work rush. The place was done up in white marble, elevators packed in behind translucent plastic turnstiles and a rounded reception desk with a black suit who was pretending not to read a paperback. Had a coffee shop, branch of People's Bank, and a big bank of scanners that had been bolted in behind the revolving doors. Nothing too good, sniffers and metal detectors. Could sneak a ceramic knife in, if you didn't already carry quills on your back.

Sonic pulled back his hood and wiggled his toes in his sneakers as he came in out of the cold, a last bit of smoke-breath leaving his lips. He passed the detectors without a chirp and stretched, getting the blood flowing, taking a look around at the people whose day he was going to ruin. Suits, suits, bike messenger—maybe give him a chance to leave before things got happening—suits.

Orange jumpsuits.

Two lines of 'em, all mobian. They looked like the prison-gangs you saw working the roads, picking up litter, but they were scrawny sons of bitches, with none of the cut ears or body ink you'd expect from guys but nothing to do but fight and work out and cut themselves. None of the stares, either. Kept their eyes on their shoes or on one of the private security guys watching them.

No, wait, not on them. There was another guy in front, giving a speech. Army guy.

Sonic snatched out a hand and grabbed the handle on top of the bike messenger's backpack as he passed. "Hey hey," he said, nodding at the jumpsuits. "What's the deal with the chain gang?"

The guy was a young lion, scrawny, mane uncut but still boyishly short up above the wool headband that warmed his head. He was pissed enough to show a bit of tooth, but not enough to smack Sonic's arm away. He just shrugged. "Work gang."

"Work gang?"

"Yeah. Think they're taking over for the janitors."

Sonic let go the guy and squinted as he scratched his headquills. "What do you mean a work gang?"

"You been living under a rock or something?"

"Shack out in the desert."

The lion took a moment to give Sonic a look from his quills to his shoelaces. "Yeah, huh. They're deserters."

"Deserters?"

"From the army. Or cowardice under fire. In the face of the enemy, whatever they call it. You don't fight, you work."

Sonic looked back at the pack of prisoners and mentally superimposed the old gang over them—Bunnie, Rotor, Sally. Even Tails. Even Antoine. "They don't look much like soldiers."

"Conscripts. Probably didn't even issue 'em a camo uniform."

"What's the point of that?"

The lion shrugged. "Frees up the janitors to get conscripted. The army's getting looser and looser with their requirements. Get around to me one of these days." He grabbed his left arm with his right and Sonic noticed that the left just hung there, limp, like the lion couldn't move it at all. "Surprised you're still walking around loose. Look tough enough. You got a lot of money or something?"

Sonic looked at him, silent.

"You want my advice," the lion said, "you go back to that shack."

"They're slaves," Sonic said, still watching the feline's back as he turned for the revolving doors. Like, you can't just leave yet, they're taking slaves in here! The lion quickened his step as a beefy paw slapped down on Sonic's shoulder and spun him on his heels to look up at a black bull under the fake blue cop-cap of a private security uniform.

"Is there some sort of problem," the bull asked, "sir?"

Sonic, we're in position, Amanda said, her virtual voice taut and clipped, because Sonic was already supposed to be in the little People's Bank joint, writing out a note on the back of a withdrawal slip that he was supposed to make as scary as possible while sticking to the general theme of Put All The Money In a Bag. And because she knew he wasn't in there, the way she knew anything. But she was kind enough not to say anything about it. Start attracting guard attention now.

The bull lowered his horns and dug his fingers into the collar of Sonic's coat, the zipper popping as he tugged the teeth apart. "You need some help finding the security room?"

The zipper ripped loose down to Sonic's belly as he jumped up and drove his forehead into the bull's nose. A bull is built solid and instead of breaking his snout or rattling teeth loose Sonic only had the guy give a loud, deep cry that the bull strangled to a ridiculous honk with both hand clasped on his bloody face. Sonic ripped his parka open the rest of the way as he slid along the security guard's side, dodging a clumsy right and popping open the button on the guy's hip-holster. By the time the guard realized what was happening and grabbed hard at the missing gun on his belt Sonic was behind him, reaching up to give him a good hard slap with the barrel against his right ear, far enough under his horn that he could feel it.

The rest of the lobby turned to look as the bull went down to one knee, blood spattering the floor, but Sonic was walking to the bank, checking the load on the security guard's gun. Eight rounds, nine millimeter parabellum. Probably company issue; people tended to go for a heavier bullet when they were paying for it themselves. He walked past the ATMs, past a collie with a blue suit and a little nametag that wanted to know what she could do for Sonic today right up until the point Sonic mechanically chambered a round, removed the safety, and put two rounds into the floor. About five civvies in a line, hitting the deck and screaming; Sonic scanned the room for any more guns. The bank branch wasn't big enough to merit its own protection, but the building had stationed a tiger guard in there in the same dress as the ones in the lobby, with a paper cup of coffee splashed over his shoes and his hands scrabbling at his hip until Sonic put his gun on his face, then turned slightly and put a third round by his head, shattering the window on the sidewalk in a rush of snow and dull, omnipresent engine roar that muted the comparatively gentle alarm bell. Dope was cringing with his hands up by his ears while Sonic pulled his pistol with what felt like another eight rounds inside. "Get out," he said, turning his back on him with quills up high and walking back behind the two tables with computers and cash-drawers that passed for the teller's counter in the post-cash age. He laid one of his pistols on the table as most of the civvies took his order to the guard as a personal invitation.

In position, Amanda said as Sonic slapped his hand on the keyboard and apparently found the right key to pop open the cash drawer. Her voice was a lot more relaxed than before. She was having fun, probably in the form of a couple of loading dock guards sleeping by her feet and a bunch of security cameras coaxed into telling lies. Hard connection established, which made Sonic shiver at the thought of metal rubbing against metal as she slid the pins of some heavy-duty cable into the back of her skull. Approved by local network. Awaiting handshake with satellite.

Sonic ditched the parka, whew! and thumbed through the cash. Few twenties, tens. He was about to lift up the bottom of the drawer and look for a big bill when the bull and another one of the guards from the lobby started launching shots at him from around the ferns they'd set up beside the doorposts at the entry to the lobby. Sonic dropped two shots back from standing, and then fell for cover, sending another bullet out as he crawled back behind the wall, through the open "employees only" door. No money and only ten bullets left. They were right, bank robbery really didn't pay.

Good job, Sonic! Security has red lights across the board.

"It's what I do best, Mandy," he grunted, forgetting to whisper as he got to his feet across a table from a whiteboard with a bunch of SALES PRIORITIES:

\*WAR BONDS

\*WAR BONDS SALES CONTEST

\*PUSH CDS

\*COLLECT INFORMATION FROM OLD CUSTOMERS FOR NEW SECURITY REGULATIONS

Handshake now, Sonic. Initializing download. I need about another minute. Make some more noise.

Sonic sighed. "Die, you bitch!" he shouted, before emptying his first gun into the carpet and tossing it onto the table. "I'll kill anything that moves! I'm gonna bury every cop in—"

He flinched and hissed in pain as a bullet pierced the wall behind him and exploded a big plastic percolator, spraying coffee over the table and wall and his fur and skin. He felt the burns starting as he rolled under the table and hustled on all fours to open a door marked BUSINESS TRANSACTIONS, found himself behind a counter that looked like it should actually be in a bank somewhere. Big tall marble top, drawers underneath with rolls of coins all spilled out, like someone had decided to bail in the middle of grabbing a few bucks of pennies. From behind him he could hear sirens from the street, the brassy, indistinct shouts of gunmen who didn't share a radio frequency.

"How we doing, Mandy?" Sonic asked, wincing at the heat of the burns on his arms beginning to light up after the initial shock. He rolled onto his haunches and chambered the first round out of the mag. No answer. "Amanda?" he asked, turning to peek up over the counter, and stopped mid way and whipped his gun down to the black gap of an open drawer in the counter and the scrunched bundle of mobian limbs behind it.

The person shifted slightly, cheap pasteboard wobbling against her knees, and Sonic heard a soft whimper of fear. A nametag on the curve of a breast reflected a little light, with the word AMANDA.

"Oh," he said, quickly taking his finger out of the triggerguard. "No, not you. Wrong Mandy. I—" He reached for words. "I didn't really kill anyone back there, you know . . . ."

Hello?

Sonic forgot about it and braced himself against the counter, quickly sweeping his sights over a ten foot wide stretch of featureless hallway, lined with empty cubicles and some door with a pushbar. Nothing like sightlines to the front of the store from where he was, but probably a regular shooting gallery from the lobby if he poked his nose out. Sorry Mandy, he whispered, too many, uh . . . lots of balls in the air here. And hot drinks. Really wanna juice. You done?

Hello? She asked again.

He froze. You okay, Amanda?

Okay, Amanda?

. . . Yeah, Sonic said, his silent words dry in his throat, that's what I—

Okay, Amanda? Okay, Amanda? Okay, Amanda? Okay, Amanda? Okay, Amanda?

She kept going, each repetition a machine-perfect copy of the original cadence, but by the fifth Sonic had started to move. He didn't have any way to know what the hell was happening, but his instincts were hearing a record skipping, a computer making sounds that gets caught in that one syllable right at the cra-cra-cra-cra-cra-cra-crash, and his adrenal gland gave a groan of protest as his instincts tugged on its leash again. He slid along the counter and plastered himself to the wall by a small opening to the hallway, quills flat. Ducked his head out for a quick look.

Fuck! at the flash and the sound of the bullet impacting in the wall a few feet short of him, and he threw himself onto the ground as the other cops he'd seen cut loose at chest height. Every fifth shot or so burst a hole in the wall behind him, small caliber or no, and he froze, quills up, quivering, ears perked for the first lull in the rhythm of the storm.

Okay, Amanda? Okay, Amanda? Okay, Amanda?

He almost bit his tongue at the piercing shriek from under the counter. The roar of shots cut off, the flow of bullets just a little drip (bang), drip (bang)—

Didn't think why, didn't even get to think of taking the teller hostage, just pushed himself up, grabbed the lip of the counter and threw himself over, sending shots up toward the cops like whoever emptied his clip fastest was the winner. He sent off another shot just as he pushed open the door, setting off a screeching mechanical alarm buzzer and flashing white fire alarm lights that made him squint his eyes against the utilitarian hallway beyond and the security guards—

Shot them in the face, once each, taking them both out like a conductor punching a pair of tickets. Sonic mechanically put the barrel on a third figure, a white mouse, one of the janitors who was losing his job and looked like he might lose a lot more, as the empty mag fell out of the gun and clattered on the floor. "Get me to the basement," he ordered.

His brain began to overheat on the final steps of the maintenance staircase as the hyperventilating mouse fumbled at a ring of keys and passcards on a ring on his belt. Too many programs: looking for targets, looking for people shooting at him, keeping an eye on the mouse, thinking shit, this guy knows I'm empty, right?, thinking Okay, Amanda? Okay, Amanda? Okay—

Sonic plucked the little plug out of his ear and crunched it under his sneaker as the mouse unlocked and pushed open the basement door. "Get down, face down," Sonic ordered, and the janitor hit the cement. "Where's the computers?" he asked.

The mouse wheezed something like "Dewon of Fife," his eyes glassy. Should have asked that while he was standing up, Sonic thought as he took off down an unpainted cement corridor with a low ceiling of gas pipes and water pipes and—

Electrical conduit. On a hunch he followed the first one he saw, turning right, glancing down as he passed brown-painted steel doors, labeled D101, D103—

Bingo. The door to D105 was open and you could hear the machines humming even with the constant chirp of the fire alarm. He went in and gasped, almost stumbling in the overwhelming heat. The whole room crammed with big black cabinets infested with thick black cables and tiny black and green wires, green and yellow lights blinking with a furious intensity. "Amanda?" he said, walking with head lowered down a narrow walkway, past rows of black towers like the aisles of an alien shopping mall, all soaking his quills in thick washes of stale machine heat. Salt sweat began to sting the burns on his arms.

She was in the last row of servers, against the wall. Her feet dug into the floor enough to keep her upright against the machines, her beetle-black armor distinguishable from the black computer-casings only by its sheen. Her arms were limp, her head and right shoulder slumped against the racks, pressing her cheek to them like to a lover. A thick red insulated cable jacked the back of her neck into the network. Wide eyes reflected the blinking lights over a slack mouth.

"Help," breathed the mouth.

Sonic stuffed the spent gun into the waistband of his pants and forced himself to look and grab the wire and rip the damn thing out of her head. Felt a snap and a little sliver of plastic flew away with the translucent plug, but still she didn't move. "Alright, Mandy," he said, flattening his quills as he pulled her left arm around his shoulders, "bartender says that's enough data cocktail for youggnh," gods he'd forgotten how heavy she was. He bit his teeth and forced himself to trudge and forced himself to walk because that wasn't fast enough.

Her toes scraped on the cement behind him. "C'mon, Mandy, move those legs. One foot in front of the other." At the open door Sonic shuddered, almost feeling himself topple, as he stepped around a dead or sleeping weasel with his legs splayed and a little badge clipped to his vest pocket. Don't know how I missed that coming in, he thought, and then he didn't think because he had to get Amanda out of here, back to the car, faster.

Snively had walked them both through each other's parts of the mission, like he walked them through their own, endlessly. Sonic knew the way to the car, but he didn't think of it, just forced his eyes up almost under his lids to see the WAY OUT signs. "C'mon, Mandy," he grunted, "wake up, left, left, left right left, left, left . . . ." He couldn't stop now even if he wanted to, leaning forward under her bulk, his momentum balancing itself against the feet he threw in front of himself to keep from collapsing and forcing him forward.

"Left, left, left right left, left left left right left left . . . ." He thought he felt her arm pinch at his neck but he wasn't sure if her feet were moving but that didn't matter because his chant wasn't for her now it was for him, faster and faster, and he wasn't even saying it he was just thinking it in time with his feet but of course she could hear that too but that didn't matter and it didn't matter if people were following them because he didn't have bullets in his gun he just had to left left leftrightleftleftleft—

Open doors, he dragged her through them. Snively's car in the bright winter sun of an alley. Ten meters up a sloped loading dock.

No rhythm. Sonic growled, let it rise in pitch as he ran up, ran with legs that couldn't get all the way up and felt like they were slipping out from under him if he didn't want Amanda to pull him backwards into the basement but she didn't, he pulled her up and up and Snively disappeared from the window as he reached back between the seats and pushed open the rear passenger door. It creaked open with aching slowness until it found some worn groove in the metal of its hinge and clunked wide with a noise that made you think it was going to fall off, it always did that and Sonic mashed his face into the fiberglass body as he dumped her torso onto the seat, his feet skidding on a patch of ice. Her legs were worming as he forced them up into the car after her, pushing her into a ball in the middle of the backseat, getting her toes just far enough clear of the frame to slam her safe inside with the door.

Sonic opened the front passenger door and dropped in and pulled the door closed and shit gods everything hurt. The air was freezing on his bare arms, stinging gooseflesh with an entirely different sensation from the crackling, prickling pain that was rising in his burns. He stretched his jaw wide, trying to suck in more air. The end of the alley in front of them was empty; the cops still behind, by the bank branch and the broken window. He reached for the seatbelt but he didn't; his arms just shivered and wouldn't reach up.

"What happened?" Snively shouted.

"She had a problem," Sonic gasped, rolling his head to the left. "She wa—"

Snively was turned away from the wheel, his taut skull of a face snarling back between the seats, at Amanda. "Was it a virus? Did you get the data? Did you get the whole package." He leaned further, enunciating his words like a man who thinks a foreigner is retarded and thinks a retard is hard of hearing. "Did. You. Get. The."

Sonic grabbed him by his shoulder and threw him back into his seat, rolling him into the driver's window with a thunk and a faint crack of fracturing glass. "Motherfucker!" Snively hissed, his features rising into a promise of murder that dropped without a trace when Sonic pulled the empty gun from his pants and pressed the barrel hard into his temple.

"Drive this fucking car!" he bellowed. His lips were pulled back so hard and taut it felt like his jaw was jutting naked and fleshless into the air, and like his jaw was nothing but pointed canines, all the way back. His quills were scraping against the window. "You drive this fucking car!"

Snively stamped the accelerator to the floor, but he couldn't hear the engine. Just Sonic.

"You shut your fucking mouth!" he roared.

**Place Unknown, Time Unknown**

The barred doors of the security station opened at a thought, and Lady Renee of Martens strode through. She was not amused. Her lower lip puffed out slightly in an in incipient snarl; her boots stamped a little too hard against the tile with each step. She kept a small window in the upper right of her visual field, displaying one forward and one rearward angle on the fox and the ocelot, but that left more than enough attention with which to glare at the creatures clogging the hallway. Four black-armored soldiers in dark, tinted gas-masks were hunched on either side of the open cell door, tails rigid, obediently awaiting a go-code, sleep-gas grenades in the launchers slung underneath projectile rifles filled with rubber bullets. Further from the door stood a white-coated medical raccoon specialist and a pair of trained combat medtechs in urban camo, ready with bags of o-positive raw red blood and plasma. Immediately opposite the door, a Swatbot-3, arms raised stiffly at the cell, plasma cannons charged.

Useless. All of them useless.

"Sidearm," Renee whispered to the closest soldier. He pulled his black matte pistol from his belt and she took it, pressing it flat to the back of her right thigh. Then she reached into the swatbot's mind, ransacked it for advice on the two bodies in the room. It was as bad as it looked like from the cameras: the targeting and combat subroutines in its primary processors had been ransacking ways to move the fox's arm for three-quarters of an hour. It knew how bodies moved—generally—and hadn't found a way to make both animals leave the room alive.

The swatbot was far from an expert. Renee hailed the nearby imperial radioservers and took all the space on the fastest one she could manage, opening a rapidCAD simulation space and instructing the weak-AI demons on the server to improve the swat's quick-and-dirty estimates, making the bones properly elastic, turning the false hinge joint into the actual radius, ulna, and humerus of the wrist. They began their work.

Renee took a deep breath, instructing her nanosystems to remove lactic acid from her muscles. Her shoulders twitched, and the slightest tremor fell through her tail. She stepped into the doorway.

Centered at the very back of the room, Ellen knelt with legs wide, arms limp at her sides, eyes wide, shocked and glassy. They rolled up to her Lady, and no sign of recognition passed over her features. Otherwise, she was perfectly still, kept with her back arched and snout lifted by the black-furred hand pressed hard to the side of her neck. The fingers of the hand were clenched tight, and a slow drip of blood had wet a path to their knuckles, as though there were a tiny bit of bleeding meat held in the first. And protruding from under the thumb, the broken point of something white and hard and pointed, pressing into the golden-tinged white fur of Ellen's throat, just beneath her collar and Renee's steel mark, pressing into the strained flesh that held back the wall of the carotid artery. A dot of deep red in the midst of the hairs, like a marker slowly soaking paper fibers with ink.

She hadn't even thought to guess what it was when she viewed the scene using the room cameras. But as soon as Renee saw with her organic eyes, she instantly knew. Days ago in the hydrotherapy cells, her first kick had missed, shattered the floor. And then Miles had wilted after a punch that shouldn't have laid him low, curling up, curling his body around the broken tiles . . . hiding his theft . . . the lying, sneaking—

As she watched, the tip of the tile shard twitched. Ellen's belly jerked and drew a sudden hard breath into her chest. Blood did not fountain onto the wall.

Yet.

Aside from the right hand holding the tile and a left arm snug under Ellen's breasts, Miles was almost entirely concealed, his head completely lowered behind the ocelot's and his tails folded over one another behind his body. He had guessed that it was more important to hide his flesh than to be able to see the room, which was a bold move, and one that drastically complicated the motion of his shoulder. She could still watch him from above, of course, at two different angles.

And he could hear her boots against the floor. "No closer," he growled. The sound of her voice was uncanny in Renee's ears, after so long.

Renee stopped, keeping her arms at her sides and her gun pressed to her thigh. "Miles. What you have done here is very brave. Very tenacious and clever and fierce. You've proven that you will be a fine warrior for me." She put on a wide smile. "You make me very proud. But now you must release my ocelot."

"Nuh-uh."

Ellen swallowed. Her lips moved. "Mmm. M's-sorry, Milady—"

"Shut up," Renee spat, and she felt her fingers ratchet themselves tight against the triggerguard.

There had been fear in her voice. Her voice, a Lady of the Empire.

"Go 'way," Miles mumbled. He sounded tired. She could hear his snout cut his words as it pressed against Ellen's spine.

"Miles," Renee said, keeping her voice calm and staring at Ellen's nose as though she could see through her to the fox's eyes. "I love my animals. I hate to see any of them harmed. Especially when I am the one harming them, because of their disobedience."

"If you love something," Miles growled, "you let it go."

"No."

"You give it a helicopter and fuel and a pilot."

"Never," Renee repeated firmly. "I have told you what I will do with you, Miles. You cannot change that."

"Then she dies," Miles said flatly.

Renee checked the latest output from the radioserver, watched the repeated motions of a simulation of the fox's arm and hand exposed to various forces. If he opened her ocelot's artery, the medics could do nothing. Ellen would bleed to death in well less than a minute. Could the loyal Queen's soldier Miles kill another animal like that, in cold consideration?

Had Renee been preparing him to do so at her own command, for the better part of a year? Yes.

She quickly picked five possible options for the CAD demons to work and picked the most promising action for herself, letting her augmented consciousness work up the demon's numbers and build an overlay over the creatures before her. She took a deep breath, feeling the oxygen flood her, and called up monitors of her blood oxygenation and respiratory rate in her already crowded visual field, watched them slowly climb as the calculations proceeded.

Stall.

"Miles," Renee said. "I mean what I say. I love the animals I collar. They serve me loyally, and I reward them with my training and my power. They are under my protection. I feel that sting in my own neck, Miles. I can feel how her back aches and her heart rushes. It is a grave offense against me, what you have done. And the punishment for it will be severe.

"But do you have any idea what I will do to you if you dare to take this any further? The pains you have known are nothing. The pains you can imagine are nothing. All the pains I have ever inflicted upon any living creature will pale in comparison."

"Heh."

Renee didn't know if it was a hiccup or a word. "Do you understand me, fox?"

"Heh. Mmm." First a dirtyrimmed ear poked out from behind Ellen's head. Then one yellow eye. "Mmmm, hmmhmmmhmmhehehehmm . . . ."

"This is an assault on me, Miles. You offend my dignity and person. You are already subject to a punishment that would kill a weak animal . . . ."

Renee hesitated. Miles' eye was very large, peeking over his forearm. It had the glow that belonged to a smile, a bright smile, very wide and very tense and very mad.

Tails laughed again, "hehehehehmmhmmhmmhehehahaha," long and breathy, his nostrils filled with the stink of cat fur. It's an assault on her, yes it is. She feels the sting. Was he dreaming? It felt like a dream; this was what always happened in his dreams, the Lady helpless while he finally held the sweet power of a knife over her or piano wire or an icepick or just his own bare hands and his own teeth and she begged him not to while he moved with viscous slowness to take his pleasure from slowness of the dream of chase, but now the fear of pursuit given way to the effortless, crowned certitude of the pursuer.

In the dreams they were always alone, alone in the dark, and here this other creature in his arms, but that was good that was better, she feels the sting, attack on her, she'll feel the sting, yes she will, the hot lance of pain and the burst of blood from her neck like her head ripping from her shoulders, of course she would; didn't Tails feel the pain himself night after night in the other dreams, the dreams of the bars and the muzzleflashes and the bullets ripping into the other flesh with hot torture in Tails' own body, wrenching the impossible screams from Tails' throat, screams so huge that they were too big for his throat and would bring him awake, not the pain but the need to scream living awake screams that were too big for his sleeping body? Now the Lady would know that dream too, the pain, the eyes that could not close, the begging. In slow moments the Lady would always remember that if Tails Prower would not have freedom in a helicopter then he would have it in hot blood.

He waited. He wanted to hear her beg. She didn't know what to do, was trying everything, and before she finished she would beg her inferior little prisoner not to open her slave's throat. And then—

Or maybe just her eyes were enough, to see the eyes soften, to see them plead. And then to see them change as he fed them this sight of deepest red—

Renee's eye widened. Her jaw set. Tails felt the burn of the air on his eyeballs as his own twinned her in response and she saw, yes, saw that he saw her and she knew that he saw and that he knew and that he would always know what he'd done to her and—

A flash from his dreams a gunflash and Tails felt it in his own flesh, in his right arm just above the elbow, pulling his arm off true and making him flinch and then with the speed of thought the ocelot was gone from his arms and he was on his back, tails tangled under his legs, the Lady pressing a knee hard on his right arm beneath the shoulder.

He sobbed in his throat. No! He swung from his elbow, stabbed at her thigh, felt the fabric part—

A deft, precise punch beneath his armpit, and Tails screamed as the ball of his humerus popped loose from its socket, ripping at the ligaments around it. The Lady grabbed his fist, pulled it away from her leg, and crushed it around the tile until the blade pressed through the flesh of his finger and crunched its cutting edge against bone.

Tails wept, eyes closed. Trying to remember what her eyes had looked like, so he wouldn't forget, he couldn't forget, even as he felt her weight leave his body. It wasn't fair! The shot was impossible. She shouldn't have been able to make it. He'd done everything perfectly. Perfectly.

She couldn't be better than him when he was perfect. It wasn't fair—

"Bring her here," he heard the Lady say.

"Absolutely not," said a male Tails didn't know. "We have to get her to surgery. The wall of the artery—"

A very animal snarl in the Robian throat. "You will bring her here."

". . . Great Lady, she . . . as a doctor, I'm tell—I'm strongly suggesting, in my medical opinion, that . . . yes, Lady . . . ."

"Here, facing the fox." The Lady's hand grabbed Tails' snout, turned his head and pushed it to the floor. "She has something she wants to say to Miles."

He opened his eyes and saw Ellen again, head gently turned to him, cradled by a pair of hands in white latex gloves. The cut Tails had sliced in her throat leaked a steady flow of blood, wetness inside bulging slightly with her heartbeat. She looked at him with ears folded, limp and frightened.

She had called herself his sister in arms. Now it seemed that she was.

The Lady spoke gently, as if to a child or pet. "Do you remember how you hurt me, ocelot?"

"Yes, Milady," Ellen squeaked.

"Tell Miles Fox how you hurt me."

Ellen swallowed, lifting her chin a little with a visible effort, fright in her eyes. "With a loose bolt from my cot, Milady. I threw it into your eye, Milady."

"And do you remember what I did to you, then?"

The ocelot's face puckered, eyes closing. She whimpered, fear fossilized to grief.

"Do you remember," the Lady insisted, "how long you spent in the pain bed, to punish you for hurting me?"

A whisper. "Yes, Milady. Yes."

"And wouldn't you agree with me, my ocelot, that Miles Fox has just offended me ten times as badly as you did? Wouldn't you agree with that, my Ellen."

Ellen's eyes shot open, her face dropping with terror and pity, opening her mouth wide for a no that wasn't there. ". . . you are My Lady . . . if you say, then . . . yes, Milady."

"Ten times worse," Renee repeated, fingers unyielding on Tails' snout.

A weak nod. "Ten times worse, Milady."

"Is there something you would like to say to Miles, Ellen?"

"I'm sorry for letting you hurt me, Miles," Ellen said, and she was. "I'm so sorry. Please forgive me, Miles—"

The fingers left Tails' snout. They reached across the small gap and slightly slapped the cat's cheek. Ellen closed her eyes with a squeak of fright. "You can apologize. But his forgiveness is worth nothing."

"Yes, Milady."

"Take her now, doctor. Then come back." Tails felt a finger stroking a long, thoughtful line through the fur of his shoulder. "I want to discuss the fox."

Kain Blackwood 2011

## \*Chapter 14\*: Winstone, 15 Pluvoise 3236

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**Winstone, 15 Pluvoise 3235**

"Mmm, Mr. Dursine, this is fantastic!" The human gave a thumbs-up as he chewed, cheeks bulging like a chimpunk's, filled with flaky honey pastry. "How do you make it?"

"The recipe comes from Kima's family," he replied, wiping his hands off again on his apron. Three stylized pictures of old-style Swatbots in white armor, outlined in black. CRUSH THE COOK underneath in large ascii characters. "And it's Josh."

"Well you do it good!" the human lied. He was fat for a human, bowl-cut hair that didn't do much to hide the size of his face. Josh wondered if the kid cut it himself. "I gotta tell you, I didn't think this was what they meant when they said I was lucky to pull Professor Dursine for an advisor."

The bear stapled a grin to his face and promised to send his mother in law the compliments. "I'm going to go make some coffee," he said, which was a conversation-abort strategy that came from his end of the family. He turned and promptly stopped, because the path to the kitchen was clogged with graduate students. One caught him in her eye and gave an embarrassed little noise, bellying up to the dinner table to make room and dragging her boyfriend with her. There wasn't anything bad about the house they'd landed, so far as the houses near campus went, but it wasn't nearly bear-sized.

He lumbered past them and felt a tug on the fur of his arm just before he made his escape. Turned and saw Kima, her dress-gloved fingers cupping a glass of red wine and the fur above her upper lip still slightly damp from where her tongue had chased away its contents. "You doing okay?" she said, just above a whisper.

His smile curdled, just barely turned. "They're really obsequious."

"They're all worried about a draft," she said, wincing in sympathy. "Thanks for putting up with it, hon. I can start getting rid of them in about an hour."

"I'm going to go make some coffee," he said again with a wink. Then he ducked his head and slipped through the doorway, occupying about half the kitchen that wasn't already overstuffed pantry, wastebin, and refrigerator covered with post-it notes. Like a lot of faculty Kima and Josh were too overworked to make real coffee, and like a lot of junior faulty they didn't have the spare cash for a coffee-press. The grad students apparently had the solution: "drip coffee." Watery stuff that fit the name, but people said it was better than drinking the dehydrated stuff people had been stuck with during the war, and better than drinking your own urine. Josh popped open the cupboard, pulled out a filter, shook some of the rough-ground flakes into it, turned and opened the percolator.

"Mr. Dursine?"

His fingers crushed the paper and sent a shower of grounds over his snout and the counter. ". . . shit."

"I'm sorry Mr. Dursine." The guy looked like an undergrad, pimply and gangly, firey red hair. He was the kind of guy that people would say, if they weren't in polite company, that he looked like he had a little fox blood in him. Perched low on his long nose were either rose-tinted sunglasses he didn't have enough sense to take off indoors, or prescription specs he didn't have enough sense to keep transparent. "You makin some coffee?"

"Wo—ah . . . ." He stifled a sneeze. "Working on it. What are you, experimental or theoretical?"

"Theoretical physics, but I've been thinking of moving over into math. I like the purer, stuff, you know? Fewer applications for the military industrial complex—"

Shit. Josh froze as he slid the filter-tray home. He had specifically asked Kima to try to weed out any of the college communists, Young Radicals or general political flakes from the student body. He was sufficiently close to and far from the political scene that he could be an Honest Politician to anybody desperate enough to find one. And now ever public surface he encountered after leaving the front door was covered with photocopied handbills. Just a couple of blocks away the admin building had been occupied twice and had its windows broken nightly. Until he'd made it through the evening without having to brush some earnest kid off.

Well, he thought as he turned back to the kid and tuned in. Bite the bullet.

"So, uh." The kid laid a long finger on the bridge of his glasses but didn't reset them or lower them. "You gonna stand for parliament?"

"Oh, gods forbid. Kima and I can barely keep things together as they are."

"You know they got a living stipend for MPs to help with that."

"I'll bet."

"Seriously. You won't run?"

"You're seriously asking me?"

An earnest nod.

"Ask me when the elections roll around."

"Dude," the kid said, "no-confidence vote today."

That was enough college naiveté to let Josh roll his eyes. "Again?" The radicals had promised a no-confidence vote every Friday until the Defense Department made more details of Lachels military aid to Mobius publicly available.

"No, man, no." The kid pulled out his phone. "Happened ten-oh-eight this morning."

Deft thumbs and the human passed it over. NATIONALIST BLOCK BREAKS. "Holy fuck," Josh breathed. "How the fuck did they do it?"

"So man," the kid said with a unpleasantly vulpine grin. "You gonna do it?"

Josh had avoided thinking about that question, and now he knew why, because he knew what the answer was. "I am so fucked," he said.

Renee was in plainclothes, a leather jacket and thick denim jeans still warm at the cuffs from the tailpipes on her motorcycle. The helmet she had left in the lobby with the building's concierge, after a flash of her badge had convinced him to let her into the antique elevator. She felt a cold bit of pride at that. The country may be falling apart in civil war, but in the face of it all the police had increased their efficiency, at least in the places where detectives didn't immediately need to worry about Acorn bullets or wolf IEDs. Time was a concierge would have given her shit about privacy and required warrants to see a rich, powerful member of the Director's cabinet. But the Windemere had been requisitioned by the General Services Administration over a year ago, striking the leases of every bigwig whose corporation had abandoned Robotnik for the forest squatter queen, the gangster queen, to make way for the top brass of State Ministry and War Ministry and the armed forces. All of whom were desperate for good places to stay in Terscala, the capital-in-exile. The deskman wasn't about to say boo to a badge.

She felt it heavy in her vest pocket, opposite the nine millimeter in her shoulder holster, as the elevator stopped at a door labeled simply "15." She felt her right hand pull into a fist as she pulled back the affectatious metal grate with her left. The skinbag. She'd always known Posniak was no good—always felt it, from almost the first moment she met him. The scheming mind that he hid behind those don't-hit-me glasses and his war-nerd squint. Him and Snively Kolenksy were both just off the archetypes of the humans that had ruined Mobius for their own benefit.

Her hand almost reached for her sidearm, but she simply straightened her jacket and reached down for the knob. Locked. With, she noticed, a thumbprint scan that had been kluged into an antique wooden door that couldn't be that hard to kick in. Apparently the security of a squad of Mechanized Army troops bivouacked behind the room service kitchens weren't good enough. Renee lifted her fist and pounded on the door.

No answer. She knew he was in, the concierge said he was. The visit was not official. Not strictly official, she didn't want to make it official. In a way, it was almost personal. They'd both been involved in Kolensky's machinations when he was still at the Internal Security Office, back when ISO was still distinct from the army, whether she liked it or not. And she did not.

Renee tightened her jaw, gave it to the door with the bottom of her fist instead of her knuckles, feeling it shake in the frame. Humans looked out for their own countries. She knew that, but to be able to attach it to this one man in this specific way . . . what if he admitted it?

The anger she felt, the sudden weight of her gun, frightened her. Maybe she should have come hot, she thought, and then she decided to bury it under the official trappings. Pounded again.

The words open up, national police were on her tongue when she heard a voice that wasn't Posniak's. Renee perked her ears and heard him, what she thought was him—it had been a while—shouting, angrily.

". . . shouldn't I open it? You're so damn paranoid—"

A latch clicked, and the door swung open on a raccoon. She was about five six, heavy, big breasts straining without a bra at the fabric of a red t-shirt that looked like it didn't belong to her, hung like it had been thrown on seconds ago. Big black shorts that were hers, generous enough to handle her hips. Masked eyes that narrowed as they met Renee's. Because Renee had seen her before, she didn't know when. Masks did make ideal criminals because the stripes made it hard to read the contours of the face without repeated viewings. But some circuit in her mind still insisted that a mobian woman in Posniak's quarters had to be some War Ministry honcho that she'd seen at his side on the TV, maybe had paid a visit to National Police Headquarters in Terscala at the same time as her. .

It wasn't until Posniak came around the corner behind her, struggling into a white undershirt with a pair of silk pajama pants blooming out around his legs, that for some reason it clicked. The way the human's furless face went white at the sight of Renee in the doorway only deepened the memory's hold on her. It hadn't been TV, no visit to the War Ministry, just one very long car ride, famished and flushed from dehydration all the way back from the cinderblocks at Ironlock to Wolvesforge. Common raccoon surname, Lotor. Forgot the rest after Kolensky gave her the boot from the Acorn case and the whole airtight affair mysteriously went to hell, until half the country was under foreign occupation.

"I'm not even going to ask you what she's doing here," Renee said, staring right at her.

The coon's black nostrils flared. "What are you doing here?" She lowered her snout, like some bar-crawler with her hackles up. "Maybe you ought to go back downstairs and talk to the doorman—"

"No! Molly, don't touch her." Lotor's bulk filled enough of the area inside the door that Posniak had to work around her, almost wrestle her to the side. The ever-in-shape prosthesis did not match his other arm and made him look ridiculous, a runt stapled to a war machine. "She's a police officer. Let me talk to her."

A deep raccoon bark in her throat, sharp but muffled like the slamming of a door in some nearby room. "I don't like people barging in unanncounced—"

"I said let me talk to her!" The tautness of the human's face, the way the lips pulled back from his snarling teeth and his bald forehead wrinkled, startled Lotor into silence as much as the servo-powered grip of his prosthetic fingers on her arm. The human's features slackened and his breathing deepened as he got himself back under control. "This is undoubtedly a governmental matter," he said in his business voice, "I need to handle it myself. I don't want you to—I don't mean that . . . ."

But the scowl was still set on the raccoon's mask as the trudged back into the space of a positively mammoth apartment. Opulent, even the walls of the living room done in terra cotta tile, baked soft sienna and painted a gentle, flowery yellow. The previous owners had left a mahogany furniture set with what Renee would bet were velvet cushions. Or maybe the human had requisitioned them himself. His office was never much at ISO, but he had certainly come up in the world.

"Does our guest want a drink?" Lotor shouted as she disappeared around a corner.

"She won't be staying long," Posniak shouted back, loud enough to be audible to her. His sigh a moment later most likely wasn't. Then he put on his mask, more transparent than usual, doing nothing to hide the darkness of fatigue around his human eyes, the tension of disgust in his lips.

Or, Renee thought angrily, the worried bunching of his brow. "I'm afraid I'm a little busy right now, Officer—"

"Agent."

"Agent." The correction stole a little bit of verbal momentum as he continued: "And I address most security matters through a strict chain of command. The numerous crises I face on a daily basis require strict, ah. Triage, to address."

Posniak swallowed whatever nonsense was to follow. His cheeks sagged as he stared at Renee with unconcealed loathing. "What do you want," he spat.

"Sonic Hedgehog botched a daylight bank robbery in downtown Boulder Bay a month ago."

"Hedgehog." The human's head bobbed with a snort of a laugh. "You came up here for this? Is it eight years ago? I've got three battalions of regular and irregular infantry pressing down against the lines around Ironlock, guerillas hitting high-value infrastructure left and right, and you come up here to—"

"Amanda Polgato was with him."

Give the human credit, he didn't break a sweat. He looked genuinely puzzled, even after a moment where the worry of discovery seemed to shine through. "So this is national security beat."

"I've had Kolensky on my desk for years, human," Renee said. Each one of those dead, hopeless years like they were iron links hanging from her ankle, no matter how many other leads she passed on to army For Proper Disposition and hopeless cells of isolated, home-grown terrorists and propagandists she turned up. "As many counts of espionage and treason as you want, all spelled out in cold indictments sitting in the army courts. He moves around the continent like he owns it, and now he's adding to his rap sheet. Here."

"He's working with Hedgehog," Posniak mused.

"Don't you even want to know how I know the skunk-bot was there?" Renee demanded.

Posnkiak blinked at her, annoyed to be dragged up out of his thoughts. "Somebody saw her?" he shrugged.

"After that . . . man, Kolensky, gave half of this country to Acorn and Lachels, he's spent five years with the entire national security apparatus looking at him—"

"Getting a little full of ourselves?" the human interrupted. "You and who else?"

"—and we haven't been able to lay a hand on him." Only the thought that he might be skilled enough with that robot arm to give her a punch in the mouth kept her talking instead of grabbing and throwing. "We haven't been able to lay crosshairs on him. Come on, Posniak, you're as smart as they give you credit for. You don't need me to spell this out, do you?"

"Indulge me."

"Kolensky's not a supervillain, Posniak. This isn't some movie where he gets to do whatever he wants because he's evil and the plot demands it. He has someone running interference for him. Someone very powerful."

"Oh." Renee felt her ears flush hot as Posniak looked suddenly bored.

"Someone powerful. Probably someone that he's worked with before. And now we know he's working in Mobian territory, with one of the closest known confidants of Sally Acorn."

"You ought to read the latest updates they have in his dossier; things have changed. They're pretty old updates, but—"

"Who wrote the updates? You?"

"Renee—"

"The ex-double agent?"

"That's certainly a bold accusat—"

"Who has another double agent and official treason risk in his room, for some sort of private meeting?"

"Agent Donlevy." Posniak leaned forward, reaching his biological arm up to rest against the doorframe, his prosthesis swinging limply at the shoulder joint. "Whatever theories you have about this, I suggest that you present them through proper channels. The structures for the assignment of work are in place for a reason."

"What am I supposedto think you're doing here? Why do you have a known traitor in your apartment if you're not plotting to . . . ."

Renee didn't know how she managed to slot everything together, the slovenly dress, does the agent want a drink. Even as she reached it her mind rebelled at it, the shirtless human without a single hair on his smooth chest and shoulder. She found herself staring at the prosthesis, the least repulsive part of him, the least alien part of him, the part she could most easily see as some kind of proper object of desire.

"Gods."

"Get out," Posniak whispered.

"You sick—"

"I said get out," he hissed, his voice carrying intensity without courage, like a wild animal snapping its teeth just outside of its burrow. Renee forced herself to look at his eyes, gleaming with illness in those purple pits of tired flesh.

She fought the urge to vomit. "Don't you fucking look at me like that."

Not just his ears but all the skin of his face literally turned red as a flush took him. "I am not looking at you," he corrected her, "like that."

She had worked with him for almost two years, shared a car with him more times than she could count, been in a firefight with him—

Lotor appeared from around the corner, shouting, with the fur that he touched, thrashing the tail that he—

Renee couldn't slam the door with his arm in the doorway, but she yanked the elevator door into place like a diver getting the lid of a shark cage back into place. Pushed the button for the lobby and held it, her thumb going numb under the pressure.

After the car lurched into motion, the moment's weightlessness settled her stomach back into place, and the disgust filling her brain receded enough to fill just the mold of some words: I'm going to kill him. At last Poaniak's feet disappeared as the elevator descended to fourteen. I'm going to kill him.

Then why are you running away?

. . . . I'm going to destroy him. She would drag every last sordid detail of his life out before Robotnik. If the war was lost, she would do it before the war was lost. He wouldn't be punished for his loyalty to Robotnik. Hewould be punished for his treason and his conspiracy and whatever repulsive perversions he had seen fit to perpetrate along the way.

Meanwhile, on the fifteenth floor, the mood was ruined.

Thomas was still braced against the doorframe, shoulders slumped, rising and falling as his lungs tried to keep up with his heart. Molly watched him, furless and defenseless, and part of her wanted to hold him, treat that naked flesh sweetly. But he had declared that the time for that was past: I said let me talk to her. Even when she indulged in something that required a safeword, the more likely declaration that playtime was over was the sudden explosive fury that would lash out of him, that little reminder that when push came to shove, he was determined to be the one that would decide where each party came to rest. Once that moment came, he couldn't fool himself anymore until the next day, sometimes the next week. Everyone he saw was a tool to be used or an asset to be guarded.

Or someone to be protected, Molly thought, watching him rest his head against the door. He wasn't a bad person, not the way that Robotnik was a bad person, or Snively Kolensky was a bad person, but the war was ruining him. They would talk, sometimes, during meals. In a way it was the strangest and best part of what they had, a kind of neutral ground where she lost her fear of him, when he no longer had to lose himself in the ecstatic pleasure of pretending he was afraid of her. Two experts in unrelated fields hanging their thoughts in the air for the other to look at, spinning webs of logic for both of them to see clearly.

Her equations dealt with alloys, stress and kinetic energy, his with people, money, resources. They were both engineers, builders, their educations rooted in at base in the assumption that one learned the rules of the world and then manipulated all the variables to maximize the good: durability, safety, power, wealth, happiness.

But after he moved to War Department and Acorn seized the upper hand, all the equations always pointed in the same direction. The walls protecting Robotnik had to be braced, and there was always only one way to brace them: more soldiers, more guns, more threats, more punishment. He looked more and more tired, more and more bored. Depressed. Trapped. The only tool he had was a hammer, and you know what that means. Robotnik seemed a railroadspike. Himself, six inches of galvanized steel.

Even herself.

"You need to get me out of here." It took Molly a moment to realize that she had said it, and when she realized that the words were hers she felt a wave of sadness, something like relief. "You need to get me out of the country," she said, knowing that she couldn't pretend that she was the tyrant anymore, couldn't pretend that he could pretend that she was the tyrant. She didn't touch him, couldn't touch him, just watched him and for the first time in months felt the bite of hope in her breast. "Through the lines, or a neutral country. You have to get me out, Thomas."

He put his false palm to the door, felt whatever sensations the prosthesis permitted him as the fingertip sensors brushed the wood. And somehow, against all reason, he looked even more vulnerable than he did when he was bound, when tears were rolling in perfect drops down the smooth skin of his cheeks.

A deep breath lifted his shoulders. And his false hand made a fist, and Molly felt that hope in her die, just reading the body that she knew by heart.

"You know I can't do that," he said, not meeting her gaze as he turned and walked past her with measured steps, toward the kitchen. And then would come the reasons, and they came: "Not right now. Did you hear that conversation? Donlevy's going to be setting some sort of investigation on me. I'm not from this country and I'm already wanted for treason by Lachels. I can't—"

She followed him as he walked into the kitchen, thumbed the cork from a bottle of Chateau Ecureuil they'd opened the night before."You're the War Minister. She's just some cop." He kissed the neck and upended the bottle, bubbles rising through the rose liquid. "You can squish any—"

A clank as Thomas slammed the bottle down on the tile counter, his throat working as he gulped the wine. "I can. But not while I'm getting you over the border." He laughed, and the laugh was bitter through his dead smile. "And she saw us like this, Molly. Who knows what she's going to tell her bosses."

"You could come, too," she said, but she couldn't laugh. She wished she was strong enough not to pretend she had some way to save him.

He stared at her evenly over his shoulder, both hands resting on the lip of the counter. He cocked his head, a sigh leaving his nose.

"What do you want to eat tonight?" he asked. "Commissary Service has a good supply of red meat this week. I could go for some steaks."

**Place Unknown, Time Unknown**

"Please," Tails croaked.

"Mmm?" The Lady blinked, glanced up at his face, a look of distraction in her pale-furred features. Tails could barely see her, distorted at the bottom of his field of vision. "What?"

He could feel the breath press in and out of his chest, metronomically regular as he tried to keep himself from moving. The slow intake ended and he formed words with the exhalation. "Please stop."

"Mmm." She turned away. Tails heard metal click against metal, quiet and delicate. "I haven't given you permission to speak."

"I'll die please stop." He could now only see the things above him. The ceiling, distant lights fogged with an insubstantial rainbow mist, like when you come out of a long stretch in a swimming pool. The chains that held both his orange-furred legs upright by their ankles. The top of an intravenous rack, heavy with big plastic bags of someone's red blood, spooling down through a tube to feed his femoral vein. From there to his heart, to all quarters of his stricken body, until it leaked and dripped to the floor beneath.

Tails had not counted how many bags she had emptied. He felt light-headed.

"You won't die," Renee sighed with tired whimsy, tracing her fingers along his bellyfur. "Probably. You're strong. Now be silent. This requires concentration." She leaned down behind his legs.

"Pleasnkk—"

The wet noise in his throat was louder than the clank from the chain anchoring his left tail as his flesh parted. There was not much room for the chain to move; the clamps fixing his arms and tails stretched in place were quite taut. The leading edge of the razor slid through his skin and into the beginning of the fatty connective tissue beneath, then touched to its sibling with an unyielding click. The Lady held the safety blade in place, letting the blood drip down onto her fingers until the flow slowed—blood pressure in the fox's shocked system was quite low—and then released, leaving the blade to stick in the wound that it had cut. That it had extended.

The Lady stood into Tails' vision again, rinsed her right hand's fingers in a tray of some unseen liquid.

"Please," Tails said.

"You're learning," she replied, looking at what she had done to his tail. "I've taught you how to speak to me. Animals don't make boasts or threats to a Robian. They don't demand things. They don't negotiate. They beg, politely."

"Please stop—"

"You know where that phrase comes from, yes?" she interrupted. "'If-you-please,' if it brings me pleasure. Of course, I do the things that please me anyway, but you suggest something I might like to do. In case I hadn't thought of the idea." She patted his left knee affectionately where it hung, turned to pick up another safety razor from the alcohol bath. "Such a solicitous fox."

"Please stop hurting me," he breathed.

"No." The Lady moved with the sudden confident stroke of an artist who sees the line, sliced the blade deftly into place beside the identical one she had left in him a moment before. Click. "You are not as smart as my Ellen of Ocelots was when I punished her for scraping my cornea." Her fingers pressed, pressed, and the blade hung between the living tissues, in the congealing fluid.

Tails' throat made a slow, breathy whine.

"She begged me, too," the Lady continued, ignoring him. "She begged me to kill her. Wished that her mother had never given birth to her. That was more clever, because she understood that I did not wish to do the things that she desired, and that she was not and never would be strong enough to escape my will in this world. So she asked not for another world, but for no world.

"But that was wrong, too. Do you see why, fox?"

A gasp that might have been a groping for the word I fell apart into a throaty cough. "P—please, Lady . . . ."

The marten turned and washed her hands. "Ellen was wrong because to say no to the world requires strength, too, and she did not have enough. Whether she should die was and is a choice within my power, as much as whether she should be caged, or walk freely, or lie in a pain bed. Whether she should purr like a happy kitten or scream like a madwoman. After I punished her I caged her in a padded cell, designed to deprive the occupant of the ability to hurt herself." Her left hand grabbed the prickly, bare-shaven skin of his left tail, near where the white brush would have began. "And I will put you there, too—"

"I'm sorry."

The Lady stopped, glanced up at Tails from between his legs. He could see just the edge of a flash of blade poised in her right hand. "What's that, Miles?"

"I'm sorry," he said again.

The Lady walked up to his side, where his head lay between his stretched, shivering, bare, dripping arms, the stinging sharp pain down and around their shaven length mixing with the otherworldly coolness of the air on the skin. Her left hand brushed his short-shaven hair against the grain, back between his ears, as she looked down at his face from out of the soft lights.

Tails had thought he was too dehydrated to cry, but he began again. "I'm sorry Lady."

"Sorry for what, Miles?"

"Sorry for." He breathed. "Hurting Emily. Sorry Lady."

"And why was that bad?"

Tails' mind had not gotten that far. He spoke the first thought that came to his mind. "Hurting is bad—"

She slashed the blade through the white fur of his chest, a long, shallow wound. He gasped and the muscles of his chest tightened and pulled on his arms and hips and he screamed , screamed as all those blades shifted in the flesh of his arms, blade and blade and blade twining from shoulders to wrists tugging at the broad clots in the endless wounds. Stop moving, stop—

Tails stop moving, only the muscles in his clenched jaw shivering. He breathed, silently. In. Out.

"Wounding and killing is the virtue of a warrior," Lady Renee declared. "But Ellen belongs to me. She does not belong to you. You tried to steal."

"Steal," Tails rasped.

"And you lied. Hid a weapon. My animals do not keep secrets. They tell me everything about themselves with everything they do. Now apologize correctly."

His chest rose high with a deep breath. "Sorry for stealing." Breath. "Lying."

The marten closed her eyes, pursed her lips in her white snout, and leaned down to kiss Tails on his forehead. "Do you understand," she said, the damp of her breath in his fur, "what a bad thing you did, Miles? How very bad it was?"

"Yes," he hissed. His wide eyes could see nothing but the almond fur above the collar of Renee's black jacket, the steel band with the symbol of Mobius. He could have stolen from her. Could have used that stray shard of tile when no one else was around. He choked out a low, clogged laugh through a wide-eyed smile, imagining the pain in his throat, the rush as he spilled hot onto the unstainable floor. "Yes I see now."

Her snout nuzzled his forehead, back and forth, back and forth. "No. You don't."

She stood back up and walked away, down out of his field of vision. "You don't see, yet. Because I'm not finished."

Tails whine through his bared teeth, unable to drop his smile. No, she wasn't done yet. After shaving his arms to his collarbone and his tails to his rump she had taken out a magic marker and had drawn around his limbs, marking them with the branching lines, flowery and delicate, perfectly symmetrical curves down from his shoulders to his metatarsals and down from his lumbar vertebrae to the very last bones of his . . . his . . . .

"But you will see."

His chest shook, once, as the sob ripped through his continuing smile. My tails . . . .

"I don't mind how slowly you learn, Miles. Stubbornness makes a good warrior."

My tails! You can't! They're mine! I won't let you, you can't, you can't . . . .

"But I'll teach you what a bad thing you did, Miles. And you'll never forget. Never until the day you die."

All those razors, razor kissing razor, following the lines all over the marble nakedness of his arms, trailing down the length of his right tail.

"You'll have scars to remember by, Miles."

One tail down. One to go.

"Very beautiful scars."

Kain Blackwood 2011

## \*Chapter 15\*: Carbon Flats, 16 Pluvoise 3235

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Amanda would lie on the bed, her arms and legs limp, and not move. Her snout was buried in the pillow, and above it her eyes were closed. Sometimes they would squeeze in discomfort. Cables snaked from the back of her neck down along the floor to the minitower Snively had set up, though the monitor was just showing a Mobian Mechanized Army seal, bouncing around between the sides of the screen like a rubber ball. Sonic knew he could see the program running if he bumped the mouse, but he couldn't understand what it said. It wasn't pictures and progress bars, it was windows that popped up and filled with long lines of computer commands, then disappeared.

Besides, he was afraid to touch the computer. The thing went right into her brain. No matter how angry Sonic had been when Snively treated her like some busted music-player in the car, as soon as he'd got them both out into the desert and a desert town and another safehouse he had to step back and get back to letting the human treat her like a busted music-player. And then Snively left again, like he always did, to go off and work his magic and spying and everything else he did, and still it was enough to scare Sonic away. For hours he sat in front of the house's TV, lying on the couch with the printouts of his uncle's journals left over from Boulder City, not reading them, looking around at the boring walls and the boring furniture and feeling like somewhere, someone was looking at him in the pages of some furniture catalogue. Just a little blue to really bring out the room's personality—

He slapped the paper down on the glass coffee table next to the fake flowers and went up the stairs. The curtains were pulled tight against the desert sun, though Sonic didn't think anyone was going to be peering through them; Snively had picked them out one of a half-finished series of tract houses that had been laid up with mold problems and backers-being-expropriated-by-Robotnik problems. The curtains were a kind of neutral beige, but the noon sun burning down behind them made them look almost black.

Amanda was lying there, her striped tail limp between her legs.

Sonic gingerly lifted his sneakers over the tangle of cables and squatted by the head of the bed, the minitower breathing its exhaust on his calf. "How are you?" he asked.

Her voice was muffled by the pillow. "I'm sick."

The word always made him queasy. He hadn't been sick since he was a kid, but it made his limbs tingle and his belly feel strangely and unpleasantly warm. "Sick?"

"I have a virus," she said.

Snively had said that. His military term was Black Ice, which apparently crashed your computer when it wasn't crashing your car. Sonic didn't know how that could make Amanda sick, but if she had a computer in her brain . . . . "Does it hurt?"

Her eyes squeezed, her throat swallowed. "I don't like it."

"Do you need anything?"

"The antivirus."

Sonic sighed. Coward to interloper in thirty seconds. "I mean, anything, you know, like orange juice? Chicken soup?" When he put it that way, you know, maybe yeah, Mandy wasn't exactly in need of a friend instead of an IT specialist. "Some acetaminophen?"

"I don't know," she said. "I don't think so. I've never been sick before."

"I don't think anyone's been sick like you before," Sonic said. "What's it like?"

Amanda rolled onto her side to look at him, making Sonic wince as she tugged on the cable-jacks with her skull, pulled them along the armor of her neck. "I'm all stuffed up," she said.

"Oh." His quills lowered as he remembered how Tails would always say that when he got a cold in the winter, copying Sally, and he knew well enough what that was like from when he'd had colds as a kid. He rubbed his fingers along the bridge of his upper snout, just under his eyes. "Like here?"

"All over." Amanda put her hand to her scalp-plate and brushed her fingers back from forehead to the back of her cranium. "I can barely think at all. Everywhere I normally think is all black and swollen and pushing, even when I'm not trying to think there."

Sonic nervously picked at a quill behind his ear. "Uh—"

"And when I do try to think there . . . ." She whined as her incisors kneaded her lower lip, but before Sonic could try to figure out a question she started talking again: "Then it pushes in on the rest of me. It's so bright and loud and . . . I'm not sure if it hurts. I think it hurts a little, like too much light in my optic nerve."

"Is that what—in Boulder City, while you were still plugged into the network? When you couldn't move?"

"I want to think there," she said. "I've learned to think there and it's good to think there and now I have to learn not to think there, until the antivirus disinfects me. Snively had to disable my radio mechanically or I'd be screaming gibberish and infection vectors to anything that would listen."

Sonic started to think he was getting it. "But he left most of your implants on?—"

"I don't want him to turn me off!" she shouted. Then she turned her eyes quickly to one of the curtained windows and brought her voice back almost to a hush. "And he can't turn me . . . them off. But he helped me not to . . . pay attention. I can only think in a little of my mind until I'm disinfected."

"So you just have to focus on . . . you just . . . have to . . . see with your eyes and hear with your ears . . . .?"

Amanda lifted a hand, rubbed it over her face. "I'm stuck here."

"Welcome to the club, Mandy!" Sonic laughed, slapping his knee. "That's not so bad!"

"It's horrible," she spat. "I'm stupid."

"They been known to say that about me, too." He stuck out his tongue.

"I'm slow," she said meaningfully, narrowing her eyes spitefully. "Ever had your feet cut off?"

"You just need some distraction. Put a cheesy movie on the TV, little rock-radio—"

"I can't watch transmissions!"

He put his fingers under his eyes and pulled, showing her the pink under the lids. "Use these bad boys. We got some machines downstairs that would love to help you out."

She closed her eyes firmly. "Ears and eyes are stupid for coded radio transmissions."

Sonic sat back and sighed. She was so young, the robot she was. Like a six year old refusing to play with the boy toys. She was so childish—

Developing brain. Early integration.

He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to push away those words from his uncle's journals. Uncle Chuck had wanted to experiment on children. Ideally, he would write, like that was just another variable to consider. The brain is sensitive and the nanites integrating with it could seriously disorder synapses and disrupt behavioral patterns and generally put an egg scrambler in your skull and start cranking the handle. Better to do that with a kid because a kid's brain is like that anyway, still developing, still flexible.

Getting roboticized could give you the mind of a child. Would, if the person who did it to you cared more about keeping you on the leash than keeping you healthy.

"Radio through the ears is stupid," he said. He closed his eyes, and he could still hear the computer. But it wasn't connected to anything. He was alone with a computer and a frightened, sick kid. "Well here's something you can't hear on the radio." He folded his hands behind his head, took a deep breath. "I got no hoooome to go to, bugs are crawling in my quills . . . ."

Amanda remained quiet, but Sonic could hear the cables brush on the floor as she moved. He loved to sing; he just wasn't a good singer. Antoine had always said he had to keep his voice out of his nose, no matter how nice it was to feel the shiver deep in his snout.

"Can't find a job and 'out it I ain't gonna pay the bills, oh yeah . . . . I got the hedgehog bah-looo-hoo-huuuuuues . . . ."

She shifted again, probably making herself a little more comfortable with all those wires cleaning out her skull. Not too weird, really. Kind of a like an IV drip. Programs and plasma, out with the bad, in with the good.

Probably could figure out that was flat or sharp or at least way too strained coming out of his throat. But he loved the feeling of tightness as he emptied his lungs. And he didn't hear any complaints.

"Ah to the day that I die I'm gonna pay, pay, pay those dooo-hooooues . . . ."

When he took a breath to start the next verse, the only sounds were the hum of the fan, the clicks of the data stacks.

Reynard Pena was not in the war room. Reynard Pena was not even in Mobotropolis. Reynard Pena was on a high speed magrail still at some indeterminate location in the triangle described by Corukas, Kingsport, and Fortune Station. They were trying to route the thing to some station where they could get him on a trivid telepresence link. They could get him on the phone, of course, but that wasn't good enough for the Alpha, who needed to see the light in her beta's eyes and the precise set of his ears and smell his scent to trust him. Probably not even the telepresence link would work with her, fucking savage probably thought it was some kind of evil spirit—

Stop. Sally forced herself to stop. Stop. You are in control of this situation. You are still going to hold the capital, you are going to hold the capital and you are going to keep pushing, no matter what happens.

"—Your Majesty?"

She opened her eyes and dodged the mortification, grabbed annoyance out of its holster. She was a quick draw. "I'm listening, Colonel," she sighed to the speaker on the two-dee screen, not daring to glance aside to see if any of her own ministers stationed around the oval table and their aides scampering and whispering behind them were staring at her nodding off either. "Please pardon me if I can't snap to attention as well as one of your buck privates; I've been awake for sixty hours." More like fifty. More than forty-eight.

Pay attention, she told herself.

"We're—the Nationalists," the Colonel corrected himself, pinching the bridge of his human nose, his face almost a meter tall on the screen at the opposite end of the room. A commitment to political independence of the military was one of the basic commitments of the Lachels military and the Lachels Nationalist Party—"are now acting as a caretaker government. That means no major policy changes until the election."

Antoine, audio link only from the Mobian embassy in High Demon, pushed back from the bouquet of speakers in the center of the table. "A significant change in the situation on the ground, of course—"

"We could try. I mean, the government could. If the country faced a genuine crisis, it can respond to that crisis. But the more questionable the situation is, the more resistance we're going to face from the public. We're not too long from our last bout of public political violence ourselves. But the big issue is what happens after the election. I know Mobius is used to fairly long election cycles—"

"We haven't had an election since I was born," Sally corrected him.

The Colonel signed, glanced briefly down at his executive memo. Next to him, a general without any political specialization turned and glared off camera at the researcher that had prepared it. "Two months."

Sally forced herself not to move as around the room aides froze in their activity, ministers reset themselves in their chairs, raised hands to snouts. Two months! Vidavin Vulanis, give us your strength and resolve!

"Two months to an election, very good," Antoine said over the audio link, and there wasn't the slightest trace of strain in his voice. The use of an audio link only had been his, and it was tactical. There was a chance right now that his tongue was hanging over his lower lip as he fought the urge to pant. "And after that, assuming a worst case scenario, how long would you estimate until a government can be assembled to set authoritative policy?"

Whatever policy that might be. And with a dizzying lurch, Sally realized that Antoine was ahead of her again, and that Lachels might not pull out of the war. The Nationalist government had collapsed after months of efforts against its foundations, and it had lost by a razor-thin margin. If the vote were proceeding rationally, that would mean that the Lachels electorate no longer supported involvement, but it might not. The margin was probably shifting back and forth on top of a writhing nest of backroom deals that could go any way in two months. Antoine was right, they weren't going to lose their Lachels troops, they were safe—

Or not, she remembered with the sense of the world accelerating wildly under her feet again. It was the damn caffeine, she thought, making her right hand into a fist as she felt her fingers shivering. It was pulling tight around her, so tight, narrowing everything down to a single line that she rocketed along, every new thought like a wild turn on a rollercoaster. Should have stuck to the methylphenidate. Should have gotten some goddamn sleep—

Lupe, Sally thought, and looked over at the wolf, saw her watching warily with her elbows on the table, hunched down with her hackles raised. Ready to snap and bite. Then she remembered she wasn't supposed to be looking at her, because this wasn't about her, or else.

With a lurch, she remembered that the Lachels Colonel was talking. "—course going to be updated to the minute by the Secretary of Defense regarding any developments in Parliament. Or the polls. Both the Nationalists and the Radicals are shedding up into component parties, we could have a major new political party at any hour."

He sounded like he was done. "Thanks, colonel," Sally said. "We'll be in touch." They killed the link remotely, and a moment later the aides cut the connection on their end. "Alright. We're going to need to task a team to monitor the situation, so we can update our strategy effectively as we get more news." She turned to War Minister Auditore. "I want you to get a team together within twelve hours, make it your primary responsibility—"

"Highness!" The room recentered on a smart, proactive, no-nonsense looking skunk in a rough crewcut. To judge by his position behind Brigadier General Wynn, he was high up at a unit at the front. A combat mobian to his core. He should not be here and talking, Sally thought, just as he continued: "You have to start planning for the worst! If we lose Lachels support, you have to start looking into a ceasefire—"

"Shut your snout!" Sally screamed, the force of her shout lacerating a throat raw from espresso, even though it was everyone else in the room that seemed to feel the pain. "This nation, we have commitments to—" shit don't talk about it openly! "—we have a duty to our citizens, all the people under the rule of that tyrant—"

Lupe stood up. Without a word she turned, and the aides stumbled out of her path to the door.

"Alpha Almatrican, is there something we can—" Sally couldn't help it. She got up and chased her into the hall, the queen's stole trailing from her shoulders. "Lupe! Wait and listen to me!"

"I've heard enough," the wolf said, not breaking her stride to the elevators and the city outside. "I should have known better than to trust a squirrel queen."

"I have a treaty with you. I made a promise to you." She scampered ahead of the wolf, planted her feet wide and pointed to her snout. "I did—"

A quick jab from the heel of Lupe's hand sent Sally stumbling back into the wall. At the doorway behind them, people blanched in disbelief. Beside the elevators, guards brought their machinepistols up and ran forward. Lupe didn't flinch, didn't look at them, just snarled at the queen. "You do not rule. This unruly mob you substitute for a beta does. I have never needed your people to free mine, and I do not. I will plan my own strikes and kill any interlopers on my pack's land long after you have given up on seeking vengeance for your parents. Any interlopers."

Sally lifted a hand and stayed the guard's guns as Lupe turned her back and walked on. "I don't forget, Alpha! If you won't listen to me, listen to your beta! And then listen to the guns of the Kingdom of Acorn," she bellowed, "when they take back what is mine and yours! I don't forget my treaties or my family! I don't break promises, and I don't break!"

An annoying buzz as Lupe pushed open the door to the emergency stairs. She was loath to be contained in a metal box, even momentarily.

The squirrel shuffled back to the war room, her head throbbing, brittle, itchy shoulders bruised from the wolf's misuse. The only thing she wanted to do more than summarily execute the blabbermouth skunk was sleep for two days.

"Meeting extended," she said. "Antoine, we need to plan for what happens if we lose Lachels and the wolfpacks."

They set up a kind of routine. When Snively called on a burner he'd left with Amanda to say his business trip had been extended, Sonic was glad that they had.

The virus that had wrecked Mandy's head was a good one. Which made sense, no doubt, because the thing was written by his uncle Chuck. It didn't have to be signed, and it didn't have to have his handiwork written all over it: he'd designed the core of the implants that had been grafted into her skull, and the thing was written to hurt it badly.

But not to kill. Sonic clung to that, maybe a little unfairly, He didn't know if his uncle could have boiled her brains or made her eyes pop out. But whatever he could do, he hadn't decided to hurt the soldier-bots he'd been designing, even one that had gone rogue and was trying to hack into his private satellite space. He bet there was an antidote somewhere, one that they just hadn't been lucky enough to find yet.

He wondered what Chuck would do if a . . . robot he'd made had eaten the virus and he didn't have an antidote program ready. A kid as strong as a tank, with a monster trying to eat its brain. There were all kinds of complications that he wouldn't have guessed going in. Like, on the second day, Amanda asked him to stay in her dark bedroom while she went to sleep. After about three hours, she said that' she'd forgotten how to sleep. "That's crazy," Sonic said. "You don't need a brain implant to go to sleep."

"I didn't sleep at all last night." She was curled in a ball, fingers rubbing nervously at the cables that hugged her neck. He could see her eyes shine even in ghost light from under the door, because she was crying. "I'm not ever going to sleep again."

"Mandy. You've done this before. You don't need a computer to sleep."

"I've never done it."

"You can do anything Amanda Polgato can do. Anything she can do, you can do ten times as good."

"Not without my—"

"You're just worried," he sighed. And then thought. "You're really worried, aren't you?"

"What if the antivirus can't fix me? Commander can't take me apart; I'm all grown together. I'll be broken forever."

"Listen, Mandy. When I was a kid, I had a . . . me and my friends were taking care of a fox kit named Tails. Loved jumping out of trees more than he liked climbing up them. Broke his arm when he was about seven, worried it would never get better, he'd always have to wear a big heavy cast for the rest of his life—"

"Will you sing?" Mandy asked. "Quietly?"

In seven hours, just before dawn, she didn't say anything when he finished Dada Cabaret's "Shine Your Light On Me." Either the virus had destroyed her mind completely or she was asleep, and when he woke up after a fitful two hours on the couch she was awake and smiling and had unspooled enough of the cable to come downstairs. After that he tried to get her used to watching TV with her eyes, because she was running through the songs he knew quicker than he could do a 40K. It was kind of sad, watching so much TV, but whatever, she was sick. Watching TV is what you do if you're sick. And she talked about what she watched, which was more than she normally did. For instance: "This show is stupid."

"Well, it's a soap opera," Sonic shrugged, wiggling his toes as he yawned, sinking a little deeper into his end of the long couch and putting a little wear into the fabric with his quills—the place needed a little character.

"Somebody would know if Mable had a twin! Sable would know! She's her older sister."

"Maybe their folks kept it quiet. Giving birth to an evil twin is kind of a scandal." Kind of surprised that with a wire in her head Amanda had never managed to see an episode of Animal Crossing before. He wondered how much of the time she spent with herself was just privately listening to transmissions, sharing time with the machines. "Next it's . . . looks like more Animal Crossing."

"Is there a fighting show on?"

"Boxing?" he asked, grabbing the clicker and thumbing through the channels, news news soap news public access news . . . . Least she didn't complain that he went too fast. "MMA? Tackleball?"

"I mean like a soldier show. Like Guardsman."

"Mmm, middle of the afternoon, maybe some reruns or—aha, here we go."

"What's this?" she asked.

"Surprised you haven't seen this," he said, as a russet red fox with a yellow bow in her hair and firing-range safety goggles over her eyes fired a pistol towards the camera.

The fox's voice over began the Lachels show's old weekly ritual of desperately trying to orient any new watchers in the audience. "My name is Fiona Fox. Seven years ago I was recruited by a secret branch of the Foreign Affairs Department called—"

"What's this called?" Amanda asked. The plausible way Fiona handled her rod had the skunkbot leaning forward on the edge of the couch, ears perked intently.

"Persona non Grata," Sonic said, and she got even more interested.

"—and when the head of GUN, Dr. Eggman, found out what I told my boyfriend . . . ." Fiona cradled her lover's blankly pretty, blood-spattered corpse, like she did every week. "—he had him killed."

"Turn it off!" Amanda cried! "I'm not supposed to—"

"That's when I learned the truth," Fiona interrupted, over a montage of her trading suspicious glances with the fat, obvious Robotnik-clone Dr. Eggman and her fellow agents. "GUN is not part of the Foreign Affairs Department. I've been working for the very terrorists I thought I was fighting against—"

"Turn it off!" Amanda squeaked, her eyes locked to the screen.

Sonic hit the VOLUME (-) button as Fiona explained that she was now a "double agent, working to bring down GUN from the inside, with . . . ." After that there wasn't enough noise to hear. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"I didn't know," Amanda begged, not looking at him. "I couldn't read the metadata on the transmission and I didn't know what it was and I watched it before I knew what it was and . . . and—"

"You're not supposed to watch Persona non Grata?" Sonic asked, not quite believing it. Not watching a show about evil robots running amok, that he could see. But this show was mostly about having Fiona Fox wear girl-next-door dresses and leather (sometimes rubber!) in alternation. Back in Knothole, Rotor had called it Thin Spies in Neon Wigs (and Their Gay Handlers).

"I'm sorry," she said.

He felt his anger flare. Not at her. "You don't have to apologize to me. Or Snively. You saw like ten seconds of some show you're not supposed to watch. Sky's not falling." His thumb rested on the CHANNEL (+) button. "Snively's not here, and far as I'm concerned, you can watch whatever you want." He was right about to change the channel when the show went to its inevitable post-cliffhanger opening . . . with Nack Weasel licking his lips inches from Fiona's. Sonic would have preferred Codename Rouge, but it did look like Nack might have shackled the fox to a wall . . . . "You can go to the other room if you want," he said. "I'm gonna watch this for a while."

Amanda didn't move until the first commercial break. Like, didn't move at all, like every time Sonic looked over at her she was sitting there bolt upright like there were a bunch of poison-tipped needles pointed in the couch ready to sink into her spine if she relaxed. Then, at least, he heard the fabric shift under her. By the end of the episode Fiona was breaking into a warehouse or a bunker or something, someplace it was really cheap to shoot a TV show, and she had discovered that the eeeevil and big-breasted Rouge had just stolen one of the show's mysterious and powerful MacGuffins, which were big fake gems of Ancient and Terrible Powers Unknown Even to Modern Science, according to the refined and brilliant but lecherous and disgusting Doc Eggman. A ridiculous hairstyle followed by a mysterious violet-furred feline appeared behind Fiona—oh, let's not forget, Fiona was dressed in some sort of fur-tight bodysuit which hid her body heat from infrared cameras, but not from viewers—and flicked the little lighter at the end of her flamethrower to life . . . .

". . . aaand that's it," Sonic said as the screen went black, the show's name in white. He tossed the remote on the coffee table as techno began to play over the closing credits, yawning wide. "Whaddaya think, Mandy? Think we can rustle you up a pink wig?"

He waited for her to say it's stupid. When she didn't he looked over. She'd hunkered in the corner of the sofa, pressed deep into the cushions. Her feet were perched on the edge of the seat, knees drawn up tight under her folded arms. "That's what you think about Commander," she said quietly.

"What?"

". . . That he's like Doctor Eggman." She swallowed, steeling herself, before she continued: "That he tells me I'm . . . being a good robot, when really . . . ."

"Nah. I just think he's a mean bastard."

"You don't know him," she said. "He's nice."

"I've lived with him a year, haven't I? "

"I've known him since I was made—"

"He almost got you killed, and he didn't even to stop to ask if you were okay. He was more worried about his secret files than about his favorite robot. His favorite object. And then he left you to go hunt some more. Left you with microwaves and minicamps for company, just like he always does—"

"He left me with you," she said.

"He—" Sonic looked at her. "So?"

"You're nice," Amanda replied. "You're a—" She folded he ears, looking at the floor. "If you were a robot, you would be a good robot."

"And you'd be a pretty good skunk, Mandy, with all your watching TV and sleeping in all day." Sonic said. "If you were a person, of course. I bet before long you could be washing down a basket of curly fries with some beer at a tackleball game."

Sonic raised his brows and felt his quills prick as she replied, "You think so?"

**Place Unknown, Time Unknown**

The floor was soft under Tails' side, against his fur. Gentle. That was good.

He kept his eyes closed, rested. There was less to do here than in his old cell, but he didn't want to do anything. He didn't want to think about anything. He wanted to rest.

Thinking was bad. Don't think. Just breathe.

The air was too cool to sleep easy. He'd rather be back in his hospital cell with a blanket, even strapped down to the bed as he had been, his bandaged limbs cradled in hanging slings. He thought the padded cell itself was colder, cold enough to make rest even with fur uneasy.

Not that he had a full complement of fur. His arms were covered with downy white underfur from his shoulders down to the abrupt black fur below his wrists. Warm enough, but until the orange guard hairs grew in he could feel the chill on his skin, faint and slightly muted. Colder near where the scars cut through skin and fur, glaring angry red like magma through cracks in hot, broken earth. They were hot, too. He had to look at them whenever he touched something with his hands. He had not looked at his tails since being brought to the cell. He could feel them, though.

He started crying again. I'm so ugly.

Stop. Stop thinking. Thinking was bad for Tails. The Lady said thinking was good for him, so it was bad. Right now thinking did nothing for him, only hurt him, so he had to stop thinking. Now he wasn't crying, and that was because he wasn't thinking. He kept his eyes closed, rested.

The doorbolts slammed.

With a pitched grunt, Tails spun to his knees, was about to push back up onto the balls of his feet but the Lady was right there, in the doorway, and the procession of movement in him stopped. He stayed there, on his knees, breathing hard, ready to fight if he had just gone up onto his feet. His muscles swelled and he could feel the strain on the skin, tighter under the rough scar tissue, like sleeves on his arms.

Renee smirked, her uniform as inmobianly perfect as always, leaning languidly against the open door of his cell. Her eyes traced the ornate patterns in his thin fur, curling around his arms and shoulders like tendrils of vines on a trellis. She had not had the doctors give him stitches, just a soft pack of bandages and a bed to lie tied in and whatever his own body could do for the cuts.

"I told you your scars would be beautiful," she said.

Tails lowered his eyes and snout, a weak growl in his throat. Renee reached down and backhanded him, putting stars in his eyes.

"No spitting on my gifts," she declared.

It felt strange to be struck on a padded floor. The hardness of the blow and the softness beneath him. The Lady was back. It was time for the gym. With a sigh he closed his eyelids over his smoldering anger and held his wrists out, together, to be cuffed. He gave a sharp yelp! as she boxed his right ear.

"I did not tell you to give me your wrists." She stepped beside him, looking down at him with a connoisseur's considering grimace. "I know you love it when I restrain you, but I'm not feeling kind today. My doctors say you have healed enough to take a thorough beating. You will obey me without the help of shackles or you will be punished."

He stared up at her, no longer bothering to hide the embers still warm behind his irises, and slowly lowered his hands.

Throw his head into her belly and hurt his neck. Attack her leg and get kicked in the face. Get to his feet and get thrown to the ground. There was nothing he could do. Renee's first command was always to kneel. She said that all else followed from it. The attacks and defenses available to a mobian on its knees were very limited, so a kneeling mobian surrendered its right to resist the people around it. And today she had found him on his knees, so there would be no fighting.

Which was good, because she was lying about what her doctors had told her. He could feel the individual lines of the scars running about his skin, tugging like he was held together with superglue, a ghost of pain in them when he moved. If she gave him a thorough beating, her hammerblows would flay the skin from his body. He'd peel like an orange.

He wasn't giving into her. He just couldn't fight her today. A week from now, he would be better.

And then if she cuts your belly your legs your face—

That would not happen. He had decided that, so he could stop thinking about it, because if he thought about what else she could do to him then he would scream and then and then—

It could not happen. It was absolutely not permitted that anything like what she had done to him with the razors could ever happen again. He would find a way so that would not happen.

—and he would not give in to her. He just needed a week or so to recover, to be ready. For now he swallowed and awaited the first order of the day, which she seemed to be chewing over, considering him, his posture and his face and—

"Stay, fox." She patted the head-hair between his ears, turned his back to him. "I have some other matters I will attend to until then. When I return I expect to see you exactly as you are now, waiting for my commands."

Renee walked out of the room without looking back. Without turning her mind to the cameras; she didn't cheat. She told the door to stay open. She walked through the security checkpoint, told those doors to stay open—told them to stay open multiple times, as they were suspicious by nature, demanding repeated confirmations unless she wanted to spend time rewriting their little minds.

The old visitor's waiting room saw little use now, but occasionally a Robian aristocrat saw fit to wait there, and it was not appropriate for them to be surrounded by dust and filth; it was cleaned daily. She sat down on one of the benches built into the tables and fastened to the floor, safeguard against their use as impromptu weapons, and eased a crick out of her back against the tabletop's edge, feeling the taut vacuole pop and the momentary warning of pain before ease, the return of flexibility to her spine.

Strange, what bodily processes the nanites could improve, how they could improve them. Or perhaps more strange what they could not fix and how they could not. Scientists were working on the problem, of course. In carefully segregated teams, bound on very tight tethers.

Renee looked out at the rain pounding the windows, the gray shadows of the towers beyond. A little over eight minutes. An old part of her organic brain called for a cigarette. She felt a moment's mental diffusion, mild discomfort as the parts of herself she had told to fix that worked the neurons a moment.

Miles had been a long one, hard and stubborn. There was not a long history of practice to provide reliable statistics, but in Renee's experience, training a novice warrior took six months of effort. Idly, she called forth the numbers from storage on one of her servers. Mean time, six months five days twenty one hours. Median time, six months eighteen days four hours. Almost a year now, with the stubborn, fierce fox in her care. Though if she were to ask him and he were to truthfully answer, he would tell her that he had been here for eternity, or some similarly ridiculous time. Three years. Five years. Ellen, after four months, claimed she had been in her possession for one and a half years.

Ellen's eyes. She was not stubborn, a fierce fighter and desirable on that account, but without stubbornness and hence without loyalty, arriving in her possession ready to learn a new mistress to replace her old commanding officer. Surprised by the depth of obedience expected of her, but after six hours in the pain bed—though a Robian preferred precise diction, that required abandoning the fiction that the pain bed had not long lost its primary function as a medical device—after six hours, the ocelot's eyes told Renee what her mouth had not yet learned, that she loved Renee because she was the one that could stop her from suffering, and because she would give her a chance to obey her and never suffer again.

But Miles. Mouthing his apologies without understanding, eyes blind. This would be different from Ellen, far different. Different from any other animal she had. She got up, returned, telling the doors to close behind her. Without guarding herself she turned and stopped in the open doorway.

No eyes. The fox with his eyes closed, his snout lowered, head and shoulders shaking with tiny sobs. He sounded like a mechanism that needed oil. His back was bent slightly. She knew that sag, when he was worked to failure beneath a shoulder press. He wants to lift himself, but he can't. His body cannot do it.

"That's a good fox," Renee said evenly, not touching him.

Miles' throat gave a long, wet, strangled sound.

"Get on your hands and knees," she ordered. He planted his palms just before his knees, then slowly, gingerly scooted his knees away from them. He kept his head low, trying to hide it, tucked the tiny white ghosts of his tails between his legs. But he could not obey and refuse her his backbone, its weak points arranged laterally so that she could snuff him out under a quick slam of her boot. She had taught him that to adopt this posture was to offer her his life. Tests of obedience were often very practical.

But not always. She stepped forward and slid one of her boot's steel toe under his snout, giving his black nose a nudge just shy of a kick. "Kiss."

He drew his snout further back between his arms, ears folded. She held motionless. It was important to give him as little help as possible. If she promised to strike him, if she did anything, he could pretend that was the cause. But if she waited . . . .

The fox's snout lifted, slightly, enough to hide the tip of her toe. She distantly felt his tense lips rub dry against the leather.

"Good fox." She moved her foot away from him slightly, slid down to one knee, so she could watch him more closely. "Tell me how to kill the Acorn Queen."

Miles pressed his face into the floor, sinking his nose into the padding, and screamed as though an animal had clawed into his belly and were slowly pulling the guts out of him. She waited, patiently. Spit drooled from his bared teeth as he panted against the fabric. Phelgm in his throat, close to his mouth, as he pressed his tongue close to his palate. "C—cccthck—coffee . . . ."

"She drinks coffee?" Renee suggested. The fox nodded, rubbing his face against the ground. "Lots of coffee."

"Drinks too much," he wept. "Poison it."

"She won't test it?"

He shook his head.

Renee sat down beside the kneeling fox, folding her legs. "Good. Now tell me another way."

Miles was clever. Inventive. But Renee had a boundless desire for alternative methods of assassination, and patience, hours of patience. The answers were of very limited value to her, given that the Acorn security apparatus would have assumed long ago that Miles had already surrendered the information he was giving her under torture. But they were of very great value to Miles. He was learning in these few hours a lesson about himself that Renee had been teaching him for months.

She yawned as he suggested something that would kill the king, too, something about slow-acting poison in a cigarette, something hard to notice. Not very good—even if one could mask the health effects with the ills of the tobacco, the doctors would certainly call a stop to it before effects could become too severe—but they were certainly scraping the bottom of the barrel by now. She didn't praise him, just yawned. "Another way."

The fox had slumped low over the hours. Knees against elbows, his snout resting between his wrists. His back rose and fell slightly with his breath as his mind worked to assemble another answer for her. "Have." More breaths. "Have one." His eyes moved behind their lids, or Renee might have thought the fox's mind entirely empty. "Have one of your animals do it," he finished.

She thought about punishing him for such a paltry, unformed plan for a killing, but in a moment she realized the thought that lay behind the words. "Any of my animals?"

"Yes," he said.

After hours his voice and affect had become almost flat. He was a computer. But the note of pain in that hissed word was unmistakable.

She reached out a hand and ran it gently along his spine, petting him.

When she first felt pity, that was always the first time she knew. Renee was not a creature that shrank from the sight of pain. Pain was her stock in trade. Triumph over an enemy brings happiness. Hurt them. Humiliate them. Break them. The more agonizing the enemy's agony, the sweeter the taste.

Renee felt pity only for the animals that belonged to her.

Kain Blackwood 2011

## \*Chapter 16\*: Carbon Flats, 1 Ventose 3236

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**Carbon Flats, 1 Ventose 3236**

Mandy looked like a test-pilot, sitting at the kitchen table with her hands poised by fork and knife, plate spotless white like something out of a science lab, waiting for the specimen—last night had been Mandy's night to do the dishes. She sat tall but still loose, the same nervous energy that thrummed through a sprinter on the blocks. She swallowed, her tongue tingling with lost memories, little dreams of taste that she couldn't consciously remember, but which teased at her. "Ready?" she asked Sonic.

Sonic grinned back at her, a mad tomato scientist. The counter, the oven mitts, his face and chest and quills were all speckled with red. Skins of onion and garlic littered the counter. He leaned over the pot and took a big whiff. Even though the chili was cooling, the scent of spice and meat lit up his nose and sinuses like a desert sunrise. Just like his uncle had taught him, enough raw capsaicin heat to melt you, let the sweet-hot of the peppercorns and bell peppers just mix into you. Snively had left enough forged ration cards sitting around to really do it right, but Sonic had taken them to the black market anyway, to keep off of the store security cams and spread the love. He was, as usual, famished. He could eat the whole pot himself.

But it wasn't for him. "We will serve no chili before its time," he said, grabbing the barbecue fork and opening the broiler. Four dogs, their ends sliced open, ends curling open like flowers, charred black at the points. "And this is the exact right time."

Presentation, like they say on the endless food shows—hell, over a couple of weeks as Mandy's guide to the very trashiest pop culture, Sonic had watched dating shows, sewing shows, and At Home with the Daimler Girls. Hot dog first, in bun, lengthwise to Mandy. Then he ladled on the chili, two spoonfuls, drowning it. Sonic glanced up and grinned as he saw her nostrils widen, two little tears start to collect at the corners of her eyes. Snively had taught her to prefer her "milkshakes," and though her guts could handle real food—he knew they could, he'd seen her down MREs and, over the past couple of weeks, chips and honey-roasted peanuts and jerky and sourballs—she tended to prefer the blandest food around, by default. She thought of eating as refueling. When she was hungry, she'd say, I have to eat, like what she wanted didn't have anything to do with it.

Sonic had done his best to remedy this situation. If the virus had her stuck in her body, she might as well enjoy it. When in Mobotropolis, do as the mobians do, and Sonic had gotten used to her to the point that he could sometimes see her as mobian without even having to think about it. That wire trailing from her neck, back across the living room and up the stairs was just some newfangled device for recording tastes for later playback. DietSoft presents CompuTaste.

Mandy inserted the fork into the meat until it clicked against the plate, drew the knife across and felt the texture as it parted under edge. She stopped, swallowed, squeezed the water building up in her eyes down into her fur. Half-frightened, half-anticipating.

His own stomach squeezed, giving a little tug on the neurons to his brain. "You gonna eat that?" he asked. "'Cause I could really go for four chili dogs right now—"

At the taunt she forked bun and dog and chili into her mouth, leaning forward before the mess on her fork could fall apart. Closed her lips.

Winced. Her throat seized, her chest shook with a cough. And yet again, Sonic thought oh gods I've killed her—

"Mmmm . . . ." Her fur smoothed under the lip of her skull armor, her eyes moved behind their lids. Melting in the heat. Bell pepper and paprika, meat and fat. Slowly, her snout worked in a deliberate bite. "Mmmmm . . . ."

Sonic exhaled, grinning from ear to ear. Another successful mission for Sonic and Mandy!

Five hours later he was sitting on the carpet outside the upstairs bathroom, listening to her groan through the door. "I feel like I have battery acid in my abdomen."

"It's stomach acid. Uncle Chuck's Five Alarm is nothing to mess with even if you've been eating normal instead of milkshake." He'd gone right back to the original recipe, which Chuck had recorded on his desert computers. Sonic liked to think of him plucking some wild cayenne peppers, but probably it had just been taken with the rest of his files from Mobotropolis. He kept thumbing through pages of clocks and distributed processing and swarm-intelligent nanomachines, but there were references to the capital in there—the leaves turning as the dates slipped into fall, an air raid that ruined one of the downtown bridges.

Sonic refused to go to school again. Fourth day in a row.

The air prickling the skin around the base of his quills as they whispered up against the wallpaper.

Won't say why, but it must be the nobles, always is. I left him in bed, no time to drag him out. Still there after midnight when I got back, nothing else moved. He needs a father, not an uncle, but the King needs ten of me. And I'm not his father.

Incendiary warheads and the Worm Mountains. They leave the bodies of climbers even in peacetime. No funeral.

He has a beautiful mind. A rosebud dying on its stem. I want to help. I want to fix it, but I can't. I can stop the war, but I can't stop it fast enough. And I can't raise the dead.

The ghost was pulling at his quills again, breathing cold against the back of his neck. Not his uncle, Chuck was gone, his words on the paper, but the other one. This kid he kept writing about, the kid that Sonic couldn't remember at all.

He's a casualty of war, as much as his parents. He's ruined. Sonic is ruined. Everything he could have been, this war has crushed. And I can only watch.

But I can't stop thinking about him.

Sonic was almost relieved as the journal switched back to science: integration of CNS with nanite swarm intelligence. The ghost haunting him slipped away, leaving a chill to linger deep among the quillroots in his shoulders.

Mandy moaned, long and low. Sonic sighed sympathetically. He had an iron stomach, but Tails had once dared him to eat a raw habanero. Well, he'd bet Tails he could eat a raw habanero. He'd offered to bet Tails that he could eat a raw habanero; the results had been a wide eyed fox and a truly agonizing two days. "I'm sorry. I probably shouldn't have . . . I mean, I kind of pushed you to—"

"Thank you for making the chili dogs."

He smiled weakly. "It was my pleasure. More fun than the last time I ran the hundred meter hurdles. You'll be alright."

"I know."

Sonic was glad that she knew she would be alright, as he realized that he didn't. He didn't even want to think about how that chili was going to exit her body. "You're pretty brave, Mandy."

Another groan behind the door. His quills rose as it broke into low, soft coughs, then stayed upright and tense as he realized it was laughter. "Braver than you."

He slapped Chuck's printouts against the door with a thud. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Sonic looked at the container in front of him. White plastic, a cylinder about the size of his forearm, rubber sealed at the top like a thermos. Some of the bottles Mandy used had a bunch of black military stenciling on them, but for a long time now they'd been plain white. Somehow easier for Snively to get whoever he got to fill them that way. It didn't smell like anything. It looked like a container for radioactive waste.

Mandy was behind him. He couldn't see her smile, but it was burning his ears. "The way it works is, you open it and you drink it."

"You're right," Sonic said, arms folded on the table, chin on his arms, scrutinizing. "You're braver than me."

"Come on," she said, coming around the table and sitting opposite him. "It's like dessert."

Just kept looking at it, his mind changing the colors of what was inside from black to green. His ears were pulled tight forward, like it were about to start bubbling and hissing. "You said it has titanium in it."

"Nonreactive titanium compound. Non-toxic, not a salt, doesn't cross into your bloodstream unless you have nanomachines to pick up the molecules." She leaned forward and tapped a finger against the lid, synthetic clicking against synthetic. "And it has sugar in it. And vanilla bean extract."

"And?"

Mandy shrugged. "Very low silicon content; brain food, also non-toxic. Polysorbate 80." Pinched thumb to fingertip until the armor clicked. "Just a pinch of cocoa."

"Polysorbate 80?"

"Preservative. It's in everything. I can give you a full ingredient list if you want. Even look up the proper organic chemical names for everything." Her eyes went distant, a pleasant concentration in them. "Polyoxyethylene-twenty-sorbitan—"

Sonic sat up. "Wait a second, are you using your—where's the . . . you know." He grabbed a quill at the back of his neck, tugged it twice.

Mandy blinked back to the room and gave a wide birthday smile. "My high-bandwidth transfer cable. I was wondering when you'd notice. I'm all better!"

"Alright! Told you some little virus couldn't keep you down."

"And you were right!" She laughed, lifted her arms and curled them at the elbows, flexing hidden biceps at home in their armor. "The antivirus says I'm clean. I've re-enabled my radio and it's working fine. I'm still not thinking everywhere, but Captain Snively says he'll be back tomorrow morning to look at me, and as soon as he does I should start using my . . . ." She was so wrapped up in her victory that it took her a moment to see that Sonic looked like he'd come down with something himself. "It'll be okay, Sonic, you'll see. We'll have another mission. It'll be fun. And I know he'll still let me, you know, eat food for fun sometimes, and I can still use my eyes for TV if you want to watch with and . . . ."

"Yeah, yeah," Sonic said distractedly, sliding down in his chair. Shit. Vacation over. Time to say hi to the boss.

"You aren't going to leave, are you?" Mandy asked.

"I've dealt with him over a year, haven't I? What makes you think I'm gonna . . . ." He squinted. "Did he tell you I was going to leave?"

She didn't say anything. Her arms were beetle up in her lap, shoulders drawn forward protectively. It looked like she was trying not to cry.

"Where's the next target, Mandy."

"I . . . he hasn't decided yet."

"Well, what are the options? Mandy." He raised his quills and his voice. "Amanda—"

"One's in the Antarctic," she muttered. A hopeful grin twitched at the corners of her mouth. "In an old Iceland base the Mobian Army used during the Great War."

"One of 'em," Sonic grunted, closing his eyes. And the other one . . . hell, he'd expected it for a while. Chuck had been a mobian and he'd lived in Mobius; how long could Snively keep him away? They were going across the lines, around them, over them, who cares. They were going where he'd been ordered not to go. If he stuck with Mandy he'd violate an edit of the sovereign Queen of Mobius.

Shit, I've never broken the law before.

Mandy didn't know how to take his laugh, kept watching him fitfully.

Law, fuck. He could wind up fighting his friends—the people that used to be his friends. He didn't need to hurt them anymore than he already had. He might not run into them, and odds were given the sorts of places they'd hit so far he probably wouldn't, but that wasn't the point. He'd promised that he wouldn't come back. He'd told . . . Sally . . . that—

He hadn't told her anything, but even that wasn't the point. Sally told him to stay away, and he should. She deserved that. Even after ten years of practice looking away from what he'd done to her, it was still there, waiting inside of him, the feel of his fists sinking into her, her bones snapping, hurting the one person he shouldn't, the squirrel that he—

Sonic was still in love with her.

Silverware clinked as Sonic slammed his forehead and his fists into the tabletop.

You stupid, stupid motherfucker. You idiot. You moron. Dolt. Dolthog. Dopehog. Hedgepig. It's been like ten years. Grow up.

I want her—

She doesn't want you.

I want her—

Kind of an odd fucking way to treat things you want, isn't it?

I'm sorry!

Who cares?

What can I do? There has to be something I can do, there has to be—

Grow up. You almost managed it back in Lachels. Be a real person.

He sighed.

Grow. Fucking. Up.

"You aren't going to leave, are you Sonic?"

Mandy pushed herself back from the table as Sonic snapped the thermos up with his left hand and promptly failed to rip its cap off with his right. He groaned, muscles straining, fingers twisting, before he sighed and held it up questioningly to the skunkbot.

"Safety cap," she said. She blinked, and the lid rose with a dull pop.

"Thanks," Sonic said with a roll of his eyes, and faster than a dark thought he upended the thing over his mouth and felt it sweet and ugh warm on his tongue not ice cream temperature at all, and thick, not chuggable, running slowly into his mouth as he gulped down a big glob of it into his throat . . . .

"What do you think?" Mandy asked timidly.

Sonic held out his right hand in a blade, wavered it back and forth as he kept drinking. As he took the container away from his mouth he raised his thumb, tentatively. "Not bad, Mandy, not bad. Maybe like what those power-lifters drink."

She apparently took that as I like it, Mandy. "I like it a lot," she smiled.

"Not exactly dessert food though." He sat back and rubbed his belly, breathing deep into his diaphragm. "Heavy stuff. Hits the spot like a sack of cement. Guess that's the titanium."

"It's some whey protein."

"Man." Sonic yawned, scooped up the cup again—he guessed it was kind of a cup—and killed most of what was left, licking the rim. Clean. "Feel like I've had a turkey dinner."

"How many turkeys is that?"

"One." He gestured lazily with his right fist, but didn't bother to flip her the bird. Slapped his belly. "You see any fat on here?"

"You should put on some weight," she said. "It'll increase your striking power."

"Speed's my game."

"I don't think you need to worry about speed, Sonic. You're the fastest creature I've ever encountered that wasn't specifically designed for high-speed travel."

"How do you know what I was made for?"

Her smile widened. "Oh, I've read the specs."

Sonic chuckled tiredly. "You know, Mandy, you got a sense of humor. You aren't careful, you're going to wake up a real live girl." He yawned again. "That shake really hit me like . . . like I dunno what."

"I think you should take a nap."

His eyes snapped open. "You drugged me."

Mandy giggled through pursed lips, shook her head. "Nope."

He stood up, force his eyes awareness flooding back into him, not sleepy. But still tired. "You put something in it. Or there's always something in it—"

She raised her arms in placation. "I've tried drugging you, remember? It doesn't work all that well. And I never get sleepy. If you're tired, it's because you're tired. You need sleep."

"I don't sleep because I need to. I sleep because I want to." He yawned. "And I want to."

"Why don't you use the bed?" she said. "I'm not sick anymore, and you shouldn't have to use the couch all the time. We should trade off."

"Damn right we should," he said, sticking out his tongue. "That armor was built for falling off onto the floor."

"Poor Sonic!" she said, half-joking and half actually concerned, her facefur tightening over her cheekbones.

"I'm alright," he yawned. "Don't worry about me."

"Okay," she said, still obviously worried. "Now sleep. Sleep is when you repair yourself, and you need it."

The sun was still up as he mounted the stairs, but Sonic figured he might just drop off for the night. He would need it. Snively would be back soon.

He tore the blanket off the bed—even with no fur under that armor, he wondered how she could stand it in the spring—kicked off his shoes and dropped down face-first on the pillow, arms spread wide, gloved wrists and socked ankles dangling off the edge of the mattress, letting the tiredness turn to sleepiness, a calm emptiness just slightly tinged with sadness.

Repairs.

Chili dogs or not, she still thought of herself as a robot.

Sonic came to with the full awareness that follows a very long, very deep night. He let his belly rise and fall, curled his fingers and toes and the end of his spread-eagled limbs. That good, light feeling in his head that came from no dreams, better even than having good dreams, like you were waking up into a good dream, and he felt good, good all over. His fur wasn't too oily, his skin wasn't too hot, his nose wasn't dry. Even his quills flattened between his back and the mattress felt good, and usually rolling in his sleep and waking sunny-side up was a recipe for a cloudy disposition until he could get some food in his belly.

They were out of bacon, though; meat was hard to come by. He could smell hot margarine, eggs and bread, maybe pancakes—

He wasn't hungry.

Sonic opened his eyes and looked at the far corner of the ceiling, as though he could actually see his belly without sitting up. You sure down there?

Yeah, that's alright. You can just wait here and go back to sleep for a while if you want.

Ho-lee shit. He licked his lips and whistled with new appreciation for robot food. It does a body good. Hey, you about to start vomiting titanium or something?

Don't think so.

All the rest of his guts seemed to agree. But his tongue wanted a piece of the action anyway. He played a moment at the unfamiliar sensation of his stomach and tongue being at odds, but then took a deep breath, tensed his muscles for a leap to the floor, and found out he was handcuffed to the bed.

He sighed and rolled his head back, sinking quillpoints into the mattress. Two pairs of stainless steel police handcuffs, holding his wrists to different brass shafts of the metal head of the bed. Oh, hi Snively. Missed you. He decided to wake up with a roar and a bang, tensing his belly and slapping his wrists hard against the cuffs and—

Snapping them both.

Sonic sat up, turned around and looked at the cuffs hanging loose around the brass shafts. Looked down at the things dangling from around the wrists of his gloves. Pinched at the flesh beneath, didn't feel the start of a bruise. It was like the things hadn't been fixed with chains in the first place. He reached out and ran his fingers over the brass, feeling the metal cool through the fabric of his gloves. Squeezed slightly, feeling the resistance. Before he could think about it, his arms decided to give a sharp tug, and the metal sheared away at the base, snapping with sharp tings right along where the frame supported the mattress, and he was holding the loose, broken head of the bed in his hands.

He turned the thing over, looked at the crushed, squeezed ovals of where the metal had broken. It had just given way. It was nothing. It was like a prop bed. They'd put him on a fake bed while he slept.

He dropped the scrap, turned, and put his fist through the drywall.

It hadn't hurt. He just sat there, looking at his forearm disappearing into the hole behind the wall, like he'd just torn a hole in some tissue paper.

He slipped on his sneakers and went downstairs.

Amanda stood up when he walked past the living room couch and into the kitchen. She rocked nervously at her hips, hands were folded in a black armored knot at the base of her abdomen, grinning. Snively looked up for a moment from the table, the top button of a light green short-sleeve shirt undone over a chest as naked as his head, pausing with wedges of three stacked pancakes on his fork perched in the air beside his face. Then he took them into his mouth and chewed, picking up a paper napkin to dab at his lips.

"What did you do to me?" Sonic said.

Amanda twittered airily through her nose. "Do to you," Snively said.

"I tore up the bedroom."

"I didn't think you'd believe me if I just told you," Snively said, regarding him warily. "Hence the cuffs."

"You did something. Both of you," Sonic snarled at Amanda. He could feel his heart racing, his face flushing hot. "You put something in that drink, something that—"

"If you don't know," Snively interrupted ponderously, pulling his voice as far back out of his nose as he could, "what your uncle did to you, then you're the last person to know."

Sonic said nothing.

"If you don't know what your uncle did to you," Snively repeated, "then you don't want to know. You fight robots with your bare hands. You gorge yourself on bullets and you live through it. Did you even have a doctor after all those through-and-throughs you picked up leaving Mobius?"

Sonic opened his mouth, but his throat was dry. He coughed. ". . . dug one out . . . ."

"After how long? Why didn't you die of an infection? Do you ever get sick? When was the last time you had so much as a runny nose?" Snively pushed his plate aside with a brusque scrape, rubbed his bare forehead, the dramatic air he had put on put aside for the cheap frustration he always seemed to call up without even thinking about it whenever he talked to Sonic, or Amanda, or anyone. "Think. I know it hurts, boy, but think for once. What has ever stood up to you in hand-to-hand combat? Amanda? May Rabbit? Do you see a pattern here? Reinforced military equipment? He put you in the tank."

Fuck you, was his first answer, but he bit it off before the human could smirk and hit him with another put-down. He clenched his teeth and forced himself to think through how this human was telling lies about his uncle, telling him that . . . "Fuck you," Sonic said. "What now, you show me some . . . thing, you just found in the journals. Hey, check this out, rodent. 'Dear diary, fuck my nephew, I think I'll make him into a robot slave and not tell him. I sure do hope he runs into my good friend Snivley—'"

"Snively. And I haven't read anything but the obvious implications of your ability to run faster than most commercial vehicles and cut though precision military robots with your quills, even after years without a proper diet. The rest I don't know about and could care—" He blinked his eyes, pushed himself back in the chair. "Listen. I can make a guess. Afterward he told you—and everyone else, I should guess—that you had been sick. Something that could hit the brain in a young child, probably scarlet fever, something that made you run a temperature high enough to produce dementia and short-term memory loss. And afterwards you just grew up. Memory of early childhood disappears anyway—"

"Shut up." Sonic interrupted. He opened his mouth to say something else, but his throat seized shut. Breathe. He breathed.

"Sonic." The human stood and Sonic drew back, stumbling as his sneaker soles caught on the tile. Amanda took a step to him, biting her lip, but stopped when Snively held out his hand. "I know you were close to him," he said. "You were close. If he had more time, he would have told you, when you were older—"

"Shut up!" Sonic lifted his hand and saw that his pointed finger was shaking and his hand was shaking and he focused for a moment on making sure the air got into his lungs. "You don't know what he was like. You don't know anything about him. You read all his science shit and just because you understand it you think he's a twisted, hairless sicko like you. He loved me."

"That's what I'm saying—"

"No. I'm strong and fast because I'm strong and fast. That's who I am. I don't get sick because I'm tough." He wanted to say something else to Snively but he had to keep talking, keep saying these things; each one he said he felt better. "I do well in fights because I can handle pain. I don't do well with the ladies because I'm a dope—"

"It was cyanide," Amanda said.

Her grin was more nervous and he shut up and looked at her, remembering the hot and cool bite of her finger under the fur of his throat. She swallowed, remembering it too, her end of it, fighting him and his friends in the basement of the hospital. His sudden, rapid descent into black and cold, the lost seconds before waking up, still on his feet, bone tired and stone stiff, stumbling back as the fight boiled around him—

"I put cyanide into you, when we fought in the hospital. I wanted you to die," she said. "You took my Sally, my squirrelbot, my first robot who would think like me, be like me. I wanted to kill you more than anything. But our blood machines can react, save us from simple toxins.

"And I still wanted to kill you. Even more. Worse than the rabbit, worse than anything. It made me sick to think we were the same. But I listened to my Commander, and my Commander was right. I always see that he's right, when I wait."

She took a step toward him.

". . . We couldn't tell you, then, Sonic. I needed to wait. You were unstable. You needed help."

He grew larger at her approach, puffing up like a frightened child, quills rising into the air. But she wasn't afraid to touch them. Brushed the spikes of his left flank with the back of her right hand, armor to armor, lifting the fingers of her left hand to his right cheek, flesh to flesh.

"We're prototypes," Amanda said, so close that all his swimming head could focus his eyes on was her face, her eyes, her flesh, the skunk. "It's hard to be us. We need to help each other."

Sonic felt the tightness in his throat swell, shift, his tongue pressed to the roof of his mouth. No sound came. The scent of fur and warm plastic in his nostrils.

"You've become a much better fighter, since I've started to help program you." She took her hand from his cheek, laid it against the skin of his upper arm. "And you've programmed me to be more . . . flexible. Resilient. I'm much more stable." She gave a nervous laugh. "I've never had command of a robot that talked back to me before."

The paralysis cracked and with it his left hand shot up hard against the top of her belly armor plate, a faint squeak as a centimeter gap opened. She stumbled back from him, from the force she had given him, staring at him with painfully open eyes, above lips rounded into a grunt of pain.

Deep enough to feel it in her solar plexus, Sonic thought, disconnectedly, fear at the threshold of frenzy shivering in his arms. Can't push me around anymore.

He gritted his teeth as the thought blossomed into the old, cold pain of remorse.

"Sonic," she said, "don't—"

"What do you think you're doing, Sonic?" Snively asked in a tone that did not convey a question. He watched Sonic calmly for a second before turning slowly, reaching his hand down to the knobs on the stove where butter was burning sweet and sickly in an empty frying pan, deliberately turning it off. "You don't want to fight with Amanda. I know you've become good friends. Best friends."

Your only friend.

"Relax," he said, sitting precisely back in his chair, resting a forearm on the table. "Have some breakfast." Where are you going to get food? "Let your head cool." He almost fucking winked. It's freezing out there.

Sonic felt his nails biting the fabric of his gloves, deep at the middle of his fists.

Amanda's voice carried more pain than a quill stabbed deep into her gut. "Don't go, Sonic—"

"He's not going anywhere," Snively cut in sharply. "You have nothing to worry—"

"Sonic, don't."

"Amanda!—"

Scrapes and snaps as she grabbed him, forced her arms around and into his quills. He could feel her in the flesh of his back where the quills tugged, the brittle smoothness of the armor, the yielding softness of pierced flesh. The armor of her skull in his cheek, pressing at the corner of his jaw. "It's terrible to be alone. You don't have to be alone, ever. We don't."

"Amanda, let go of him." The human standing up, forehead wrinkled into lines of worry. "You're scaring him. We're all friends here."

"We are. We're—I'm your friend, Sonic—"

They both shouted in pain as Sonic locked his elbows and threw them wide, quills sunk in the flesh of her arms cutting skin and muscle until they ripped clean from their living roots in his back. He looked at her, still stumbling back for balance, blue needles stuck senselessly into her wrists and elbows, face as open as the rest of her body was hidden, not even her hatred and her suspicion to protect her, not even the sickly-sweet fairytale trust of her Commander. Nothing but despair.

He got the fuck out of there.

The late winter wind stung numbing flesh of his arms and face as he ran. So cold in the desert.

Inside, Snively sat, forehead resting on the heel of his right hand. "Too early. But we couldn't wait." Eyes closed, motionless save for the slow, steady, angry working of his lungs. "If he'd found out on his own . . . ." He trailed off, unwilling to say whether that would have been better, worse.

Amanda was on the floor, legs bent before her, skewered arms limp and forgotten at her sides. Wet cheekfur gleaming in the light. "He'll come back," she said, thinking of the taste of meat and fat, the soft smile when she was afraid and didn't have to be. "He'll come back. And if he doesn't, we'll find him." She looked up at her Commander's closed eyes, the mask he wore when one of his plans had fallen through, when they had to rethink and regroup, spend a week of sullen fury matched to helpless sorrow. But they didn't have to. "We'll find him, Commander."

She could see the lines of his jaw lengthen, the skin stretch over his skull as his eyelids pressed tight. "We'll find him, right, Comman—"

Spit flew from his bared teeth to congealing syrup on his plate: "Shut up, Amanda!"

Amanda shut up. Watched him with eyes only a moment hurt. Then just tired. So very exhausted.

"I need to think," Snively growled, as she reached down and pulled the first bloody quill from her left wrist.

**Place Unknown, Time Unknown**

The Lady Renee of Pine Martens rested on her knees, head bowed. "He is mine."

"Already?" The Empress cocked her head. Invisible lights shone off the contours of her armor.

Renee's ire stirred beneath the heavy blanket of loyalty that lay over her thoughts in the presence of the Empress. It clouded her perceptions. She couldn't be certain whether Amanda was being sarcastic, or whether she was actually impressed that she had broken the Acorn Queen's most loyal soldier as quickly as she had.

And as the Empress intended, Renee was forced to fall back on truth even if she'd had the capacity for lying to her. "He obeys me. His will is subject to mine. I will train him as my warrior."

"Mmm." The Empress's smile shone brightly in the darkness of the empty thought-space. "Robotnik is right. If Miles can be brought into the Empire, then there is no one who can resist its growth."

Renee clenched her teeth, and her thought-teeth followed suit. The Empress's power was undeniable, but she still felt the urge to deny it. The way she would speak about the Empire as though it were something separate from her—she didn't boast that there was no one who could resist her. And the way she didn't give Snively his due. Lord Robotnik was at the Empress's ear, but it was Snively who was the architect of the Empire, and the true master of Roboticization in all its forms. There was something so . . . childish about Amanda, for all her strength and mastery. Though it was one of the most basic logical errors to think that she was somehow undeserving of her strength, that 'right' was different than might, she still found herself tempted to the thought. Wanted to be tempted to it.

She knew it was a slave's thought. She hated herself for it even as she hated Amanda for it.

Amanda purred to herself. "If my Sally's favorite can be programmed, then my Sally, too . . . ."

"You should kill her!" Renee shouted, slapping her thought-hands on the invisible ground. "She's an abomination! She's the Queen of Lies! She—"

Thought-space bent rapidly until Renee could no longer perceive it. Her Empress's face hung before her, bulging and filling her sensorium, yet somehow perfectly formed. An angry face, though the anger was broader, filling the Empress and Renee herself, making Renee shrink smaller, down to the tiny point of her organic mind.

We have discussed this.

Yes, My Empress.

I am sick of the subject.

Yes, My Empress.

Return to your duties.

Yes, My Empress, and she felt her lips moving, her real lips, dry and slightly chapped from the brief communication trance. Blinked her eyes, felt the greenhouse warmth of the afternoon sun slanting through the windows. She was sitting reversed at one of the tables in the jail's visitor's room, her rump on the bench and her back against the edge of the table.

She licked her teeth and swallowed as she looked for Miles. Cleaned into far corner by the windows with his brown plastic bucket of filthy suds and the small yellow sponge in his right hand. He looked up at her, questioningly.

"Clean under your feet," she said, with a quick gesture of her snout. She did not call him to attention or require him to salute. He had not earned the honor of military discipline.

He simply got to his bare, black feet, lifting the delicate traceries of his tails for balance as he squatted to wipe the dust and loose fur from around his soles. It would be a while, yet, before she could simply give the fox the order to heel and forget about him until she needed him. But it still gave Renee's snout a smile to feel confidently that she could safely turn her attention to other matters while he performed certain tasks. Even lowly, pointless tasks that did not require concentration, like cleaning the entire visiting room floor with a sponge rather than a mop.

One could say that he was undergoing the training of a worker-animal, if that made sense—which it did not, as worker-animals were made by nature, not trained. But he behaved as one. He heard the task; he performed it. He did not think; he did not question. He simply heard and acted. A minion of the Acorn Queen would say that he acted robotically, which was, in its way, accurate. The term robot had originated as a borrowed, comparatively recent Lakolska neologism, derived from an old word for worker.

But mobians had seen to it that robots did not work. They fought. And with that, they ruled, and it was mobians who would work. This was the inevitable way.

Miles finished his task and dropped his sponge in the bucket. Then he looked up at her a moment, then lowered his snout, the dominant systems inside him without instructions, the other systems that would fight or flee paralyzed under their force. She let him wait a few moments, letting him practice keeping balance in obedience when he had no task to steady him. Finally, she clapped her hands, once, for attention, pointed to the windows. "Use the spray-bottle."

The fox nodded, listlessly, left his suds-bucket where it was and walked over to the plastic crate by the wall where she kept his tools for today. Pulled out a rag, orange shred of prison uniform, and the unmarked gray bottle with the cleaning fluid. He turned to the windows, looked up at their height, then back down at the crate.

Renee smiled to herself as he stood upon it, sprayed the glass near the very top. Even in something as lowly as this his fire burned, his will longed to impose itself. He would be the best window-washer. That was his nature. It was not a nature that tended to produce window-washers. And her mind turned again to the counter-offensive, the way it always did. There was still time for him to serve in the shock troops, go behind Acorn's lines in the city. It would require stricter, intensive attention to him. She had bent him to her command on Moonday. Returned Kingsday to oversee him in calisthenics. It was Queensday.

He wiped the top clear of streaks, left and right up and down. He got off the crate, and then she saw the hesitance in his step, the tightness of his fingers as they caressed the curve of the plastic trigger underneath the nozzle. She could not see his eyes, as the cameras stationed in the room were not at the proper angles, the desert sunlight against the glass too much to permit a reflection. But she did not need to see them.

Her animals were not to keep secrets, and Miles was not keeping one from her now. She could see the subsystem within him fighting over the cleaning agent inside the bottle, enough to burn her eyes, with the other subsystem that screamed that she had other eyes, that he would not surprise her, that she could never be hurt, that he must always do what she said.

It was taking him a long time to make up his mind. Several seconds, intensely introspective, utterly thoughtless of how obvious his dithering was. Renee stifled a yawn, got quickly to her feet, took two steps to him and pinched his right ear in her left hand.

"Miles," she said.

Almost instantly the bottle thumped hollowly against the tile by his feet, joined silently by the rag. His left ear folded firmly to his skull, his eyes pinched, his whiskers flattened to his snout. The pain produced by her thumb and forefinger crushing the delicate earflesh was sharp, penetrating, but not intense. It was not a disabling pain. It was just to remind him.

She let go his fur and let the flesh of his ear resume its pointed shape. It folded quickly, but he did not lower his head, though Renee could see that he badly wanted to. His shoulders were low, pressed low, letting his arms hang low to mid thigh, fingers trembling almost at the hem of his shorts.

"Miles," she said with mild disappointment.

She wasn't sure whether she heard the slight whine in his throat, or imagined it.

"Knees," she said, and before she had finished moving her mouth he had dropped, as though he had been waiting, aching to drop, because this was the way he could apologize to her and placate her and promise her that he would never have evil thoughts again. His limbs were becoming practiced at the motion, both knees sinking equally quickly as he pivoted on his toes, tails pressed to his legs to counter the forward shift of weight, hands at his sides until they rested on his thighs. He kept his head low, pressed to his chest, his eyes fearfully closed.

"Hands and knees," she said, and as soon as he had obeyed added absentmindedly, "belly." He lay down on the tiles, taking what was left of their damp in his chestfur and his right cheek as he turned his snout to the side. His hands went to his sides, palms up, because this was the position in which a mobian was most helpless, most at her mercy, and because she had told him that was what she wanted him to do when she gave that command.

Renee scooted the forgotten spray-bottle out of the way with her boot and sat beside the prostrate fox, smirking at the slack release of tension spelled out in his features. Whether Miles' higher-level systems had given any attention to the fact at all, she made a point to rarely strike him when he was on his knees, and to never hurt him when he was on his belly. His body and the deep portions of his hindbrain already knew that when he was at his lowest before her, there was nothing to fear.

This was the cornerstone from which she had already begun her construction. What care did she have for a fox that would wash windows, dance, clean her laundry, drive her car. She had hundreds of thousands of mobians to do these things. She was awash in them. She could have one by walking to the street outside and laying a hand on the shoulder of the last of a passing work-group as it went to factory or dormitory, like plucking an apple from an overgrown orchard. Miles had no business washing windows.

But his business did include obeying her, without delay and without question. She had taught him to do so with pain and fear, fear so great that when he carried out her commands he did so like a panicked terrapod, bellowing and kicking at the walls of his stall, shaking the yoke on his shoulders.

Fear of her was still there, and it obviously needed to be, but the more she used him the more supple his will became, the better fit Lady and mobian had. There were times that he obeyed because he was afraid of her, and there were times he obeyed because the task captured his interest, or because he couldn't think of anything else to do, or because he wasn't thinking, or because she had given him an order, or because he obeyed.

And once obedience was simply written into his being, any fear would be superfluous. There would be no need for him to fear his Lady.

There would be no reason he could not love her.

Gently she rubbed his back, softly, letting her palm and fingers tug lightly at the smooth, well-groomed fur over the nubs of his vertebrae. Mobians liked this sensation. They liked it at a very basic, genetic level.

Soon, she decided, she would see if her pet would eat a morsel from her hand.

Kain Blackwood 2011

## \*Chapter 17\*: Dead River District, 5 Ventose 3236

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**(17) Dead River Administrative District, 5 Ventose 3236**

Snively let the car slowly roll to a halt on the weedy parking lot around the restaurant. A building that looked like someone had built it himself, wooden sign painted WALLY'S with the rusted supports holding it to the roof unhidden. Windows with framed delivery slots facing directly onto the blacktop hinting that the place had once been nothing more than a burger stand, probably catering to a surface mining operation that had moved on. Then they'd added the box of a dining area for the highway and a later-arriving town, the wood and adobe ruins about a half-klick back. And then they'd boarded the place up. Just as well. There was no meat left for Looserville, and the patrons had no doubt been a mob of uneducated, alcoholic dogs who would water the dust with switchblades at the slightest provocation.

He shifted in the driver's seat, letting a hot unpleasant burp escape silently through his nose. The thought of the place in operation turned his stomach, but not as much as the fact that he desperately wished it were open. "You should eat something," he said. Amanda's mind was not very complicated. If she said she lacked for one thing, she would be willing to take dozens of substitutes. Most likely some hot, fatty, cased meats. The senses of taste and smell were very closely related to the motivational centers, slightly moreso in Mobians with their superior noses.

In the back seat, the black woolen blanket didn't shift. Snively knew Amanda was listening, though, even if she was asleep. She had made something like an alarm clock and something like a chatbot, a sliver of herself that listened for things important enough to wake her.

Conversations with her Commander fit within this category. "I bought you some jerky from the last fuel station. It's barbecue-flavored." Turned his eyes to the sealed plastic packet on the passenger seat. Plastic sticker set at a price-gouging twenty-five sovereigns, though less than half of what you had to pay without the benefit of a proper ration authorization. In a plastic window meant to reveal the terrapod meat within, he could see a little white packet like one of the segments at the end of the tapeworm. DESSICANT – DO NOT EAT. "It has a cross-promotion with Captain Insanity's Barbecue Sauce," he added, not managing to make the fact very tempting.

Amanda did not move. He felt a burst of exasperation. "Eat something," he ordered.

She gave a waking sigh, and the contours of the blanket rose and fell in the rearview mirror. "I'm not hungry," she said.

Snively stared icily at the mirror, then grabbed the jerky and tossed it into the backseat. "Eat that. You'll like it, it's savory." Sighed, rubbing his palms against the steering wheel. "And bold, if they're to be believed."

A hand wriggled out from between the blanket and the fabric of the seatback like a black moray eel, seized the bag and dragged it back beneath. He heard the obedient pop of plastic, but she masticated silently.

"The highway's deserted. You can come out if you like."

"Yes, Commander." The blanket did not move.

Snively bit back his order for her to sit up. Hundreds of kilometers until they were far enough south to push into the forest and breach the lines. Quite the roundabout way to get into Queen Sarah's Mobius, but Posniak could logically only take care of half of the troops they had to evade, and that even if he hadn't recently seemed as tired and passive-aggressive as Amanda. "When we rest tonight," he said, "you're getting a thorough diagnostic."

"I don't need a diagnostic."

He almost shouted the hypnotic trigger at her right then. But she was not insisting; she knew that she was going to get a diagnostic. She was complaining. She didn't want to go to school; school was boring. Keep telling her what a good, special little robot she is, and you'll eventually produce one stuck-up little bitch.

"You are going to get a diagnostic," he growled. "You have gone far too long without proper maintenance and expert supervision. It's my fault." It was his fault. He had misjudged Sonic, badly. He was too stupid, too frightened to be a stabilizing influence for Amanda, let alone a useful tool on his own. The most idiotic part was that his misstep, he had seen an hour after Sonic had fled, had been to trust too much in the sentient instinct to happiness. At this very moment, he would lay every sovereign he had that the rodent was in utter misery, probably shivering somewhere under the frigid sky. Too closed-minded, too balled-up, too hedgehog. "I've been spending too much time preparing for covert work in western Mobius when I should have—"

"I want to find Sonic."

If she had said it in anything but the most timid, apologetic tone, her face still hidden beneath the blanket, he would have screamed. Hit the horn. Thrown something at her, then quickly triggered her for some judicious memory-editing before anything wore in to deeply.

"You know we can't find Sonic, Amanda. Poor thing." He was referring to her, of course, but almost as soon as he said it he realized that she would take him to mean Sonic, so he ran with it. "We won't find him if he doesn't want to be found."

"Not easily."

"And unfortunately, he's stronger than he was. Maybe faster, too, though who knows if the titanium supplement will affect whatever Charles did to his nervous system. It's not safe for us to be around him."

"I'm not afraid," Amanda said.

Had she just called him chicken? Or had lumping her and the rodent together in his mind coded his reception of her words, producing an accusation that wasn't there? "As I say," Snively sighed, "you need a diagnostic." Him too.

"Can't we just take, a, a month—"

"No."

"Could I—"

"No. We need to get all of Charles Hedgehog's work, see the whole of it, the finished product."

"Why?" Amanda whined.

"To keep you safe. To make you stronger." To finally see Dr. Charles Hedgehog's vision as the mobian himself had, this male daring to see minds and bodies for what they were, evolution's flotsam, shapes in the scum, waiting for a mind to take hold of them and bring forth from chaos order and power, impossible power. To understand it. To have the technology finished and final. To hold it in his hands, swollen with potential like the first club, the first gun.

And when his pompous uncle saw and welcomed him back, to give the world to him as a gift. To steal the accomplishment he childishly thought belonged to him the way Acorn thought the land belonged to her. To be the better man.

"To make you a better robot," he said.

"Sonic makes me a better robot. You were gone for so long, Commander. He programs me to be braver and more stable and—"

"You need a diagnostic."

"What if he wants to come back?" Amanda asked. Snively ground his teeth at the echo of a two year old's why.

"He knows where to find us."

"No he doesn't. We didn't leave a note."

"That wouldn't have been safe, Amanda. You know that. Stop being silly."

"I can think of a safe message. Something only he and I would understand. Like a code."

"And how will you talk to him, Amanda, hmm? Be reasonable."

"If we broke into a TV station or a microwave transmitter, I could push a message onto a commercial—"

"Amanda!" He wheeled around between the seats, glaring at the blanket. "You are absolutely not to transmit over any publicly available—"

"Why not?"

"Take that blanket off." Snively said. When she didn't move, he repeated himself, more slowly, voice cleansed of any traces of anger. "Sierra Charlie Alfa Null Null One, remove the blanket and look at me."

At the passenger's side of the back seat, black fingers slowly drew the cloth down over her pointed ears, over her nose to be tucked up under her snout, defensively, but she couldn't hide her eyes. Amanda's lips still had a fading pout to them, but her eyes showed fear.

"You are never to use your radio to make a public broadcast. This is vital to continuing our work without harassment by disloyal elements of War Ministry and Internal Security Office."

Meek, now, mumbling against the taut edge of the blanket. "Yes, Commander."

"Have you been using your antenna?"

"Just for watching TV," she said, splaying her ears as though even that were breaking some rule.

"You do not need Sonic to be stable and brave," Snively declared, relenting as he saw that her rebellion was not in earnest, or at any rate was not in earnest so long as she knew that her Commander could turn his eyes on her. "You are stable and brave because you are well programmed and because we are finding out more and more ways to program you. Because we are finding Doctor Hedgehog's work. Yes, Amanda?"

"Yes, Commander."

"It's been an upsetting week." He rolled back into the driver's seat, closed his eyes as he pushed his skull into the headrest. "But you'll have a diagnostic tonight, and you'll feel like a new robot, fresh out of the packing crate."

"Yes, Commander. Do I have to finish the jerky, Commander?"

"No, Amanda. Not if you're not hungry."

"Can I go back under the blanket, Commander?"

"Yes, Amanda. Get some sleep, if you can."

Even before she felt the camouflage slide over her ears Amanda had closed her eyes tight, pulled away from the confines of her body and into the vast space of her mind. Quiet, growing more empty as they approached the forest. The car itself was old and not government-issue, but a few RFID transponders and systems-indicators called quietly, like crickets. The car lacked a properly aligned dish-receiver, so the satellite broadcasts drizzling down around her were too faint and unfocused to resolve into image and sound. Fuzzy amplitude-modulated audio signals, occasional bursts of digital UHF signal through the buzz of a set of high-tension power lines, close to the horizon. A single cell tower in range, now.

She thought and without deliberately calling it up she remembered this, the smell of the wet grass, the slowly growing stink of her damp tailfur, the steady drip from the darkening dusk-gray clouds. In the western plains, squatter's land, her sniperscope cracked, eyes watering as they tried to resolve the glow two hills away into combat wreckage or campfire. Snatches of voice carried on the wind, a woman singing, or crying softly in pain.

It was Amanda Polgato, kneeling in the grass, sometime during that long-ago rebellion before she had been captured and used to make a combat robot. SCA001 realized this without the sudden wince of fear and disgust that usually clenched her muscles and mind. Being sick had forced her to live in the skunk, see though its eyes and hear with its ears, but Sonic had been the one that showed her, whether he had tried to or not, that so much of her moment-to-moment awareness had always been bound with the this flesh: the pains and aches that could alert her to damage, the scents and tastes that she could detect, and that no swatbot could, at least without interfacing with a highly specialized bomb sniffer.

And the memories. They were a part of her, part of her programming. They could guide her, give her a spark of intuition in the way one situation was like another. She could be under a blanket in the back seat of a car and think of a time that Amanda Polgato was so frightened and alone her heart seemed to hurt, so desperate that a distant light was a friendly campfire that she could almost cry.

She could think of this time and be drawn into it even though her Commander, Captain Snively, was sitting right there in the front seat.

Sally she could understand. Her Sally had been lost to her after the battle at the hospital, her programming too corrupted, her body guarded by layer upon layer upon layer of security. Snively told her that dangers were shifting too rapidly against and within the Mobian government, that Amanda had to leave her home and do secret wetwork to continue his research. And besides, Amanda had come to see, being with Sonic, that her programming of Sally had been too simple, her approach too naïve for such rich raw material as the squirrel possessed. Merely to reacquire her now, without access to the nanite tank and the refitting equipment, would be far too little to make her into the beautiful robot she could be. Sally could be no more than a painful memory to her.

But Sonic. She had integrated with his systems slowly, carefully, keeping a physical and mental distance as she learned his routines, his quirks and bugs. Attempting small acts of programming: a simple bug-correction here, a more substantial rewrite next, even before she realized he was instinctively doing the same to her. Learning and reacting.

And now it had ended for no reason. Just Commander's insistence that Sonic needed to learn of his manufacture now, before they went into rebel territory. Why? Why did they have to go into rebel territory? They didn't have to right away; they could have gone to the installation in Iceland instead. It would have taken a long time to travel, but she could have used it to rewrite Sonic's deeper programming. And why did they have to hurry to recover Doctor Hedgehog's research?

Why did they have to recover it at all? Why did Commander Snively do the things he did? Why did they fight against other people in the Mobian government, and hide from them?

It was not her function to know those things; that was the answer she had reached long ago. SCA001 was a combat robot. She chose tactics, not strategy and not . . . policy, was the word. It was a word that Amanada Polgato had known, like ethics and insubordination. Above my pay grade.

Amanda Polgato had not thought that many things were above her pay grade. But SCA001 was not Amanda Polgato. She should not trouble herself with things that mattered to her Commander.

After Snively gave her a diagnostic, she probably wouldn't. She probably wouldn't think about Sonic, either. She tried to remember if she had stopped thinking about Sally so much after a diagnostic, couldn't remember, and realized that she probably wouldn't.

As the car's chassis shook and its computers quietly chirped that its engine had reactivated, Amanda felt the wetness on her cheek, performed a quick self-diagnostic, and concluded that she was terrified. She closed her eyes tight in the darkness, and without calling up any stored files saw an image from the television, saw Doctor Eggman, saw him with Amanda Polgato's brain.

When the cell tower passed within a mile she said hello. It was lonely and at her military codes it opened up great reserves of unused bandwith like a great hug.

Amanda wriggled through the network, squirming this way and that until she opened a high-bandwith door onto a digitally coded audio transmission. Two long tones before the click of a live microphone and a male voice. "Ryerson, War Ministry."

I know the whereabouts a fugitive, she said, the act only deepening and changing her fear, not relieving it. And stolen government property.

Josh was looking at the furnishings when Pawel Pavlovski rolled in though the discreet rear door of his own office, his bulk materializing impossibly out of what moments ago had been tastefully subdued wallpaper. Asteroid rolling out of a wormhole. He looked well, healthy, powerful, on the move, as though there were nothing but muscle under that pale skin. He must have paid whoever tailored his suit a fortune; it was like humans were meant to be that fat. "Mr. Dursine, welcome. I'm sorry I was delayed, I'm quite happy that you've decided to pay us this little visit."

Us at Stern Mayer Waffen. You could see the Fabrik from the windows, as bland as unassuming as if they were turning out creampuffs or pastel umbrellas. Josh had been more interested in the office's showpieces: from a musket, 27th century, balls the size of his wrist to be launched from massive hexagonal barrel of pitted iron at the light touch of a curled firebrand hinged in the heavy oak stock, all the way up to the first production-line A3-101 Defender assault rifle, fitted with some additional options such a snipersscope, optional flash suppressor, and platinum detailing that seemed to outline it as though your eyes were fitted with some sort of augmented reality HUD.

Josh scanned them and their settings for cameras, as well as the frame of Pavlovski the elder's portrait. It wouldn't surprise him if the room was wired, and at this point the anchor of the disintegrate, fluctuating pro-war bloc would very much like a video of Joshua Dursine, ex-Foreign Affairs Department rebel. Since filing the papers to stand for office three weeks ago, contacts with him had become increasingly valuable.

"It's a pleasure," Josh lied, reaching forward and leaving his complimentary Weissbier on the corner of Pavlovski's desk, sans coaster. The human's ample grin became a little more strained. It was already rather questionable for a mobian to show up in nothing but jeans, boots, and windbreaker for a business transaction, even one with an antiestablishment public image.

"It's mutual," Pavlovski lied, eye lingering on that glass before he went behind his desk and sank into creaking leather and creaking wood and creaking fasteners. Due for another replacement chair. "I'm just glad that you see the importance of national defense and maintaining an active international role in—"

"I don't." When the human said nothing, he added, "You sound like a sleazy version of my old boss."

"Mr. Dursine, one of the things you'll learn after you become a Member of Parliament is that movies about backroom deals to the contrary, some politeness is not only expected but—"

"I'm not going to win. Figured that out a week ago." He blinked quizzically. "How dumb do you think I am?"

Something slipped from the human's face, and he gave a different smile, one that plumped his cheeks and creased his flesh. He gave a piggish snort. "Frank told me very."

Josh's ears itched, hot. Maybe they weren't being recorded after all.

"Of course," Pavlovski continued, eyes a little colder, "you're alive, and he's dead. So why don't you try telling me why the war bloc should endorse a fourth-place curiosity who has done as much as he can to imply that participation in the Mobian Civil War has never been about making the continent safe for democracy?"

"Endorsement from the merchant of death? I'd think that the war bloc could stand to lose you." And it could. The war block hadn't even existed as such before it lost a vote of no-confidence. By definition it was on the run. Any exciting story at least had to have the war bloc on the ropes before a stunning comeback, and the press wanted a good story.

When Josh had decided to get in, he still didn't know whether Lachels should stay behind Acorn—couldn't tell why it was behind her, had only the slightest idea what was going on east of the Brenan River without the access to generals and War Department operatives that even most MPs didn't have. So rather than go all in for against the war, he'd decided to just stand for a principled decision, one that should be informed and designed to end the war as quickly as possible. And they'd stolen that from him: apparently a principled decision meant being against the war now, a standardized euphemism. And when you talked to the centrists, the deal-makers, you found out what the principle was: winning. No, not the war, the election. "But what happens to Mobius?" he'd asked a middle-aged, salt-haired, former businessman, heterosexual, married, who despised tax-and-spend bureaucrats but nonetheless had compassion for struggling families. "Does the war stop, or do the—"

"What happens is, we built a coalition around the end of the war. Then we end it." The guy was still smiling, like he was afraid of a lens somewhere. "We do that by voting."

There were other things that pricked his whiskers. The way, characteristically, Lachels' support for Acorn seemed to be waning right as she might be in a position to put Robotnik to bed. Those persistent, ugly rumors about the Robian east that always seemed to take the same shape: people in chains, workers in prison uniforms. But what really bugged, him, more than anything, was the way that the anti-war bloc was winning the debate through some formal political logic that had nothing to do with the reality. You aren't even on the right track, here. D minus. Rewrite.

"I guess I'm a professor at heart," Josh chuckled.

"I'm sorry?" Pavlovski grunted.

"'Scuse me, sorry." Josh leaned forward. "I'm going to endorse you. Want to make sure you knew in advance."

". . . I'm sorry?" Pavlovski grunted again.

"I'd ask you to promise me you'll push the war, because gods know you're still going to be raking in defense contracts to Secure Our Borders, even if we decided to stay at home. But I think I'll trust your greed instead."

"You think I'm having a problem getting endorsements, bear?"

"From the weirdest anti-war clown around," Josh said with an inquisitive rise of his brows, ". . . yes?"

In the smoky dark below decks, the swaying of the waves was less obvious. No horizon, no stacks of intermodal trailers towering on either side of you. Just a vague sense that his balance was off, and even that was passing quickly.

Sonic sniffed, and the corner of his mouth twitched in an aborted smile that sank back into a featureless line. Gyros recalibrating.

"I don't know what you've heard about other boats," the muskrat said. Wiry, strong and unwashed, his fur sheened with oil. He wore denim pants and a denim jacket with reinforced seams, and he kept a tobacco pipe with a bowl the size of Sonic's fist clamped between his teeth, cutting his words to faint suggestions. He walked ahead down the corridor, ducking his head with deeply trained reflex under overhead pipes. "On this boat, you fucking work."

What Sonic had heard was that deck swabs on cargo boats out of Boulder Bay were basically slaves. Like, literally. You would have a guy on your boat whose job was to go out and roofie low-lives stupid enough to hang out in the dock bars, or if you were feeling adventurous, stupid enough to hang out in Boulder City, and then drag them onto the boat and tie them up until you were in international waters. You would pay them and then charge them their pay for food and other stuff they needed, air, whatever. Enslaving sailors had become a real science, too. Decades to practice since Mobius first fell apart, and in the past year or so real competition from the government.

This muskrat had been real happy to have Sonic just willingly sign on for a slow boat at all stops down to Port Lyons on Iceland's bitter Antarctic coast. You could tell because that thing in his mouth started spewing smoke like an octane jenny.

"I'm not going to lie to you," the muskrat lied. "You're going to have to keep your vices down if you want to have enough money to disembark before we've done the whole circuit. If you want rye and dice below decks, you'll find them, but you'll find them an expensive proposition. The gambling too, even for a swab with spikes on his back." He narrowed his eyes, snorted some smoke from black nostrils, broaching a stereotype: "Do you swim?"

"No."

The mate shook his head, bit down on his pipe to hide any escaping signs of mirth. "Not good, not good. You'll be expected to work without tying yourself down right from the get go. Steady on your feet?"

"Yes." Really, the muskrat was thinking that would make it hard for Sonic to jump the rail near port with his cash in a waterproof bag. The difficult part of getting off a box-boat, wasn't trying to avoid gambling or drinking your wages away but in getting the wages paid at all, and not having your money beat off you by a gang of the brass and their closest pals among the crew if you tried to head down the gangplank or sneak off on one of the cranes.

Sonic wasn't worried about that, of course. He could handle five or thirty wharf rats with iron pipes.

"In here's your home," the muskrat said, leaning against an open bulkhead door, nodding inside at the damp, stained bunks, pictures taped to the pitted ceiling above clothes-stuffed canvas carry-alls serving as pillows. He noticed one or two beds with people inside, others that he wasn't sure whether there was a mobian hidden under the rough, thin blankets. "We're a clean house. No fleas or ticks."

Maybe, maybe not. That didn't bother Sonic either, of course. Fleas didn't bother a robot. Only failing to do what it was made for. "You mind if I catch some z's."

"You watch out. You think you won't puke, but you do." He banged his fist against the wall. "Head's over to port. You fuck it up, you clean it yourself."

He nodded. The muskrat didn't tell him not to use the bunk he threw himself onto, and when he rolled his eyes back down to the bulkhead door the mate was gone.

Sonic took a deep breath, slowly let it out of his lips as his eyes fastened on empty computer-grid of the bunk above him, interlocking wire and fuzzy beige. Just like that, empty your mind, nothing. An empty half a year down to the Antarctic, down to the one Black Box installation he could have a chance of getting to and infiltrating before Snively and Amanda cracked it. He wanted something, something to bring to her, something to explain himself. He had failed so far, left everything to her enemies before now, but that didn't hurt him anymore. If the past was no longer in reach, then the future was, sitting before him as plain as that grid.

Everything was so simple, now.

It was like one of those cheap non-hologram three-dee toys that you could get at a drug store, one of those wild patterns of dots that did nothing but hurt your head until your eyes suddenly clicked and it pulled into hard shapes, foreground and back, a simple little picture of a single thing. A crossed wire, or a wire that had never been put into place, the finishing touches delayed and delayed and finally gone in the madness at the end of the war. A robot that no one could tell was running around with his brain still exposed, no one could see the sparks, smell the smoke, not until it was too late, and the only person that mattered got hurt.

Owner, Amanda had been trained to say. Commander.

Her, was what Sonic thought.

Sometimes he tried to remember back to when the wrong circuit had closed, when loyalty turned into love, devotion into desire, and no one to tell him different. Not even her, as lost as he was. Knowing that he was there to protect her, but mistaking the difference between them for the one between royal and commoner, bridged over and over in stories. Sonic couldn't blame her, even if he had the slightest desire to. A princess could love a pauper. She could love her knight. But she couldn't love a sword.

He smiled, limbs heavy, sinking quickly towards sleep. She didn't love him, she never had, she couldn't. It was all just a product malfunction, one for the lawyers. The crown couldn't sue his uncle anymore, but he could still bring the Princess everything that his uncle had left. Deliver everything to her in a tidy package to be disposed of as she saw fit: files, papers, himself. Even in a storage closet lined with bars, even being dismantled, he would serve her, as he was meant to.

Sonic slept like a creature for whom six months were nothing.

**Place Unknown, Time Unknown**

Tails lay on his back, the padded floor soft under his fur, eyes closed. He felt like he had a fever. He did not have a fever, but he felt as though he did, the same lethargy in his body, limbs feeling disconnected, isolated, out of scale. His head was swollen, filled with sluggish, sour thoughts he only sometimes bothered to note.

This one, in a sudden spasm of will, instinctive and pointless: What am I going to do?

He moaned briefly, the sound bottled in his belly, and shifted with a brush of fur and fabric.

Whatever she tells me to do.

Tails didn't think beyond that.

Lick her spittle from the floor—

His eyelids pinched. Stop.

He breathed out slowly, though his nose, shoulders slackening again. He was getting better at not thinking.

I am a coward.

This thought was a safe thought, with a sweet, personal pain to it, like picking at a fresh scab. Tails was a coward. He had always looked down on the civilians that lived under Robotnik, once Sally had freed almost half of her country. To ask a mobian to throw off chains was one thing, like asking him to take a leap into blackness. But when the land you were leaping to was right there, when you could see the wave of freedom that would break over you if you just stopped working in the robot factories, went AWOL, gave less than your best, what sort of person would keep on working, maintaining and repairing the cage that held him tight?

Out there, in the city outside, they get up in the morning, they wash. An old, tiny part of their minds asks: what am I going to do?—

The doorbolts fired. Tails did not flinch. He was used to it. He opened his eyes and looked up at her. It had been only a day since she last came. Maybe two days. He had slept about seven times since she last came in, but he didn't sleep for very long. He remembered the lights being on, then off, then on, then off, but he might have dreamed of waking up with the lights on, then going back to sleep. That happened, in his dreams.

She looked down at him and he didn't move. She hadn't told him to move, yet.

"Up, Miles."

His belly tightened and his legs locked as he sat up, quickly, but not hurriedly. Rolled, planted his hands on the padded floor and stood. Turned to her and stood at rest, tails drooped against his legs.

The Lady moved to his side, eyes roaming over him in a cursory inspection. He blanked it out of his mind, stared at the door of the cell opposite his own, across the hall. Don't think.

Her finger, scratching at the tender flesh behind his right ear. It flicked, once; reflex. Do not think. Do not feel.

The skin of his throat pulled tighter as she grabbed the fur at the back of his neck in a fist, squeezed his scruff. Tails exhaled, letting the sensation hold him a moment. He responded to her as though his mind were no more than a few wires running here and there in his body, from core to limbs. Like a marionette with all his strings on the inside.

The lady smoothed his neckfur back, patted it firmly, and turned away from him, walking out into the hall. "Follow, Miles."

He leaned forward just a moment, as though a leash were pulling him, and jerked his legs into motion. After a moment he was walking, naturally.

"You look tired, Miles," she said, not looking back to him said as she turned and led him deeper into the cell block. "That's not healthy. You haven't been sleeping right, and when an animal does not sleep right it is because it isn't doing enough to tire itself while awake."

Renee turned, stood solidly before him with legs firmly planted in a wide stance. He stopped to avoid running into her, then simply stood, like a mannequin.

"You should show more interest in your training," she said. "It will make you healthier. Stronger. Happier." She grabbed the handle a the cell door and the bolts fired. "In."

Tails stepped forward, walked into the cell. Could have been his own old one. Cot, walls, toilet—

Sally—

It wasn't Sally. He knew that with a certainty that steadied him even as deep parts of his mind still fitfully cried Sally! She was a chipmunk and a redhead and that was enough to make his empty mind grab at her, but she was heavier: a bit of sag to the belly over the hem of her prisoner-shorts that hinted at paunch vanishing on a starvation diet. The hair, too, bobbed short in a style he could still call up in his mind more easily than the shoulder-length growth she'd been wearing when he'd been captured—

The face. Concentrate on her face. The face was not Sally's. Walnut-cheeks, unscarred by combat, and rounder ears. And softer eyes, a wider mouth, an expression of fear that he had never seen on Sally's face, even in the fiercest combat. It was at home there, worn into the creases in the fur. The frightened, compliant mobian that the Lady always tried to tell him Sally had been, in secret.

"Strike her," the Lady ordered.

Fear swelled in her eyes, growing bright and big. But she didn't move, didn't lift her arms to protect herself. Just waited, her eyes fixed on Tails as though he were the grim reaper.

With surprise, Tails realized that he was frightening. Muscles hard under his smoothed-brushed fur, his belly and chest dotted with old combat scars, the starburst bulletwound in his shoulder, and the half-hidden pink traces down his arms, greater testimony than any ink could possibly be. Maybe she thought he'd done it to himself, carving his own flesh when he couldn't find anyone else's. He looked like a monster.

Even though he was terrified.

"Strike her," Renee repeated.

He wasn't obeying. She had twice given him an order, and he had not followed it. That didn't seem possible, that he should be able to hear her words and keep them outside of him. But she was right behind him, blocking the door, and she was going to punish him. Worse than before, worse than ever.

"I said," Renee repeated, slower than before. "Strike her."

Protect yourself, Tails thought, trying to push his will into the chipmunk the way the robian seemed to push her will into him. Could she fight at all? Why the fuck couldn't she?

The Lady's voice sounded a note of warning, tense like a finger on a trigger. Right behind him. "Miles."

Lift your fucking arms, chipmunk. It was like there were padlocked chains holding Tails' fists to his waists. You don't hurt civilians. You don't hit girls.

His diaphragm tensed rock hard as the Lady's fingers took his right ear and crushed it, pain like a needle of amphetamine spiking through the flesh. "Strike her," she ordered, but she was too late, because his right hand had already shot up and glanced its knuckles along the line of the chipmunk's snout. It was not a hook and not a straight and not an uppercut and not even really a punch; it had nothing of his trunk or his heart in it. He just swung his arm at her face like a yo-yo at the end of the string.

Renee's grip on his ear kept his head in place, but his eyes rolled down to follow the chipmunk as she dropped, until she disappeared under the curve of his snout. He heard her body slap against the tiles. A moment later the Lady released her pinch and he looked down at the chipmunk curled on her side. The fresh flow of blood into his ear brought, slow, warm relief from the pain.

"Good," the Lady pronounced.

Tails felt his shoulders rise and fall with his deep breaths. Looked into the chipmunk's eyes as she stared at him accusingly.

He hadn't even really hit her.

"Kick her," the Lady ordered. Tails stepped forward, the tile cold under his soles, and drove his right foot into the chipmunk's belly, just underneath her folded arms. She coughed, face screwing up in nausea as his tarsals squeezed her diaphragm against her stomach. She hadn't even put her arms up. She hadn't even tried to dodge. "Again," the Lady said, and Tails shifted his weight back onto his left foot as the chipmunk grabbed at his ankle, clung to him as he shook her loose and weakly stamped his instep on the side of her torso, gave her a kick that wasn't so much a kick as a push, the way you push garbage that you find in the street that you don't want to touch, rolling her over so her back was turned to him. She curled up again, spine showing under her fur.

He heard her sob. He felt his gorge rise, felt his fists tighten.

"Pin her."

She was just a rag doll, letting him pull her onto her back with just his toes before he straddled her belly and dropped to his knees, knocking her breath out of her lips with his rump. He didn't trap her arms under his legs, he wasn't thinking, his style and his technique were all wrong, but she had no technique, she had nothing, slid her arms to either side of her head instead of protecting her face.

The chipmunk wasn't even a slave. She was just a punching bag. Tails felt his jaw clench.

"Strike her," the Lady ordered.

Now the chipmunk lifted her arms, crossing her wrists in front of her eyes as though that were the only vulnerable part of her, as though Tails couldn't just twist his waist and lock his elbow and drive his right fist hard into her snout-cheek, feeling the shock of the impact travel up from his knuckles through his wrist and up to his shoulder, sensing the echo of the blow deep in his own belly. That's a punch, that thing that just shook your brain and filled your eyes with sparks. That's what you guard against. This, the follow on blow from his left against her nose, feeling the cartilage crunch soft under his knuckles, almost seeing the black tissue swelling with lymph. This is how you fight.

"You may," Renee said, acknowledging the unordered blow. "Strike her at will."

Tails pulled his right fist back, looked at the eyes rolling sightless in the ground squirrel's face over the welts rising under her snoutfur.

Look what you made me do, he thought, and he punched her.

The room was quiet, but it was loud in Tails as he pummeled her, his chest ringing with the reverberations of the blows, feeling the difference in the sensations as his flesh bruised over his knuckles and he began to strike at bone, the scent of her blood in his nose, against his tongue as it snuck between his bared teeth. It was then that he first thought that what he was doing was sickening, but it wasn't making him sick, it was doing the exact opposite. She could have saved herself, she could have saved him, they could have teamed up on Renee but instead she demanded that he let Renee torture him so that she could be tortured, too, so that he could be tortured for nothing.

He wouldn't let her do it, the bitch, he wouldn't—

"Good," the Lady said.

Tails gave a growl and locked in place, his right arm shivering by the chipmunk's cheek, fingerfur still sticky with her blood. No. He wasn't doing this for her. The chipmunk had tried to have him flayed alive, and yes, that wasn't true, but he wanted it to be true and he didn't care if it was true because he had been suffering for years because of this chipmunk, she had destroyed his life and body and he would make her pay. Every part of him wanted it, his knuckles, his scarred arms, everything down to his tails and toes.

Maybe that was what the Lady thought was good.

"Don't stop," the Lady said, and Tails' fist sprang into motion again, plowing into the chipmunk's cheek with a smack of flesh and a crack of shattering bone. He stopped again, transfixed by the sharp twinge of pleasure that swept him, barked a yip of delight behind his teeth. He felt himself smiling.

This was what it felt like to go mad.

It felt wonderful.

"Again." A left jab under her snout, against the top of her throat. "Again, keep going." Tails punched again, again, letting the violence sing through him like music, part of him searching for himself inside of it, inside of the music, and he found himself. Small and tiny. Like there was an airplane buffeted in the winds of a hurricane, and he was the pilot.

He had to stop this.

(No I don't.)

He had to stop now or he would be lost. Like Emily and all the Lady's others. He would be her slave and he would love it.

(I can love her.)

Eject, pilot, but he couldn't eject, he was trapped in this body and the robian wouldn't let him leave. The Lady was life. This was life, the air sharp in his lungs and this tang of blood and

(This is how Sonic felt when he—

Tails took his lower lip between his teeth and bit. Blood flooded his mouth, inundating his roar of agony, and he focused on the pain, the sensation of his flesh parting around his canines, held onto it and let the pain burn him, the pilot desperately beating at the controls, ripping out the wires, feeling the plane lurch into a dive, the winds unable to stop the craft's headlong descent toward the end—

(This is all there is other than Her, only blood and agony and . . .

"Miles!" The Lady grabbed his right ear and crushed it so hard it felt like the flesh had pulped, like it was a rind spending its juice. "Stop it!"

Tails released the shreds of his lip.

Suffering.

"Kill her!"

She's already dead, Tails thought.

The Lady clasped her hands into a sledge and slammed them into the side of Tails' head. He blanked, tumbled off of the chipmunk. Landed on his side, his face throbbing, head swelling as the impact reverberated in his mind, amplified by the sudden emptiness there. He struggled to breathe, and the act made the pain suffuse him, fill him the way ink blossoms in a glass of clear water.

"Miles. Miles. Look here."

Tails dutifully opened his eyes. Slanted sideways in his vision, the Lady was seated on the floor, the chipmunk lying limp with the mess of her head nestled in the Lady's lap. Her eyes were swollen, bloody snot drooling from her deformed snout as she breathed.

A crisp crack like a biting into a fresh vegetable as the Lady twisted the chipmunk's head almost one hundred and eighty degrees.

Tails didn't blink.

"Did you think you saved her life?" Renee snarled.

No. He hadn't thought that.

Kain Blackwood 2011

## \*Chapter 18\*: Mobotropolis, 20 Germinal 3236

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**Mobotropolis, 20 Germinal 3236**

Sally kept her lips closed and spread her jaws behind them, yawning through her nose. Brigadier-General Wynn was flapping his gums, pointing out forces on the interactive trivid display across the room from her. It showed a map-cum-bar graph with relative concentrations of loyalist troops along the lines. This wasn't hard to get; over the years she'd gathered an almost kinaesthetic sense of her army's disposition. A very tall, thick blue rectangle sat atop Mobotoropolis, a number of other ones in a cordon to the east that bulged out into Robotnik's lines, more reaching out along tributaries of the Great River, pushing out in the forest, where the bars grew smaller and thinner, farther apart. Tiny VTOLs like little toys sprinkled in the north and south, and a tiny little ramjet fighter at Dassin AFB behind the capital, the fledgling airforce she'd cobbled together from captured and loaned jets that let her rule Mobotropolis airspace and move safely back into the palace.

Wynn was talking about how they didn't have enough soldiers.

The size of the red bars opposed to the blue was speculative, intelligence cobbled from line LPs, overflights and some deeper-level assets run by MILINT. The farther east they withdrew from the line, the more doubtful their loyalties to Robotnik were, the more translucent the bar.

Along every point of the line except the arc to the east of Mobotropolis, the bars were of roughly the same size and translucency.

"Majesty?"

Sally blinked, flicked her ears. "Yes. Of course, sorry."

"Yes," Wynn said noncommittally, trying to best navigate everyone in the war room past the difficult fact that their sovereign had just zoned out. "Of course, implementing a draft has unavoidable disadvantages, which are better discussed by a psyop—" He cleared an empty throat, gestured at a weasel across the table from him in a dress uniform, who kept his eyes on Sally and appeared absolutely impossible to embarrass. "Specialist political officer, Colonel Wilkinson."

"Thank you," the weasel said, standing up as a mouse behind him scurried to bring up a bullet-point presentation on the trivid. Sally had the vague sensation that she'd seen Wilkinson in the war room before, though her generals had never introduced anyone to her as a political officer or a psyops specialist. There were a lot of Colonels. Once you got below Colonel, Sally didn't keep track. "We've analyzed several different structures for a system of mandatory conscription and military service, and prepared a number of different action options, each of which provides a unique balance of potential advantages."

Sally took a deep breath to hold off a sigh, popped a crick in her neck as the weasel called up the first of his substantive slides, which was INDEX ONE: SPEED VERSUS COMREHENSIVENESS. "The first chief issue in structuring a system of conscription is the degree to which the speed of training new troops should be sacrificed to obtain a selective service system that is more comprehensively organized. The difference is essentially one between a policy that can be implemented quickly, and one that is potentially more stable in the long term and might be perceived as more fair. The—"

"Hold it; hold it." Having to speak with people like this was one of the unavoidable tortures of her station: that perceived as more fair had stuck in her mind like a splinter. Sally leaned forward, turned her snout off center to show him her bad side. "Are you suggesting that We press-gang people? You send a squads of MPs out to grab whoever's on the street? Congratulations citizen, you're in the army?"

"Well, there are a number of ways that—"

"Because We aren't doing that," she added fiercely.

It was like he was used to having his Queen shout at him. "Well," he began again, "that would be the absolute quickest way to put soldiers into the training pipeline. But obviously that would carry a number of undesirable political connotations—"

"That's right," Sally said. The uncomfortable shifting in seats was like a wave in her peripheral vision. She didn't care. "Robotnik is the one who's got chain gangs walking my streets."

"Of course. So there are a number of ways in which we can customize a system of conscription to balance the—"

"Oh for gods' sake," she spat, picking up a cheap ballpoint from the table and sending it skittering down the table with a desultory toss. She rubbed her palms against her facefur but her ears could still hear the Colonel talking, drawing out his patter and waiting her out. This was a job for Antoine, if Antoine had a job other than doing anything and everything to get the right results in the Lachels parliamentary election short of vote rigging—fuck it, bribe someone, steal the damn thing if he could do it without drawing attention. He'd been up there for weeks.

Her nerves were fried. She'd try to get a secure line to Antoine tonight, to double-check her on this, make sure she wasn't just sleepwalking. She tried to call him at night.

Steeling herself, she came up for air and sound. "—ways that we could minimize potential political backlash and discontent from such features of a plan. Non-military critical policies could be changed to the benefit of the affected population. Additionally, forces could be redirected with the goal of liberating Ironlock Prison, which could serve as a major propaganda victory in—"

Sally had already thrown her pen, so she turned to the splay-eared General Wynn. "Gordon," she said, "who the hell is this? Why did you let him in my house?"

Wynn opened his mouth, but the weasel kept talking. "Majesty, I—"

"We have been over this!" she screamed in earnest, finally making the weasel shut up. "We will not ask Our people to die for a propaganda victory! The prisoners in Ironlock are not more important than Our other subjects. They will be freed when we free our Eastern lands. That is Our policy. And if you'd ever sat at this table before, you'd know that." She waved her fingers at the Royal Guard at the door to the war room. "Escort him out of the building."

"Majesty—"

"What do you think, that we can distract them from being forced into military service with some smiling faces on the front page of the Clarion? Do you think my people are stupid?"

"Majesty—"

"Do you think I am stupid?"

"Majesty, Ironlock Prison is an important strategic objective."

"You can't just call it a strategic objective—"

"Majesty, your pardon, it is. Our need for soldiers is pressing enough to require conscription. Intelligence indicates Ironlock is overfilled with loyal, trained soldiers. It's like seizing a mine or an oil field. I'm not saying that we'll gain more than we lose, but we have to liberate it sometime, and intelligence indicates that Robotnik is running very low on foodstuffs; he may not be devoting enough calories to prisoners of war to satisfy international law. There's no reason not to reposition it in the strategic calculus, especially given the potential political benefits, domestic and international." He paused, hesitating, on the verge of a smile.

Hesitating because she wasn't answering, or even moving.

"I understand that the strategic disposition of the army is outside of my authority," he continued, "but it's an important consideration. I've already asked Colonel Langford at Infantry to prepare a report on—"

"Do it." The weasel didn't respond, so she turned to Wynn. "Do it. Get me a plan of attack. Something to minimize casualties."

"Yes Majesty," he replied, quietly.

Sally realized everyone in the room was staring at her.

"I'm sorry, I can't continue. I didn't sleep last night." This was a lie, she'd gotten three hours. "Transfer a copy of your presentation to palace IT. We'll reschedule if necessary."

"Of course," the General said, and he was going to ask something else but she was already walking out the door.

Her stride was quick, even hurried, but precise. Two of her Guard fell into line behindher without a word, stayed with her in the elevator. Left her behind at the door to her chambers, which was wood, and not perfectly soundproofed. She went to her bath, big as her entire childhood quarters in Knothole, and shut the door. Now she could scream.

But she didn't. Grabbed the lip of the sink, closed her eyes, opened her mouth as wide as she could, and made a paltry little noise, "ah," felt a hollowness in her chest, drew another breath. "Ah . . . ."

They were right. How long had they been right and not told her? Months? Years—not a year, that was insane, the Lachels election had changed everything. If she hadn't been distracted, it would have been ideal to reallocate troops to Ironlock immediately after their no-confidence vote.

So months.

Sally couldn't even be sure he was in Ironlock. But she was.

Scream.

She couldn't. Slid down instead, putting her forehead against the cold tile, her hair in her eyes. I'm coming, Tails. Just hold on a little longer, just a few more months. Aunt Sally is coming.

Snively heard the door open again, saw the light thrown across the ceiling from the hallway, and started talking. "I need to speak with the Director," he croaked, "about classified information vital to national security." He had honed the speech while in the helicopter, making sure that the information most calculated to get him his uncle's ear reached the listener first. "It concerns a weapons system of tremendous power capable of winning the war." He broke off and coughed, tongue working instinctively to swallow the scuzz of old vomit out of his mouth. He needed water. He needed pants that weren't soaked in urine. "The information cannot be discussed with anyone but the Director." He needed to speak to his uncle.

He had for hours been strapped down to the soft, encompassing, now damp and stinking patient surface of an inactive remote neural induction driver. No one but his uncle was likely to ensure that this situation was altered before the machine was activated. Logically, the only reason for the delay that had occurred already was to soften him up prior to interrogation, and there was no need for that. He was going to tell his uncle everything. "The information is time sensitive . . . ."

Snively stopped as he noticed the size of the shadow rolling slowly across the ceiling, like a huge boulder about to drop. Julian arrived beside him, the slope of his belly and chest planetary in scale, his distant head like a moon cresting over the horizon.

"You should probably start talking now," Julian said flatly.

"I need to speak to the D—Fuck," Snively whispered, his breath curling and catching like dry paper in his throat. "I, the, the, uh—"

"Yes?"

"The roboticizer," Snively struggled. "It's not a—"

"That word is sophomoric," Julian declared. "Etymologically nonsensical. The childish invention of a childish gang—"

"I KNOW!" Snively screamed, stretching his jaw so wide it hurt. "It's not some toy!"

"It's a weapon—"

"It's not a weapon!"

Julian's brows squeezed his eyes. "It's an experiment," he offered after a moment. "An inconclusive experiment that you pursued at the cost of your country, your friends, your dignity, and any debt of family that ever existed between you and me."

"The experiment was a success."

Snively yelped as Robotnik grabbed the strap around his right wrist and pulled it painfully tighter. "You call this a success."

"I never wanted to hurt you, uncle," he said, recognizing that the breathy tone in his own voice indicated that his will was shattering, that even if he hadn't already decided to tell his uncle everything he would now, truth, lies, anything he willed. "I never betrayed you. I always had you at heart, but I had to know. I had to understand what Charles Hedgehog had done."

"Which was?"

"It's not a weapon. Amanda isn't. The war was just a job for Hedgehog. He wanted to remake sentient life. Rebuild people right down to the cells. Amanda is a new lifeform, superior to mobians and humans physically and mentally."

"Fair enough," Julian said with a slight nod. "Hedgehog's motivations are of some historical interest. Did you find out anything about the technology itself?"

"Don't you see? The—"

"Anything?"

"It doesn't matter! Yes, the nanites' distributed processing isn't hard-wired at the nanoscale; I've partially reconstructed the machine code and interface. There's reason to believe they can substantially alter intracellular chemisty, which could help explain Sonic's neurokineti—Hedgehog." He swallowed. "Sonic Hedgehog. He got the treatment, too."

Julian blinked, looked away a moment. "Hmm. It makes sense. Fortunately he's not in the war anymore. So there's no immediate value to—"

"Uncle, shut up!"

That got his attention.

"Don't you see? It's what Hedgehog wanted that matters. I didn't torture Amanda Polgato. I improved her. I—" Snively laughed, the sound catching in his throat, cack cack. "—enslaved her, but I didn't have to, you see? We aren't humans who captured this country to experiment on lab animals. We're finishing what Hedgehog started, what a mobian started and wanted for them. We're giving them strength, intelligence, impossibly long life. They'll flock to you for it, uncle. They'll beg for the, the—"

"The upgrade. The treatment." Julian snorted. "I was there, Snively. I didn't have clearance for Science Ministry's deep level projects, but I knew Charles Hedgehog. His grandest ideas would repulse the King himself. The average mobian want his gifts about as much as they want a second tail."

"But you can do it right, uncle. With the help of an expert in psychology, with my help. I can find the right . . . way to . . . ."

Julian had picked up the plastic mouth guard. The one that would keep Snively from biting his tongue apart, once the pain bed was activated.

"Uncle—no! Uncle, this is true. This how to win the war. I'll tell you—I'm telling you everything, now."

"Yes," Julian said calmly.

"I'm telling you everything," Snively said, outraged and terrified. "You just have to sit down, and I'm going to tell you. There's no point to torturing me."

"You deserve it."

Snively screamed as his uncle inexorably forced the filthy plastic into his words. "I know how to win the war! I can do it! I can give you the world!—"

I can give you the world.

It was the last intelligible word his nephew had spoken for the day. The doctors would keep him alive, salvageable, for now. If Julian changed his mind later, he would still have the recordings to enjoy. The placement of the pinhole camera and the pickup range of the microphones were for interrogations, so the movement of Snively's head seemed minute and the slaps of his head against the padding of the machine were almost inaudible.

Julian Kintobor put his finger to the touch-screen of the minicomp, dragged the video back. Watched his nephew's drawn features over the curve of his own shoulder, looking down at himself looking down at the traitor. His eyes narrowed, watching Snively's face carefully, as though there were an illusionist's feat being performed, and he needed to see where the card was palmed.

I know how to win the war. I can do it. I can give you the world.

Rewind.

I can give you the world.

Rewind.

With my help—

Forward.

I can give you the—

He brought the minicomp down against the desk and the LCD screen snapped into wedges of color and darkness.

The idea that such a pusillanimous worm, that sweating, squirming thing could offer him as much as a decent lunch made Julian's stomach clench. But what made Julian let go the broken machine and lay his hands flat on the edge of the desk, focus on keeping the food down was the thing in him that wanted the parasite to give him the world. Even just give him Mobius, keep the nation from slipping through his fingers like so much loose dirt. He could feel the squirrel's troops far over the horizon, pushing less like some fighting animal than like a spreading lichen or bacterium, or just the incompressible, crushing weight of water.

Weakness. He was weakening. And it seemed to matter to no one.

The ministers and generals and their lackeys and lampreys, terrified. Always their stiff posture, their flared whiskers. Carrying his orders like nitroglycerine, wanting nothing more than to pass them on as soon as possible. Few dared speak back to him. Even the few who seemed actually interested in governing, like Thomas Posniak, seemed geniuses at losing a war without losing composure. Often when discussing the need to cancel a construction project to send bodies to the front, to impose yet another transparent and inane criminal prohibition in order to expand the pool of convict labor, Posniak would invoke the metaphor of a burning house. We need to put out this fire first, he would say, his mind quickly spotting which portions of the raging inferno could be ignored for the next week. It came so naturally to him that Julian could at times imagine that the Lakolska had actually grown up in a burning house. He had been born around the right time for it.

Snively at least understood that the war had to be won, and that Acorn was stealing the country from him not with greater martial strategy or insight, but with simple xenophobia and unthinking faith in the past. The Kings of Mobius had been great warriors, even the early Acorns who had rebuked the nobles and reset the throne had been warriors, but for generations they had ruled through cunning and money rather than might, letting their people accumulate the worst habits—sloth, a short attention span, a love of fatty foods— until even the disunited Overland Empire could push its armies to the door of the capital in a month. But the people that the Acorns used to call the commoners only knew that she had a tail, however minute.

Julian did not. Even if their real masters were the humans in the north that he had defeated for them, the ones that paid for Acorn's airplanes and mercenary soldiers, as long as they had a twenty-something squirrel who looked vaguely familiar to act as a buffer, they were free and proud as they wanted to be, unless someone told them different. Julian was a human and hence necessarily a foreigner and interloper and tyrant, even if he had betrayed the country of his birth to save them from total, ignominious defeat, yet again expanding and securing their borders just like their Kings of old. He had already given them a gift far greater than any that Snively had to offer. They had shown their gratitude.

Julian slipped his thumbs under the lip of the desk, squeezed. The thumb of his robotic arm punched into the wood.

His hatred of them had been growing for some time. He could see that now. Perhaps his first decision to first give Snively prisoners on which to experiment could be attributed merely to a healthy contempt. But as his nephew's obsessive tinkering went on, moving from traitors to mere criminals, and then the poor, as his scientific method sank towards the animal habit of a serial killer—surely Julian had to have been nurturing disgust during those years. Still praising the Mobian people in his speeches even as they remained stubbornly dissolute, refusing their birthright and giving their loyalties to criminals and traitors, while Snively drugged and gutted them like Julian's own dream, giving wild, obscene play to the truths he denied.

This disorientation, the unreality. Like waking up. Why should he deign to shape and discipline this mob? What had they done to deserve him? None showed the slightest capacity for loyalty, sacrifice, discipline, any of the building blocks of power—

Except . . . .

I can give you the world.

Julian groped for the path, not moving. Destiny still hidden from him, still beyond his grasp.

Not Snively. Not given. But he had found something. Something that remained loyal to him even as it shook away his nephew.

He had to see.

Amanda was waiting. Soldiers had led her into the room, all mobian. Two in front holding EMP grenades with the pins pulled, leather taut over their knuckles as they held the spoons in place. There were three behind her. From the occasional flash of a laser sight's red dot on the walls in front of her, she knew that at least one of them was training a Poiccard assault rifle on her, probably seven millimeter armor-piercing rounds aimed at her neck. She didn't mind. She was dangerous.

After opening the doors, which said PRIVATE CONFERENCE, the soldier on the right said, "Wait here." So she said, "yes, Sir." Then she did. For twenty hours, by her chronometer.

The room was the opposite of every home she had ever had. In the walls a lattice of conductive iron compound drank EM signals the way foam baffles ate sound. Nanoscale filaments even suffused the dim-tinted shockglass windows. This was not very strange; people sometimes needed a quiet place. Her room in the basement of Napiers hospital had been just as quiet, smothered by rebar and layers of concrete, with nothing but soil beneath.

But that room had her database, and a hardline uplink from which she could reach into the nets. This room possessed no thinking machines of any kind. The black tile floor possessed nothing so clever as twinned slots of alternating-current power outlets, their slight EM fields producing a very dull hum in the silence, like crickets chirping. The lights in the ceiling, fluorescent tubes set high up in a ceiling of black tile and dark wood, were operated by a simple mechanical dimmer-switch with no more mind than a screw. So were the four lamps hanging from stiff cable. Beyond this there was only furniture, with enough sense in its fabric to retain its basic shape while cushioning the user.

And Amanda had thought she had been alone in the desert. She found herself idly patting the back of the couches as she paced past them, muttering niceties that they lacked the receivers to hear, let alone the chips to process.

Treating a sofa like a microwave. She was not well.

The other difference in the room was its height. Amanda lived on the ground, and where possible under it. But here she was almost fifty meters above the ground. Long windows filling one wall, blocking EM and odor but admitting light. Even after the horizon occluded the sun and the atmosphere's scatter of its lower-frequency emissions sank into quiet, there was so much light, regular processions of streetlamps marking out the roads between towers of steel and concrete, and then blocks of brick and wood. The moving headlamps of cars—hadn't there been more, old memories wanted her to ask, aren't there supposed to be more of them?—and the fixed grids of light that the towers cut from the darkness. Millions of people, and the billions of machines that served them.

The glass was cold against her palms. Her tears were hot against her eyelids. She didn't know why she was crying now, and not when special forces had dragged Snively into the stealth VTOL. When the look in his eyes changed, when she knew that he knew that she had called the troops to take them, she felt nothing new, just the same slowly-growing uncertainty. She didn't know why she had done it; she didn't know why she was crying. She didn't know anything anymore. She didn't know her own name. She didn't know her commander. She didn't know her function.

She didn't know if it was all her fault.

The door opened. She spun sharply from the window and slammed her right heel against the floor, holding herself rigidly at attention. She had activated only the hanging lamps, to minimize internal reflections on the windows, and the room was dark aside from four round, overlapping pools of sharp light that made the couches seem to glow. The person who had come in was a shadow, massive, its bulk shifting left and right with each step. Amanda's eyes focused on a pair of black boots, rumpled black pants of a military dress uniform, the red jacket of the Mechanized Army, but with enough rank signifiers to cover the breast pocket, and—

She thought an expression that had not entered her mind since her birth: oh gods.

She marched sharply forward, limbs swinging precisely and symmetrically on either side of her perfect spine. The repetitive motion helped her, calming the electrochemical panic in her brain from something approaching a seizure to a mere terrified awe. Reaching the center of the light, instinctively presenting herself for inspection, stamping right and left feet before snapping her bladed right hand fiercely to her temple. "Special Combat and Apprehension Robot Number Zero Zero One, designate Sierra Charlie Alfa Null Null One."

"Mmm." Director Julian Robotnik raised his thick red eyebrows as she saluted and straightened up himself, the barrel of his belly and chest protruding as he clasped his hands behind his back. "Do you know who I am?"

"Yes, Sir," she replied, and swallowed as she realized that she did not know how to address him. Director? Commander? Owner?

Robotnik lifted his left hand and brusquely waved for her to drop the salute, before remembering his non-com etiquette. "At ease." This was an order, and she treated it as one, sharply replanting her feet, keeping her spine straight and head high, tail still plastered to her back by fright. She forced herself to keep her eyes on a button just beneath his collar, stopping their drift to the mount of the prosthesis in his right shoulder.

"Tell me about yourself," he ordered.

She barked out the litany. "I am a robot built for light combat, law enforcement and counterinsurgency. My Owner is the Mobian government. I—"

I serve my Owner by obeying my Commander, but that was not true. She had betrayed her Commander, and when she thought about it was all she could do not to throw up. She began again, "I serve," and then couldn't get any farther, because she didn't serve her Owner; she hid from her Owner's agents for years at a time, killed her Owner's soldiers, stole her Owner's property, and made friends with a hedgehog who committed crimes against her Owner.

She didn't do anything else.

"Help me," she said.

"Help you," Robotnik echoed. She couldn't see his face, but she could feel his eyes on her, inspecting her, judging her.

"Please help me," she croaked. Her chest shook with a hiccup.

As soon as Robotnik said, "Dismissed," she sagged, clapping her hands to her knees to keep from falling into his feet. She gasped for breath, closing her eyes against the heat of more tears. "What do you need," he said, excitement in his voice.

"Help," she whined. "Help."

"How can I help you?"

"I don't know." The antivirus had fixed half her mind, but the rest was bugs and fear, each giving birth to the other in logarithmic growth. She was crashing. "I need to know my—"

Amanda dropped to her knees. She heard the Director draw back as the memory surfaced too late, you're vomiting—

A dingy farmhouse, the tightness in her belly, the pounding in her head, her stiff fatigues reeking of whiskey and sweat, her fingers tight around the toilet seat, close enough to feel the coolness of the water against her whiskers, in her ears the coughing of the raccoon she had fucked because he was the only one in the place and it was the last bottle of whiskey and the resistance was falling apart and the Mechanized lines were drawing tighter and—

She opened her eyes and saw the chalky mess of milkshake and stomach acid, flecks of red jerky, and she took a breath and smelled it and fell forward on her hands, retching at the scent of biology.

Robotnik needed to reveal her function. If he couldn't, then she didn't have one. And a robot without a function was nothing. Was junk.

And if she wasn't a robot—

Weeks after her capture. The three of them alone, only their voices to share through the bars of their adjacent cells. All of them naked. Freezing. Starving.

The human in the hall. Short. Bald. Bar of chocolate in his hands, the wrapper torn. The scent.

"We're going to have a fitness contest," the human said with a grin.

If she was Amanda Polgato—

The biomonitor leads so familiar against her skin by now that she didn't even feel the absence of the fur shaved from patches of her breast, abdomen, temples. The pain like burning wires in her legs as she ran in place on the treadmill. Celine's voice rasping like a hacksaw in oak as she ran beside her. How Melanie had looked after Snively put the bullet between her eyes. His eyes on them now, watching the end of their seventh 10K, in a few seconds to be watching the start of their eighth.

She heard Celine stumble. A thump. Saw Snively stand, draw his pistol and unload on the treadmill next to her. Scent of burnt plastic, blood. "And we have a winner!" he cried.

She kept running.

Amanda wailed, a rope of secretions hanging from her lip to the pool beneath her face.

The prize. A black tank, twice as tall as her. It would erase her, he said. But she was already erased.

"I can't be Amanda Polgato." She shook her head, dizzying herself. "I can't."

The pressure of a strong hand against the small of her back, not pushing, resting. A machine hand. Robotnik was beside her, his bulk close. "You can't be Amanda Polgato," he said, still that excited curiosity in his voice.

Because if she was, she didn't want to be anything anymore.

"You need to tell me what I am. Please." She arched her back into the hand, lowered her tail. "You need to tell me what I'm for."

"What you're for," Robotnik said. Still not a question, but more certain than before.

"I want to be good. I want to be a good robot." The phrase brought up a sadness within her like a mountain of rusted metal. "I used to be good. I used to be perfect . . . ."

The hand rubbed her armor. She felt it in her spine, the Owner's hand pulling against the mounts in her vertebrae.

"Tell me how to serve," she breathed. And with a quick push the hand was gone. "Please. Tell me how to obey—"

The boot slammed into the armor over her belly. She rolled onto her back, not hurting, he was strong but not enough to hurt her, just to shock her as he loomed over her, the lights turning the tufts of his moustache black, flaring around his skull like a corona.

"Stop it!" he roared.

"Please . . . ." she cried, obeying when he reared back and slammed his heel into her belly again, frightening sounds of cracking plastic composite, feeling the press of her armor against her belly when she tried to breathe.

"It's disgusting!" he shouted.

"Owner, please—" and his boot stamped down again, and she put her hands on it, not trying to hurt him, just trying to push his foot away, and he kept stamping at her fingers. Now she told him, "stop, please," and he didn't listen. "Stop. Stop!" He took the boot from her and before she could get up he was already at her head and the boot was coming at her face, black, blotting out everything.

Deep in her brain and spine the circuits closed. She braced her elbows against the floor and caught the descending boot, toes in her left hand, ankle in her right. Her muscles held, blocked his mass and in a single motion she twisted and pushed. He had already started to fall; that saved his ankle. She felt the impact of his back against the floor as she rolled to her side, right arm out before her in a defensive posture, left arm ready to push herself to her feet.

Robotnik's breathing was deep and ragged, the rise and fall of his abdomen like a massive bellows. Slowly he sat back up, pushing himself from the floor, rolling forward to sit with a grunt. His pale skin was flush, the bare skin of his forehead creased by the smile that raised his cheeks, the flesh squeezing around the pits of his reddish-brown eyes.

The thought came unbidden. It didn't even really come. In her room beneath the hospital she had once discovered a disconnected electrical junction box that she had never noticed before, painted over black, sitting just along the base of the north wall. Always there, always seen, never noticed.

I can kill my Owner.

"My nephew lied to you," Robotnik said. The way he said the word made her recoil, expelling it from his lips like some long, fleshy worm. "That is what he does; he lies. Do you know why he lies?"

"No," she said. So strange, the way that he made that terrible question seem so small.

"Because he's afraid. Afraid of combat. Afraid of the soldiers that shield him from it. Afraid of me. Why shouldn't he be afraid of you?"

Because I would never hurt him. But she had.

"Snively is a coward, Amanda. A weakling. Ugly to look at. Uglier to speak to. Why in the world should you obey him?"

She didn't say anything, because she didn't know, and because Robotnik didn't expect an answer either, because there wasn't one.

"Snively is a squirming, snapping, sordid coward, and with the exception of myself, he is the most daring human or mobian I know of on the face of the globe. He risked his life and defied me to create you."

As Robotnik got to his feet, she already knew the next question. So different than learning from Snively, who simply wrote things into her memory.

"He is the best of them, robot. Liars. Cowards. Hypocrites and weaklings. Why should you obey any of them?"

". . . . because I can help them," she said. "I can do what they can't."

"Yes, Amanda. You can do what they can't." He got on one knee, laid his right hand on her shoulder, squeezed with an affection that made her ears burn, made her armor groan at the press of his servos. "You can rule them."

**Place Unknown, Time Unknown**

Julieta was small for a wolf. She had known this for a long time, and when she was very young it had made her blanch and show tail rather than fight with her brothers. But growing up in the war with the Robians, Robotnik's soldiers, had made her brave at a young age. There were many of them and they were cruel. But they were not as cruel as wolves. Her uncles and aunts and mother and brothers killed them in the desert. They fired on their convoys and threw grenades over their barbed-wire fences. The Robians were more and more as Acorn in the far West pushed them, and it became harder and harder to kill all the soldiers before they could shoot back, to escape after throwing the grenade. One of her uncles was killed. Her second-oldest brother, Pedro, was killed. Even the great War Alpha Lupe was killed, all her war party vanished in a raid into Robotnik's stronghold in Terscala.

But Julieta was brave. A black-and-white spotted dog in a Robian soldier uniform offered her candy on a street in Fennec Settlement. She shot him in the belly with the pistol her mother had given her and ran away down an alley and crawled under a fence and went back to her mother. Her family howled for her kill, and she too. She was a warrior, hungry for more blood.

And then.

Waking up with the lights of the soldier's guns blinding her, her uncles' blood already in her nose and her brothers' wrists already caught in plastic prisoner-ties. Their war-den betrayed. Herded into cage-trucks, taken to a horrible building in what some of her pack said was Terscala, a place of barbed wire and barred windows and high staring cameras and many doors. Other wolves were there. Many packs. All the packs. Disaster, terrible defeat.

How?

They were brought to a large room with a television screen that stared blank at them. They whispered vengeance to one another, raised their hackles at the beady black eyes of the cameras in the corners.

All eyes turned to the front as the screen flickered. They all saw it at the same time: the great War Alpha. Her fur hidden by the uniform of their enemy.

The room was instantly filled with screams. Shrieks of terror, howls of grief, snarls of rage. On the screen the mouth moved but Julieta could not hear what was said. She grabbed her mother's fur and pressed herself against her mother's shivering leg. Her brother Raul was next to her, holding just as tightly. He was crying.

Dark magic, he said.

Julieta knew about dark magic. Raul had told her many stories he had heard from his favorite uncle. Dark magic made spirits that could pull the breath from your mouth and nose while you were asleep. Dark magic, drawn on a dead body, made it walk and kill your enemies. Dark magic made knives that were death if they even cut your fur.

If dark magic could make the Alpha become a Robian, what could it do to her mother?

Weeks later her mother held her in bed at night in the dormitory where they had to sleep, with its cold, dank cement floors and the rusting frame bunk-beds, and Julieta asked about dark magic. Mother told her that the Robians did not have dark magic. The Alpha had abandoned her people. This was a black shame on the Alpha, who was not called Alpha and was not called Lady Lupe, either, as she claimed, but Lupe the Traitor, who was cursed and so were all her children and all her parents in the ground. It should make Julieta very, very angry. It should make her want revenge upon Lupe the Traitor and all the dogs that held her guns and Robotnik, who was her master.

Julieta growled, but mother put her hand on Julieta's mouth, for quiet. The Robians were an enemy worse than the Acorns, when the Acorns had been enemies. It was good to be cautious of them, of the guards that watched them sleep and eat and took them to factory and then took them back to dormitory. But they did not have dark magic, and Julieta should never think that they did. That was a lie of the Traitor's, to make them frightened and cowardly. The Robians would break and bleed and the Traitor would beg the wolves for mercy and she would not be shown any.

Show me what you will do to her neck, Julieta. Julieta showed her teeth, then without making a sound snapped them shut.

Good, mother whispered, good. But wolves must be cautious, wait, learn the Robians' weaknesses. Julieta must wait and be brave.

The next day instead of going to factory, the young wolves had to go with soldiers to a different place, the wolves with less than ten years. There were fights. Wolves were killed. But Julieta was brave. She knew that she had to wait to find weaknesses. She would see her mother again later. Most of the other young wolves went into a cage-truck, but the guards took her into a van where there were other mobians, rabbits and moles and a rat. They wore manacles. They were all taken to a building. The guards took her and gave her to a big guard, a marten in a special uniform. The guard grabbed her arm and tugged her down a hall. Julieta wanted to growl, but she had to wait. She would see a weakness and tell her mother. The big guard dragged her into a small white room and threw her hard to the floor. It did not hurt; the floor was strange and soft. Julieta got to her knees. The room was white and—

Dark magic.

The corpse was before her, sagging on its knees, arms limp. The spell had been carved into the dead flesh of its arms. Its head sagged and its eyelids sagged and its ears sagged and its lips sagged. She had never seen a thing so tired, so eager to go back to the earth from which had been stolen.

As she looked at the fox's face, its eyes moved. Looked at her.

There weren't really a lot of differences between a person—a mobian—and a machine. Some people might think that there is. It's an easy mistake to make. Miles had made the mistake. But now he didn't make the mistake anymore.

This wolf girl: you might think she was different than a swatbot, or a coffeemaker, or a parking meter. This was only natural. They were differences. Take the swatbot. It has black armor, the wolf girl has gray fur. The swatbot is eight feet tall, the wolf girl is four. The swatbot can do very few things with its face, the wolf girl can do very many.

The swatbot cannot make coffee, the wolf girl can. But so can the coffee maker. The wolf girl and the swatbot can both fight, but the coffee maker can't. The wolf girl could do so many things, you would think there was special thing inside of her that couldn't be seen.

Miles knew better than that. Why should there be something inside of her? Miles was a mobian. There was nothing inside of him. So there was nothing inside the wolf girl, either.

"Kill her," the Lady ordered.

Miles stayed still. He didn't look away from the girl as she flattened her ears in terror, eyes staring at him, trying to trick him into think there was something behind them. He didn't move at all.

"Kill her," the Lady repeated. The girl looked up at the marten, thinking she might be joking, nothing had happened, then stared back at Miles as the marten moved behind her, stooped down. It didn't matter what happened to her. \

"Kill her." That was the third order. There were always three.

Miles watched as Renee grabbed the child's snout with her right hand, the crown of her head with her left, and twisted. The sound made Miles fold his ears a moment, but then he brought them forward again. His shoulders rose and fell slightly as he breathed.

Now it was time for Miles to be beaten.

The Lady punched him in his temple; he fell back, arms and legs splayed. He tried not to feel it. She dropped to one knee and put her fist into his belly. He couldn't breathe. He tried not to want to breathe. She slapped his face, but there was no force in the blow, no anger.

Slowly she sat.

"I can't stand seeing you like this," she said.

Miles watched the ceiling. The padding didn't move. The recessed light didn't flicker.

"You think this is what I wanted to teach you? You think I saved you from Ironlock because I had a desperate need of a lump of flesh to beat?"

Miles watched at the ceiling.

Then he stared at Renee, because she was astride him. She slapped his face, left, right. The blows did not hurt very much if he did not let them. She grabbed his face by both cheeks, spat in his face. "Show yourself!" she roared. "This isn't courage; it's spite!"

Miles made a quiet noise deep in his throat. His right eye blinked shut, squeezing Renee's spittle out to run down around his snout. His left still offered a sliver of red-veined white and agate iris.

She dropped him and stood, clapping her hands to her face. Her brow was clenched tight with disgust. After a moment she left, the sound of fur against the padded floor as she dragged the body behind her. The door slammed. Only her eyes remained, black plastic and half-glimpsed shine of lens in the high corners.

Her spit slowly sank into his cheekfur, phlegm running over the damp hairs to drip to the floor. The lights in the ceiling did not dim or move. After a while Miles' diurnal instincts went numb and he rocked onto his side, gave a quiet breath as his shoulder sank into the padding and his own weight compressed his lungs. Without moving his arms or fingers he wormed his way slowly into the rear corner of the cell, curled up into a ring of orange centered on a rope of vertebrae, face and hands pressed hard to the wall. He began to shake, his entire body jerking with silent, distinct sobs.

If there had been floor-mounted camera in Miles' low corner, it would have seen the fox's face torn open an agony of laughter. Silent and toothy. Hands pressed to his skull as though trying to keep a monster from digging its way out.

## \*Chapter 19\*: Terscala, 13 Messidor 3236

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**Terscala, 6 Prairial 3236**

His sleeves were wet. Shit. His sleeves were wet. He touched them. Wet. Lifted his forearm to his face. Sniffed beer.

How?

Posniak fought through a gravity shift as he turned his head, looked down the long receding perspective of the bar. Soldiers. Mobians. Soldier bar. Only ones with money. Ration cards. Brass drinks at home.

NO! No drinking at home! High pops as he ground his teeth. Fuck!

Splotches in their forest camo, somehow brown in the red and green and blue neon. Puddles around glasses and glasses. Slammed down onto the counter, foam flying. Trivid light reflecting. Posniak recoiled from their shouts. TV loud. Lies. Army TV.

Burp. He leaned forward, riding the belch, keeping the whiskey down. The tip of his nose wet. Coughed at the smell of beer on the petroleum-scented composite of his false hand.

Shouts like a tennis racket bouncing against the back of his skull, again and again. "—going back!" "—oing to kill every last—" "—cheers for Robotnik—"

Morons. Posniak's fingers grabbed at his skull. Loose hairs like a disease. Sick of it. Managing their mayhem. War a playground. Him the teacher. Making sure only the right people got hurt.

Soldier's playground. Brutes. Morons. Ruining the world for everybody—

Thumps, room spinning. Lights, pipes. Ceiling. Snarling face of a weasel or a wolf or a wolverine, whiskers flared.

"We're morons, huh?" the mobian snarled.

"—n't say it out loud," Posniak coughed.

"Fucking humans, they're—" "Waste him, Frank!"

Posniak burped loudly as the fist came down.

The Terscala MCC looked like every urban pretrial detention center in the world. Downtown for easy access to the courthouse. A high-rise jail, twenty stories of bland concrete. The triangular floorplan was instantly recognizable, as though a normal office building had been sheared in half vertically along one of the roof's diagonals. So were the distinctive, unevenly-spaced arrowslit windows that gave the prisoners their legally mandated sunshine while ensuring their legally mandated imprisonment.

The courtyard out front was all mud cut off by cyclone fencing. Flowerbeds and trees were displaced by temporary trailers and small-scale construction equipment for a building refit that Renee hoped wasn't compromising security. Looking at the bustling army engineers and smelling the dust on the late spring wind gave her a sense of tired disappointment. Snively Kolensky was in there, with treason charges pending. Maybe he would have kept his robot in better repair if he hadn't been so busy trying to keep away from Internal Security.

Maybe. Or maybe Renee had wasted a decade or so of primary casework so that an accident could put the traitor in a jail that was already being remade by the time arrived.

At least she could interrogate him. She would have that satisfaction.

She passed through the propped-open doors and found the place as busy on the inside as on the outside. Sheets of some kind of composite wall paneling were stacked beside the radscanners. Renee pulled her sidearm, unloaded it and cleared the chamber before giving it to the guard running property check, who was a Mechanized Army infantrydog in a Mechanized Army uniform. More red fabric on the leopard manning the radscanners. "Army taking over the jail?" she asked as she walked in and assumed the position.

Faint hum. "We've been expecting you, Agent Donlevy. The prisoner is being held in in a specially constructed cell on lower level two."

She wrinkled her facefur. "Is that more secure than the top floors?" she asked.

"You can put your arms down now," the leopard said.

LL2 did not look secure. It looked like a godsdamned basement, which was what it was. Bare cement and overhanging piping, the throb of the HVAC plant behind one of the gray doors lining the hallway. She flared her whiskers as she walked. A strenuous recommendation for a transfer to a cell on the twentieth floor was in order unless they had set up something very impressive. An electrified cell with spikes facing in from the walls. An all-glass cage with vents for nerve gas.

Or a sensory deprivation torture chamber, that would work. Three of them dominated one end of the central core of the building, set in between structural supports. Black composite and metal, studded with bolts like massive boilers. And a table that looked less like a tool for interrogation than something that belonged in a wicked operating room, and—

Snively was not in any of them.

The human was standing in the center of the room. He was in his ISO greens—no, he wasn't. It was broader-shouldered, with gestures to functionality that didn't belong on formal dress uniform—more pockets, wide trousers that gave his thighs and knees plenty of room while tightening up near his ankles. Broad, hard-to-break zippers that ran from just above his elbows down to his wrists. It was the uniform of someone who wanted to be able to dominate a parade ground anytime, all the time. "Hello, Renee," he said, grinning with his eyes more than with his mouth. "It's good to see you ag—"

"Agent," she spat.

He snickered. "I'm sorry, you've earned your title with years of punctual, long, boring service. And I do appreciate it. For years I've been working with such sloppy, unpredictable—"

"How did you get out of the cells," she said, and then her fur bristled and her tail went stiff. Her hand had brushed her right hip and felt the emptiness of the holster.

Snively shook his head gently. "I was never in them, Amanda, and they aren't cells. I'm sorry for the deception, but though I'm technically recorded as under arrest, I've actually had —"

Renee wasn't listening, because he was right; they weren't cells. She'd seen the like, once before. The roboticizer. The experiment that had destroyed the country. No, was all she could think. Absolutely not.

"—not sorry," the human said sharply.

"What?"

"I'm actually not sorry about bringing you here on false pretenses. That was a lie. I very much anticipated watching your face as you learned that I was not only outside of your authority, but invested with far greater power than I have ever enjoyed before in my life." Snively took a breath, straightened his collar as though he were about to recite a speech. "Renee, I hereby offer you a rare privilege and opportunity. The world is going to change, change dramatically—"

"Shut up," she said, and then "shut up," to stop him talking. "You are disgusting." She turned back to the hall, turned back around with a raised arm. "I am going straight to War Ministry with this. I'll go to your uncle." He opened his mouth, but she turned, walked away, no she didn't, she turned back around again. "I hope he hasn't been told about this. I hope he gets his revenge on you in person. I hope you scream."

"You know what I hate about you, Renee?" Snively asked. He quickly took a pistol from behind his back and shot her.

Renee lay on her back, mouth open. Her belly was dead, like a cinderblock had been launched into it, but she couldn't breathe, and then the pain, ripping her apart, her awareness of her limbs quartering, trying to get away, to get away from the pain.

"It's how full of yourself you are," Snively continued, walking to her side. His long nose was wrinkled at the smell of the scorched graphite. "You act like a patriot. Maybe you think you are one. But you're not. It's all about you. You're all yes sir, no sir, and what are my orders, sir, but you aren't fooling anyone. Nothing but contempt. That's all you've ever had for me and my uncle. If you serve Mobius, it's a Mobius that exists just for you, inside your head."

Short, shallow breaths. Tried to get them with her chest, but each motion of air made Renee's belly scream, the skin as taut as a balloon ready to burst. The wet in her fur, the swelling—oh gods, the bullet was still in her. It had tumbled, shredded her intestines—that stench—

Just the toe of his boot, lightly tapping down on the wound. "Pay attention." He didn't wait for her to be able to move her mouth and give an answer, just squatted down by her side. "You will not hold back anymore. You will give yourself up. Body and soul and mind. "

She tried to talk, sobbed in pain. Tried to grab hold of her anger, clutch it tight.

He slapped her in the face. Then the other way. Squeezed her cheeks. His face was all she could see.

"You will become what I make of you. I will make you a god."

"Duh." Snively cocked his head, smiling as he waited for her to force her answer out of her lips. "Doctor."

"No doctors can help you," he said. "I won't let them. There's only one thing that can help you."

Renee moaned.

"Take your time deciding. You have a great many hours before you're too far gone."

Renee tried to say no. She did. And when she was done trying, she nodded her head.

Snively got to his feet and brushed his hands on the baggy legs of his pants. "Well, don't just lie there," he said. "Get moving."

Pushing her irises down almost under her lids, she could see just the shadow of the roboticizers. The structural supports marking out where they were. She twisted her mouth into a silent scream and slowly began to push herself over, onto her elbows, to crawl.

"Come on," Snively said. "You have to want it."

From the window of his Terscala apartment the people looked like ants. Little ants, boiling in the sun. Furred. Furry spiders. Posniak squinted against the afternoon glare, brows pulling at the staples in his forehead. You could turn a magnifying glass on them, trace the flaring focus of the sun along the smoking pavement, through the fences blocking the streets, right onto one of the little bugs, watch them scatter . . . .

Solar cannon. Not a bad idea, in the sense of an idea to take to the Director. Orbital solar cannon. Make it sound better. Orbital directed solar energy projector. Maybe call it a converter, somehow; make it more complicated. Orbital directed passive-active converted energy projector. There. That crazy enough for you, Robotnik?

He called himself Robotnik, now, even in private. Before, it was kind of a joke. Like the entire country had called him a name and he'd adopted it, to show he was bigger than any name they could pin on him. Now, he thought the name was big. Like that thing he'd gotten from the tailor, Generalissimo Mad Doctor. And he had plans to match his outfit. From this high in the downtown the city's new shape was clear, the regular spacing of the barricades segmenting block from block. They didn't need it, he'd told Robotnik, not yet. The wolf attacks were brutal, but Lupe was taking her own lumps—intel had multiple commando squads with the sole assignment of stopping her heart. And this much restriction of ground movement was the end of any pretension that they were ruling Mobius for the benefit of anyone but the army brass. Terscala, the most modern city in Mobius, was becoming a prison. Anyone without military clearance would struggle to move from block to block for any purpose other than going from home to work—

There. Just like Posniak had warned him. A hovercar, licensed, probably War Ministry, breezed above the wire, a perfect illustration of Robotnik's society for anyone watching on the ground. Did Robotnik want the end now? The rebellions on every block, climbing higher and higher up the ranks of the non-coms until his most loyal guards had enough sense not to stop some colonel from shooting him in the back of the head?

"No one will rebel," Robotnik had declared. Planted on his chair with his legs splayed, like a swollen, pregnant bug at the middle of a hive. He'd been on a remodeling frenzy at home, too. Moved his office into a raw, featureless technical space, no desk, just him presiding like an ancient king, holoprojectors planted all around, wizard-works flooding him with information from every branch of the army, all over the city, all over the front, all the time. "They will obey any order," he said definitively. "Every order."

"Do you know something I don't?" Posniak had asked.

"Everything."

"Why do you want my advice at all if you aren't going to listen to it?" he shouted, fury redoubling when no one reacted, not Robotnik on his throne, not any of the four furred guards with snouts like smooth knives. "Do I just stand here?"

"Get out."

Posniak had obeyed, and then he had got drunk. He only had to go through two checkpoints to find a functioning bar. Afterwards a military VTOL got him to a hospital. A week with codeine and antibiotics. His mailbox and phone blessedly quiet, then unusually quiet, then unnervingly quiet. Thinking he ought to order somebody killed, make himself useful around here.

He had critiqued a paper once, as a grad student, that had come at the subject from an economic standpoint by describing a market in clout and favors. Hypothesis: in unstable, autocratic, militaristic regimes, high-level government officials can't retire . . . .

The sun slid behind a cloud and without warning Posniak was looking at the dim reflection of a shirtless human with wisps of untrimmed hair not nearly enough to hide his white scalp, rows of staples along one mess of an eyebrow, two in the other cheek. He reached up to tease the inflamed tissue around the metal and stopped, the long lines from the elbow of his prosthesis warped slightly by a desert wind on the glass.

Maybe Robotnik was right not to listen to him. Maybe their time was just about used up. Posniak was. Welts all over his face, bruises all over his mind, eyes staring out of deep dark circles like a—

He closed his eyes.

The first thought to cross his mind was kill her, that'll look good.

He decided to go to bed.

In the middle of the night Posniak woke up, his belly on fire. Time to piss blood. He rolled over with a groan and looked at three mobians in night-ops black, shadows against the dark windows.

One of them looked startled to see him awake, for a moment. The other two, no. Good night eyes on foxes and raccoons. They carried unnecessarily heavy ordnance. They'd only need a silenced pistol to—

No silencers.

If Robotnik had learned anything from him, he'd forgotten it. No silencers on the rifles.

"Drama queen," he sighed with disgust before the fox pulled the trigger.

**Place Unknown, Time Unknown**

"Tails!"

Miles blinked and paid attention as the Lady bashed the wolf in the back of his head, dropping him on his knees, like Miles was. "Shut up!" she roared.

"Tails," the wolf said again, his mouth hanging open. He was dressed in a loose gray jumpsuit—a worker uniform, Miles had gathered—and had a worker's leanness, though not emaciated, not dying like so many of the animals that the Lady brought. Miles stared at him blankly, wheels humming loose and frictionless in his mind.

The wolf crawled forward, reached out a hand and grabbed his shoulder tightly. The Lady remained a pace back, watching. "Kill him, Miles," she ordered.

Miles's nostrils filled with the scent of wolf as the male hugged him, squeezed him in arms that before being trained by the Lady he would have thought were strong. An old smell, waking him up. Rough fabric under his snout, pulling his whiskers, fingers making pain blossom gently at his shoulder blades as the wolf grabbed and held his fur. "Tails," the wolf said. "You're captured." Then: "You're alive. I never heard anything, not in the camps, not after—"

William. Miles breathed, felt Will's scent fall into place in his nose. William and Mary. In the forest. When he was a kid. Mary died. Will disappeared, dead, scooped up by the army in the squatter camps. Then dead, or east.

Whiskers at his ear. "She's one of the Lords," Will whispered. "Evil. We take her on three."

"Kill him," the Lady sighed, dropping her commanding composure. Her shoulders sagged.

Will's words sent the wheels in Miles's brain spinning furiously, but none of them meshed with the gears that led to his limbs. His arms stayed limp as Will grabbed his shoulders, looked at him with eyes filled with fear and fight. One, he mouthed.

Miles breathed faster. Everything going so fast. We can't take her, he thought, saying nothing. Will was insane.

Two.

Tired, calling the next customer to the deli counter: "Kill him."

Three—

Miles didn't see. A blur of brown fur and gray fabric and a shout and the Lady shouting and a crack and a soft thump as Will hit the floor. The padding cushioned his skull as the Lady stamped her heel on it, hard, a sudden shock of red blood blossoming around it as the brain burst.

His own breath hot against his lips. Eyes fixed forward. What was happening—

Then Miles straightened his spine, swallowed and met the Lady's eyes as she squatted before him.

"You knew him," the Lady said, the flush of surprise and combat still behind her pale facefur.

Miles said nothing, pinned by her eyes. She reached out a gloved hand and pressed the tip of her index finger against the end of one of the traceries that curled down from his bare shoulder, nestling it in the fur to brush the scar tissue.

"You conspired with him," she said.

Miles sniffed. He hadn't. She slowly drew the smooth fingertip down along his pectoral, into the thick white fur of his chest, curling down, up, drawing a new line. He started to cry. No. He hadn't. He hadn't hurt her. He hadn't attacked her.

"You conspired," finger curling back, tracing down along his sternum. "And you lied."

He whined, lips pressing tight to lock the words away. He hadn't! It wasn't fair! It had happened too fast! He didn't know—he hadn't—Miles forced his eyes open wide, locked them to the Lady's, begged, please, don't cut me, I'm sorry, don't—

Renee grabbed his snout hard, wrapped her fingers around it, thumb at his lips. "Make his body so no one will ever want to look at it."

When she released Miles and stepped away, he got awkwardly to his feet, stumbled forward and slapped the heel of his bare right foot down hard on the center of the dead wolf's chest. Again. Again and he stopped, hearing the snap and crunch of the ribs. Paused, wheels spinning, breathing hard.

Then he knelt beside the corpse and went to work with his hands. Feverishly. Compulsively.

After a time Miles felt her hand between his ears. "Down." He slumped down, haunches on his heels, eyes closed. Smelling.

"Leave it. Workers will clean it up." She rubbed him once, brushing her fingertips along his close-buzzed headfur down between his eyes. "Until they do, sit and think about what you tried to do to me."

The doorbolts fired into place behind her after she left. Miles sat back on his tails, wrapped his arms around his knees, and rested his snout on his chest.

Kain Blackwood - 2011

## \*Chapter 20\*: Port Lyons, 4 Thermidor 3236

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**Port Lyons, 4 Thermidor 3236**

A hard gust set Sonic's ears back and he stood pat, digging the tread of his boots into the ice. He squinted his eyes into the wind, landward, and saw two workaday walruses in front of a longshoreman's chowhouse, a cast-iron pot between them. Thick thumbs pressed potatoes into the stubby, dull blades of paring knives. It looked like the only unfortified, unabandoned property within two blocks of the wharf. They snorted at him walking the no-man's-land on the docks, not enough sense to come out of a tough midsummer's gale despite all his bare skin and lack of fat.

They belonged here, they worked, and they ate. As far as they were concerned, the Mobian civil war was something that belonged down on the water. Sonic guessed it belonged up in Mobius, but it sure as hell wasn't staying up there. Geography and mobian ethnicity had made for tight ties between Iceland and Mobius ever since they invented boats with masts. Back during the Great War, Iceland had taken off as an ocean mining and manufacturing plant a quarter way around the world from the front, and walrus fishermen had kept the country fed.

So when Mobius had gone to war with itself . . . .

Tolomak's crew sold to both sides, trying to play 'em off one against the other. He'd commandeered the quays in the middle of the south harbor, giving access both to the eastern route Sonic had sailed in on and to the western routes up to Corukas and the smaller ports on the coast. He was sort of a buffer between the Loyalist and Robotnik-allied shipping gangs on the different ends of the docks, and he had the setup you'd expect for a guy in that spot. Looking up, Sonic could just see the tops of the wind-blasted cranes that took the intermodal shipping boxes off the cargo boats. The rest he couldn't see, walled off as they were behind three stories of shipping boxes laid like rows of bricks. Right in front of Sonic was the gap that served as the gate. Through it he could see treaded snow-crawlers parked in a line, the corner of a warehouse, part of a stack of tight-packed crates.

He looked up at the squirrel manning the gun nest on the box to the right of the gate. The squirrel sat back behind a quick-deploy bulletguard that looked like it hadn't been moved in years, wind ripping the smoke away from his cigarette. Long fat barrel on his on his gun for plasma discharge coils, no ammo to blow up when you ashed.

The squirrel just looked back at him, so Sonic started walking forward into the gate again. Two steps and he heard the slap of a glove on a battery and the capacitors in the gun whining to life. "That's close enough," the squirrel shouted.

"I'm here to buy something," Sonic shouted back, unzipping his coat and briefly opening it wide to show his lack of heat. But it took less than five minutes of behind-the-scenes talk for them to get him inside the warehouse, a walrus chick and an otter following him with an air of indifference and two old-model Poiccard submachineguns between them.

They'd been expecting him.

Kiryan Tolomak was of Antarctic derivation, white from the tips of his ears to the tip of his tail with only his brown-black eyes to distinguish him from an albino. Even in what passed for the summer down here his fur was thick enough to do without a shirt in the drafty warehouse. He was like a pencil sketch of a fox. Maybe that was why the hard, sharp smirk on his snout seemed to stand out so much more. "Hedgehog off the boat," he said, using the fingers of one hand to tap a cheap ballpoint against the fingers of the other. He was sitting behind a desk in the open warehouse, a minicomp on the table and a bunch of hardcopies of contracts and ship manifests, like all the ordnance was just for show. "Pleased to meet you. What's your name?"

Sonic took the pause to unzip his parka. Two seconds until the sweat on his belly was freezing.

"My boys say you were poking around up at the old Mobian army lab in the back city," the fox said when he decided that Sonic wasn't about to say anything. "Case you were wondering if I take an interest in every northerner comes rolling down the gangplank."

He'd come rolling down the gangplank from the Aurora on a bright, sunny two in the morning. He'd rolled two dogs and a white-furred bear with a set of knuckledusters down the gangplank in front of him, with a quay full of longshoremen watching. Kiryan apparently took an interest in northerners like that, as did all the dock shipping gangs. Four different recruiters had been at him before he'd even managed to find a place to sleep. Beating one up only seemed to encourage the others. Even now, the fox's eyes gleamed with a hunger that Sonic imagined was usually reserved for a hold full of seabed ore that he could get Sally and Robotnik's agents to buy at extortion prices—Sally's because she needed it badly, Robotnik because he needed badly for Sally not to have it.

Sonic kept his quills down and his lips pressed hard together, ignoring it. "Sign out front said it was an Antarctic Weather Station," Sonic said.

"I know," Kiryan replied. "I'm the one who gutted the place—well, the one who had enough sense to really gut the place after the usual looters gave it the once over. Even assuming they had an EM detector to find all the electronics in the back of that 'storage closet,' it took a lot of know-how to get past that optical scanner."

"You blew the door off its hinges," Sonic said.

"And there's easier things than to blast through three inches of hardened steel," the fox smiled, his annoyance bending the pen's cheap plastic against his thumbs. "But you know what was back there. Who are you, Royal Guard? Internal Security? MilInt?"

"I'm a hedgehog who's interested in having a look at the stuff you stole."

"Unless you're working for the Crown or the Doc you don't got any more right to it than me, and each of them'd say it doesn't belong to the other. That gives me, what, nine and a half tenths of the law? Why don't we just drop the act and get down to business. I could use a hedgehog like you, and I'm gonna."

"No deal."

"Yeah," the fox smirked. "Look, we'll start easy. No mixing with the ends of the docks. But my crew's gotta go inland for essentials like food and entertainment and companionship, and there's this echidna that's got a stranglehold on an old profession—"

Sonic felt disgust rising in his throat at this neighborhood tyrant like so many others, remembering what he'd used to be, some of the things he'd done in Lachels and Mobius. But he locked it down and called back the right kind of patter. "I'm not gonna do jack shit for you until I see what you got, foxie. It's better that way. You won't like what's going to happen if I bring you a sack full of heads and get a surprise about what's behind door number two."

"Hmm. Why look." Kiryan's eyes widened theatrically and he picked up a clipboard with a smile. "I just happen to have our inventory for the lab haul right here. Twenty Erlenmeyer flasks, two boiling flasks, three nonstandard torus-shaped containers, ten tower computers that were top of the line twenty years ago—"

"I said see."

The fox sighed, lowering the clipboard. "Hedgehog, digging the right boxes out of the stacks would take hours."

"I've got hours."

"I don't. Make up your mind. Do some damage for me or get lost."

Sonic flexed his quills, watching the way Kiryan froze in fear a moment. A moment later he felt more than heard the gunmen behind him drop their boredom act like a dead cigarette. A grin on Sonic's lips as the blood pumped hot in his arteries. "You wanna see some damage?" he asked.

"Don't think smash and grab, Secret Agent Whatsyourname," the fox said, businessman's amiability gone. "You can hang with the boat bitches, but my outfit's the real deal. I don't want to spare the manpower to haul your corpse to the tideline afterwards. You're tangling with the sharpest fox you've ever met, hog."

A soft laugh as Sonic thought briefly of Tails. "Don't bet on it," he said, dropping his quills and ignoring the barrels pointed at him as he walked back toward the door he'd come in. "Leave your haul in the stacks. Find someone else to buy it."

Sonic's skin itched as he consciously kept his quills down, but it was worth it four steps later when he was able to hear Kiryan say "wait" without looking relieved. The fox was sharp. Sonic had got to feeling a little invulnerable on the boat, with his new body, all the pistols locked up in the armory and the same mess of twenty or so hard mobians to deal with every day. If he had to he'd try getting into Kiryan's compound under cover of darkness, finding the right boxes and blasting his way back out, but he didn't know how he'd swing it. Specially with the sun circling the sky 24/7 for another month or so.

Watch yourself, Sonic thought as Kiryan, chewing on either a stick of gum or a bit of rage, picked up a walkie-talkie to call the crane cabin in the yard.

For the fifth time, Antoine's phone buzzed in his pocket. He eased sideways in his seat, took a sip of dry white wine as he reached down to silence the notice, then turn the phone off. Unnoticed by MP Pawel Pavlovski and MP Miryam Woyrczek, though not-MP Joshua Dursine, already lingering on the borders of the lunch conversation, seemed more interested in the arrangement of greens and steak on his plate and was watching the position of Antoine's hands rather than listening to the representatives.

"How certain are you that a new election would deliver enough representatives to form an alliance block?" Antoine asked. The use of the phrase Alliance Block, rather than War Block, had been one of his innovations. The pro-war press had quickly taken to it.

"That's not what you should be asking, Majesty," Woyrczek replied, rubbing her thin, mountain-woman fingers along the lip of her wineglass. "You should—"

"Damn right we can," Pavlovski barked, belly straining the buttons of his shirt as he sat back and mixed metaphors: "The tide is turning against these doves. You've seen the a.m. polls from Rolls Corporation and Brubraker." Which were pollsters highly sympathetic to, and in one case outright owned by, the war industry. To which Antoine generously pretended to pay the slightest concern. "Right, Josh? We declare a no-government stalemate, we'll pick up the seats we need for a majority."

"Well, the polls are really shifting day to day," the bear replied timidly.

Antoine leaned forward to speak to Woyrczek, glad that Dursine and Pavlovski were at opposite ends of the table. The bear was an idealist rather than an unctuous lout of a firm owner, but he was equally removed from the reality of the situation in the Lachels parliament. "What should I be asking?"

"How you're going to get a pro-alliance government without another election," Woyrczek said. Her tight-drawn bun gave her eyebrows quite the field in which to rise. "And how quick."

Dursine's phone began to rattle on the tablecloth. It gave him a good excuse to ignore Pavlovski's eyes burning into his. "Sorry. One sec."

Woyrczek ignored him and continued. "The way things are, any majority we put together can be bought out within a day; the price of fifty percent plus one is just too high at the margin. Unless there's a substantial shift in public opinion—"

"And you don't think we can shift it."

"Not without an election, a major victory or an atrocity. An election does tend to drive the public debate. Makes the media more flexible, because they need—" She briefly looked over at Pavlovski, who had taken out his own phone and was squinting as he punched up a message. ". . . because they need to be able to tell a story. We pick the right one, we can . . . uh . . . ."

Woyrczek's phone was playing a muffled, tinny ringtone in the jacket pocket of her suitcoat.

"Uh, Majesty," Dursine said, his snout bathed blue-white in the glow of his phone's screen.

Antoine quickly surveyed the restaurant's velvet-draped dining room. More phones were going off, parliamentary aides. Two tables away, a woman had taken out a pocket trivid-projector and given it the place of the table's centerpiece. A talking human head floated in the air, skin buzzing and rastering slightly. A screaming graphic had been put together and hung in the air beside it, one word over the highly recognizable eastern gate of Ironlock Prison.

SLAUGHTERHOUSE

"Your, uh, Majesty," the bear said again, eyes still rooted to his phone, "I think we ought to break for—I think you need to read this."

In twenty minutes Antoine was back in the Mobian government's floor of the Gasthaus Grosse Adler. He turned off the lights and placed the call with an encrypted portable. The transnational security checks went off without difficulty. Once he reached the palace switchboard, he encountered a serious obstacle. "I'm sorry, Your Majesty. Her Majesty is indisposed."

"You will put her on the phone," Antoine ordered.

He could hear the tension in the Royal Guard's voice. "Majesty, Her Majesty has left strict orders." The Guard were well trained in close-quarters combat and executive protection, and their loyalty to the Acorn family was unquestionable. Antoine had once learned from his parents, in a very embarrassing visit to the palace when young, that spats between king and queen were not an appropriate subject for the guards, a rather strange intersection of constitutional law and etiquette. "She is not to be disturbed for any reason."

"I understand this is difficult for you, but Her Majesty is under the pressure of tremendous stress." He swallowed. "Tremendous stress and grief. She was not anticipating a call from me. It is of vital importance to both me and her that you connect me directly to the speakerphone in her chambers. If she hears the phone ring first, she may disconnect it."

"Majesty, shouldn't—I have to at least give her the choice of whether to answer your—"

"You will connect me now!" Antoine shouted. "I am your King and I command you to immediately let me speak to my wife!"

The guard didn't respond. He was about to shout again when he heard hear breath, loud, shivering. "Sally. I'm on a secure line in a secure room. I need to know what's behind the releases about Ironlock Prison and—"

"He's dead," Sally choked.

Antoine pressed his snout hard against the phone's receiver. He could hear his own breathing now, echoing on the line, the click of plastic against his incisors. He had known this would be coming, a prediction that he had made without daring to think directly on the subject, the answer slotted away into a deep corner of his mind until it was no longer possible to ignore. Until there was a body.

"He has to be dead," she said, and Antoine winced with sorrow as he realized that there wasn't a body, not yet, and that they were still waiting. But Sally couldn't endure the waiting anymore, not after seeing what could have happened to Tails. What very, very likely had happened to Tails. "They're all dead. He killed them all, Antoine. Robotnik killed all of them."

I'm sorry. There was nothing we could do.

As King Consort and Sally's chief political advisor, it was Antoine's job to test her judgment, a task that because of their ignoble background and the dignity of the monarchy even high military officers were often reluctant to perform. The wise course had been to give Ironlock Prison no more strategic value than it naturally possessed. Sally had seen that correctly.

So when he had suggested to her years before that perhaps it might be wise to strike at the

prison and release its prisoners, he had not been thinking of Tails, he had not even been seriously advocating such an attack. He had merely been serving as her conscience and her sounding board. And unless she understood that, everything he could say to correct her would only drive the thorn in deeper.

He briefly fantasized that the gods were real. He asked Vidavin Vulanis to take away both the words he had spoken to her and his other leg.

The offer was not accepted.

"I want to be with you," Antoine whispered into the phone. "I want to hold you."

"Get me my army," Sally snarled. A sob overlaid with a sarcastic laugh, decayed to a growl. "We won't be getting any volunteers from Ironlock."

"Sally."

"You can get me my army now, right? Their voters will be a little upset about—"

"It will be easy. It does not require my personal—"

"Get me my army. Get their damn troops. Then we'll end this damn war." Her voice cracked again.

"Sally, I am coming home."

"The way out is through," she said, ignoring him. "We win the war. After we win the war, everything will . . . ."

The pause lengthened. "Sally—"

Her voice hardened like ice. "Get me my army."

"Sally—"

She broke the connection.

Sonic had almost gotten used to it, with Snively and Mandy. There had been kind of a rhythm with them, specially Mandy. Mandy had made it into a game. And now there was an intermodal shipping container with a yawning shadow falling a meter inside its open mouth. A confined darkness in which his speed meant nothing. His old bug.

Hope you're doing okay, Mandy, wherever you are . . . .

Lock it down. A brief wave of tension flowed through his quills and his mouth fell into an expressionless line as he called up the calm, empty cold that filled him when he remembered he was a robot. The mission objective is in that cage. Now walk to the waypoint.

Before he could take the first step Kiryan strode quickly into the black, reappearing by a thumb-switch for a set of three overhead bulbs, by the back of the five-meter deep box. The computers were stacked at the back in a nest of plastic bubblewrap. A table filled the left side of the container, glassware, plastic and metal arranged on and under it. "We've tried to keep everything in some kind of order. If you want we can identify the original location of every—"

The fox shut up as Sonic pushed him to the back of the box, out of the way of his uncle's stuff. Some of the beakers were clean; some had dried crusts of green, red, and golden-brown liquid around the rim. Some were plugged with dusty plastic seals and still contained something that looked like water but probably wasn't. Three glass or plastic containers the size and shape of large doughnuts, filled with some golden gel or—

Notebooks. He took the first in the pile and flipped it open.

"Hedgehog, you don't mind if I—Just kind of slide on past you here . . . ."

Sonic felt the tug on his parka and his quills as the fox squeezed past him, ignored it. He flipped steadily through chapters of hydrogen atoms, distributed neural networks and gods knew what his uncle was writing about, lingering just long enough on each page to know that he wasn't smart enough for what was on it. It was only when he got frustrated with the first book and flipped open the next that he realized what he was looking for. There had to be something. Something obvious, something where Chuck made it clear what he had did. Sonic looked at the ID sticker with his uncle's name on the cover of the third book, the fourth—

The fifth was machine-printed, machine bound in a plastic spine. The cover was Mobian blue, with raised seals showing the Royal Guard, Science Ministry, the Mobian Army. The DRAFT stamp on the laminated paper was much more excited than the report's title, set forth in very calm, measured lettering, uppercase and lowercase:

Project Pullo

Final Report, Pullo Prototype

Yes.

Sonic flipped past a table of contents to a little letter that said EXECUTIVE SUMMARY. Snatches of text, necessity of preliminary test and voluntary and approved by parents and most loyal and suited for executive protection duties and Sonic realized he didn't care, he already knew about that, just needed to see his own name, see confirmed what he was for. He flipped further, and suddenly he was looking down a picture of a young mobian, grinning mischievously.

No.

Canine. By the time the colors of the snout and the blonde head-hair were tugging at Sonic's memory, his eye had already rested with stunned incomprehension on the identifying information listed beneath, a little childhood dossier.

D'Coolette, Antoine

"No," Sonic said quietly.

The light from the bulbs above became sharper as someone slammed shut the doors to the shipping container, cutting out the sun. A moment later the sound of the latches sliding into place, a padlock snapping closed.

"No," Sonic said, looking at the names of Antoine's parents, his height and weight at age four, "no," and Antoine's name again and more pictures on the next pages, before picture, after picture . . . .

With a scream he threw the report down on the table, ran as hard as he could at the doors. They boomed and held, their latches shivering unseen in their locking mechanisms.

"I warned you," Kiryan's voice came as a muffled shout through the metal. "Sharpest fox around, Sonic. Didn't get much news on that boat, did you? You're the hottest piece of merchandise anywhere on the coast."

Sonic grunted as he put his shoulder to the door again. Again. Bend it, he thought. You're a robot. Rip the crate open.

"I reinforced it when we saw you on the docks," Kiryan shouted. "Do you know how bad Robotnik wants you?"

Open this door. He slammed steel to steel again and shouted as his bone popped hot in and out of his shoulder socket, flesh swelling in the aftermath. Open this door, robot.

"Just relax. My guess is negotiations over price shouldn't take more than twelve hours. After that you won't have more than—"

Sonic's mouth tore open and he filled the box with his roar.

Antoine.

It wasn't possible.

After a half an hour of shouting and breaking beakers against the corrugated steel walls, Sonic wasn't angry anymore. If Sally already had a robot, so much the better. Maybe he could still be . . . something, for her . . .

He just didn't get how Antoine could get the nanites and he could wind up with the super strength and immunity to disease. Maybe the nanites were contagious?

"You'd think someone would have noticed," Sonic muttered, turning another page in the Project Pullo report. Nothing about him in there, nothing at all. Details not just about planning to put Antoine in the tank, but actually putting him in there, the reactions afterward. Antoine was apparently a tank-boxing supersoldier.

Again, you'd think someone would have noticed. In the pictures, it was almost the opposite. Before, a sharp, fox-like, almost cruel smile. Afterwards, wide, self-conscious eyes, a little soldier.

Sonic swallowed a sickening bubble of hope. Maybe the report was fake . . . .

He sighed and tossed the report back in the pile, reminding himself that there were bigger things to worry about than what was left of his life. For instance, if he didn't get out of this box in about ten hours, that was about what was left of his life. They were going to slice him up to see how he worked while Robuttnik watched. Self-pity was still at about Plan E as to how to crack this steel egg from the inside.

Plan A.

Sonic found a length of black pipe lying loose along the wall near the back, from some prior load. When he slammed it into the door with his best overhand chop the metal sheared off just above his grip and went flying back end over end into the beakers he'd left on the table.

Plan B.

He picked up the pipe out of the liquid and shattered glass—no smoke or quickly-rising bubbles of acid, which took out Plan C—and tried the rear wall of the container with the same result after three swings. Even if only the doors had been reinforced, the rest of the place was deep in the stacks, wall to wall. However thick it was, it was enough.

Plan D. These plans were going way too quick.

He started by looking at the containers, not trusting himself to be able to make heads or tails of the gibberish in his uncle's journals. Most of the stuff was dried out, seals broken. A lot of the other beakers he'd managed to take out himself. The golden donuts still looked okay, but he wasn't sure what the hell they were.

Sonic picked one up.

It was cold through the fabric over his fingertips, had the smoothness of glass except for a band of plastic and metal at one end like a pipe junction, like the ends of the tube had been fed into it. But even holding it up to the bulbs above couldn't tell whether it was glass all the way through, or glass around whatever the yellow stuff was. Toothpaste, lemonade, deadly skin-melting virus. No obvious way to get it out, either.

Without thinking, he slammed it down against the edge of the table. His teeth shivered and there was a rounded dent in the table, and that was it. Do not break plastiglass in case of emergency, apparently.

Maybe hard enough to chip through the door by the padlock? Sounds like a Plan D. He twirled the ring around his right index finger, caught in his grip and

PAIN

There was something in his wrist, piercing deep through the heel of his hand, sharp cold steel that reached all the way up into his elbow, spreading like some kind of lightning fungus—

Not cold, hot.

Sonic looked with wide, stinging eyes at a hand he lifted in front of his face slowly, like a nightmare, and saw that the bare flesh of his forearm behind his white glove was dark, flushed angry red, deeper than sunburn, hotter than sunburn. He couldn't feel his fingers clutched around the metal junction of the ring, couldn't make them let go even as the heat shot with a sharp blast of pain into his shoulder, submerging the two needles in his wrist's veins into a ubiquitous, indiscriminate burn.

Somehow there was time to see tiny bubbles beading up through the amber liquid inside the ring, a faint tint of red blood following them.

His teeth pounding each other into his gums as the agony ricocheted into the center of his chest.

Heart attack.

Burning. His face swollen and red with heat, shifting light fuzzed to a rainbow as his irises slid up underneath his lids, heat under his fur and radiating out through the gaps in his quills until it met the thick down of the parka and flowed down his back, like a liquid. Trying to drink the air into his lungs, air like water, like syrup, a single breath taking an impossible time, feeling it heat up in him until the need to exhale was like drowning. He was drowning. He was burning to death. Escape. Flee.

Run—

Running through the white expanse of the cargo yard the wind ripping through his quills slippery slipstreaming the heat dripping from his quills like blobs of jelly, mouth open wide like a jet intake, inhaling always inhaling air hot from the closeness of his face. Suddenly a sense of time again as he watched the powderpuffs of bullet impacts in the ground before him, always a moment after the muzzle flash meters away, snow gently arcing up and not coming down. Feeling the shreds of his parka fall from his arms as with a stutter-step he dodged between two of the shots, may I cut in, angled impact of his feet in the snow turning his path toward the origin of the bullets, the sluggish gunwolf's mouth open in a scream that was too slow, too deep to hear.

Exhaling, rolling his fist up to punch, he tried to remember how he had gotten here. Remembered instead who he was. Sonic's knuckles trailed a blurred wake of air as they began to sink into the wolf's unreal, deforming playdoh face.

Two halves of a thought docking with impossible ballet grace. Seems like I'm moving slow, but I'm moving very fast—

The word lurched into his perception and suddenly the world was an avalanche of perfect and discrete moments one after the other, each barely leaping clear of the next as multiple lanes of gunfire opened. Sonic rode his reflexes without a seatbelt, firing out of sight behind him with his left hand at a target he'd seen an eon ago and knew hadn't had time to move, something clutched in his right hand, wondering when he'd gotten the gun, how he'd gotten out of the boat box—

Time froze again as something moved at normal speed, a glowing, impossibly perfect strand of light that suddenly connected the snow between his feet and a place on the wall of shipping containers before him, holding in place a moment before instantaneously winking from existence.

A plasma bolt.

The world was too slow for sound, but Sonic felt the laughter in his burning face, eyes rolling down from the plasma-gunner's nest to the lowest level of shipping containers in the wall, imagining them not there anymore.

Oh, was the word in his mind as he course corrected into a graceful curve that seemed to stretch before him in a phantom dotted line, terminating in a ninety-degree crash against the first floor of the compound wall. No time for more words, but the sudden feeling of certainty in his chest and his head and his legs sufficed as remembering how he escaped the shipping container.

Three meters from steel both of Sonic's toes hit the ground together, launching him into a trajectory that would still be travelling upwards at the moment of impact. His quills flared wide as his knees rose for the grasp of his arms, dimly aware of a deep throbbing shattered-concrete ache under the heat that meant he'd almost died when he'd done this before. One word made it out of the storm in his pre-lingual centers, echoing loud in his mind.

Cannonball.

"When's Preacher's Promise into dock?" Inunak asked, snorting as he flared his walrus whiskers wide. He watched the empty street as his hands cut the skin from the carrots, grunted at the ugly shipping-container wall of the fox's compound as the sound of shots came from behind it. Always them and their guns.

Anartat finished another potato and tossed it into what would become the broth. They had a kind of shorthand; Inunak was asking if they could get the stew ready in time for the longshoremen. "S'fine," he barked.

"Hrn," Inunak grunted.

A bomb went off.

The walruses could do nothing but stare as a block of intermodal containers almost fifteen meters wide suddenly lurched into the air like someone had jerked the planet away from beneath them. A clump of dark blue shrapnel burst from the container at the base, flinging a rain of shredded metal into the midnight sun. The shards clattered on rooftops, impacted into flesh and dirt with shouts and thuds. The containers gave hollow, groaning whale cries as they rolled down into the street, fell back into the fox's compound.

Anartat and Inunak stood with their mouths slightly open. The dockfighting was rarely so fierce.

Then they both turned to the pile of blue shrapnel crawling desperately toward them.

The hedgehog looked like he had spent weeks alone on the tundra. All his bare skin was sunburnt, blistered and cracked, his quills a broken nest of wild angles. He breathed raggedly, crawling up the cement steps onto the rough porch. He bit the fingers of his right hand, blood welling from his glove as he forced himself to drop some sort of hollow, empty ring of clear glass. Then he grabbed the handles of the iron stewpot and sunk his head all the way in.

Potatoes and carrots bobbed around his headquills as the level of water sank slowly.

Inunak coughed. "Uh—"

The hedgehog threw his head back, water streaming off his quills, then bent over and vomited. It splashed off the cement, thin and clear as the water he'd just drank, soaking his fur and just missing Anartat's toes as he leapt back. One long, continuous evacuation until it stopped in an open-mouthed, guttural intake of air. Then he climbed back onto the pot and shoveled raw halved potatoes into his face with his gloved hands, sinking his teeth into them and eating them like apples as the water steamed on the chilled cement.

Inunak didn't say anything.

The hog kept eating, oblivious as his shoulders began to twitch like a marionette with tangled strings. Suddenly he couldn't support himself anymore and he fell onto his back, dragging the stewpot with him and splashing the cold water over his face and chest in a broad wave. The tremors slid into arms and he was seizing on the concrete, quills scraping as his skull beat the ground. Bits of potato were stuck in his grimacing teeth, his legs kicking. Then he stopped.

His belly rose and fell quickly, his eyes closed, a rounded slice of raw carrot resting on his right cheek.

"Urnh," Inunak said.

Anartat shook his head. "Don't see that every day."

Sonic opened his eyes. A walrus in a cook's apron was looking down at him. "Don't kill us," the walrus said

"Water," Sonic rasped. His head was splitting.

The walrus reached down below where Sonic was lying and sloshed a bucket beside him. "Don't kill us," he said again. "We been taking care of you."

Sonic forced himself to roll on his side—he was on some kind of table in the empty longshoreman joint—and upended the bucket on his face, forcing his throat to take in the water that didn't run over his quills in a wave of freezing relief. He let go and it rolled onto the floor. "Food."

"Don't kill us," another walrus said, coming from another quadrant of the room with a bowl of steaming something.

"Ain't gonna kill you," Sonic groaned.

"Thanks."

"Walruses are good people," Sonic said, then blinked through the impossible hangover pain in his head, ignored the hunger pangs in his belly, and focused his eyes on the electronic equipment piled inside the door of the place.

Two golden rings were sitting atop the block of shrink-wrapped computers.

"The fuck," he hissed in terror.

"Fox's people brought it over," one of the walruses explained. "Says leave him the fuck alone and never come back on the docks or he'll kill you and everyone you love and grind up the bones and—"

"Yeah, yeah, I get it." Sonic couldn't take his eyes off those fucking rings. He shuddered, feeling sick. I'll have something to bring back for you, Sal, but it's got a mean kick. "I'm bunking up at Mavis Donavan's place, know her?"

"Yeah. I wouldn't move for a while if I were you, though."

"I wouldn't either. How do you get north without a boat?"

The walruses looked at each other thoughtfully. ". . . slowly?"

"Sounds about right," Sonic said, groaning as he lifted himself up toward what smelled like a fish chowder. "I feel like I got hit with a brick wall."

A snort. "Other way around."

"One way to complete the mission," he muttered.

"Hell of a way," one of the walruses nodded.

**Place Unknown, Time Unknown**

Miles stood up, arms hanging as the bolts fired behind the Lady, locking her in his cell. "Sit," she ordered, and he rhythmically performed the same motion in reverse, spreading his tails and sitting with legs folded before him. The Lady drew a fat-barreled sidearm from her belt and pushed the muzzle against Miles's forehead.

It was room-temperature. Plastic compound at the edges of the body. The fox gently crossed his eyes, filled his vision with the barrel.

"It's beautiful," she said. "Isn't it?"

She flipped the gun over and let it hang upside down from her index finger, balancing on the curve of the trigger guard. Obviously not a standard gas-propellant pistol. It had a fat, rounded, barrel and tiny battery pack that mounted on the top, as though to fight the natural kick of a kinetic discharge. Round for plasma coils, Miles realized, a functional plasma pistol, the most deadly secondary infantry weapon that he had ever seen.

"Form suited to function." The Lady's fingers dexterously flipped the gun over again, unslotted the power pack and clicked it back, popped loose the compressed-gas canister that fit in the butt like a semiauto mag, slid it back into place. Quick pressure with thumb and finger popped loose the interface between the gas reserve and the supermag coils and heating elements, revealing a tightly-wound nest of electrical connections. "Unyielding where needed, breakable where appropriate. Perfectly suited to me." Another quick toss of the gun, then another, then another until she was holding it lengthwise before him, finger around the trigger, snug in grip. An incredible piece of work. Tails wondered how much fur and flesh it had already burnt.

"This is what you should be," the Lady said.

Miles lowered his snout as she twirled it on her finger one last time, slid it back into her holster. He stayed slumped as she sat before him on the padded floor, legs crossed in reflection of his posture.

"The Empress has set her timetable for the reconquest of Mobotropolis," she said.

Miles perked his ears.

"To fight in it will be a great honor," she continued. Miles couldn't keep his eyes off her crossed legs. It twisted his mind to see her speaking about the Empress with anything less than perfect posture. "It will be the start of the greatest triumph since the Brenan dynasty first united the three kingdoms under the single throne of Mobius."

The Lady had never talked about this before, specifically, but her hatred for Sally and the businessmen she served made it obvious that the Empress wouldn't stop until she owned everything and everybody from ocean to ocean. And she would, of course. The Empress had done to the Lady what the Lady had done to him. The best officers in the standard army would be her creatures. Sally would clean her toilets. Even Sonic . . . .

What would happen to Sonic?

"A command structure has been firmly established." The Lady's eyes had lost focus as she spoke, her whiskers flattened against her milky facefur. "My orders are to break resistance in the southern half of the city, ensuring that my Empress's ground forces can cross the river on major bridges. I will give my finest warriors the honor of dropping behind Acorn's lines. They will kill and capture. Those who capture good stock for me may win the honor of joining my kind." She blinked, refocusing, and looked Miles in the face. "You will not be among them."

Miles folded his ears.

"You are not worthy to bear my collar and command any of my animals, let alone to serve my robots. I will serve my Empress without you."

He didn't know why his ears were folded, why he had to look at his own lap. He didn't want to be her animal; he couldn't.

But there was the world was outside, and the reminder of it made the room squeeze him. It was the Empress's world, and it was terrible, but it was something. And he'd never see it again except through a window.

The Lady had been wrong about him. This cell was his home.

Miles had forgotten he'd closed his eyes until she grabbed him, wrapped her arms around his head and shoulders, forced him against her shirt. He flexed his spine, a cry of surprise muffled by the fabric against the side of his face, but only found the deep reserves of her strength. A button dug into his eye.

And then he relaxed, surrendering. Nothing more happened.

She was hugging him.

"I'm not going to throw you away," the Lady told him. "I don't know how you're hiding from me, warrior, or where you go. But I'll find out."

Her hand rubbed once over the tight buzz of his headfur before she let him go. He fell back against the wall, his face blank. She looked at him a moment, considering.

"Rest today," she said. "Gym tomorrow. I'll return soon."

Miles lay against the wall for a long time after she left.

## \*Chapter 21\*: Terscala, 13 Ventose 3237

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**(21) Terscala, 13 Ventose 3237**

Miles was sort of sleeping. Dormant. On his back with his arms at his sides, half-lidded screensaver eyes noting the recessed halogen tubes in the cell ceiling only as a grayscale play of light.

The doorbolts tripped a circuit in his mind and the startup routine began to drag him reluctantly up to awareness. A deep breath stretched his shoulders, brought out a stiff pain his neck. Next he had to get to his knees. He waited for the command.

"Up, Miles." Miles got to his knees just in time for the Lady to drop a pile of black at his feet. "Put them on," she said.

He picked up what his mind took a moment to recognize as a cheap black t-shirt, the kind you could buy for ten sovereigns in a drug store—brain supplying the long unusued concept of drug store after a deep scan. Usually they had the name of whatever city you bought it in on it. Tourist tee. Nothing on this one, though, just black, still with that stiffness that meant it hadn't been used. Putting it on felt like a gloved hand squeezing his fur. Without standing he slid an identically shaded pair of loose work-out shorts on over his prison shorts, hung a pair of cheap sandals on his feet.

While he was putting them on, the Lady gently swung a knot of steel chain and leather onto the ground before him. "These too. We're going for a walk."

Miles picked up what turned out to be his old mental-patient muzzle, or one like it. It looked new. He stretched it slightly, anticipating the nasty bite of the thing on his whiskers, when he stopped, ears perking. He looked sharply up at the Lady's face.

Her brow softened slightly at the sight of his wide eyes. "Yes, outside."

Frantically he stuffed his face into the muzzle, roughly forcing it on till his black nose showed through the small opening, buckled it. Untangled the four sets of chains from where they joined to the lead at a central ring, fastened the shackles on his wrists and ankles, snapping the chain after each shackle to make sure there was no slip. In less than a minute he stood up sharply before her, unable to pant but breathing hard through his nose, holding up the links of the lead for the Lady to take the handle.

She ignored it, searching his muzzled face, looking into his staring eyes. "So you can want things."

A breeze tugged at his tails. Miles lifted them to feel it more.

The collar of the shirt stretched as he rubbed himself against the cement. The cement was rough, gritty, covered with tiny stones and flecks of dirt that clung to his palm and arm and cheekfur. It smelled. He scraped the soft flesh of his nose against it and widened his nostrils and smelled the scent of rubber and burnt octane and faint raw earth. He opened his eyes to look at the speckled grain, grey and black and—

Dirt.

Not a meter away from his nose, a bed of brown earth like a plowed field stretching to the horizon. Dead stalks and brown leaves brittle and twisted, spreading a faint, reedy musk into the air. The dirt soft and wet, pattered by a recent rain. He tore fur from his knuckles as he got up to crawl—

His lead suddenly jerked, the pull dragging his wrists together with a tinkling scrape of chain. "That's enough," the Lady said.

"Mmmph!" Miles jerked his arms forward, straining at the lead, reaching out his nose for the deep, clinging scent of soil—

"No!" The lady's bootsole landed hard between his shoulder blades and stamped him flat, his tendons screaming that they were about to tear.

Miles went still as the pain sobered him, that old sensation pressing away the of all the fresh, intoxicating new ones. His ears flushed hot with the embarrassment that always followed a wild drunk. Then they folded gently to his skull.

She took her foot from his back, forgiving him. "I won't have you soiling your clothes in that mud, fox, just after I made you presentable." He spread his arms to let her grab him under his shoulders, lift him to his sandals—strange, always feeling the same thing under his toes.

Outdoors suited the Lady. Her lintless uniform seemed like black marble in the light. The brown curve of her ears seemed sharper, and the brighter fur of her snout and eyes drank the sun, bathed in its luster. She spread her shoulders as she took a deep breath, smiling, and tugged Miles's lead gently as she folded her hands behind her back. A lift of her snout to indicate the world: "Look, but don't touch."

He looked. They city he had seen beyond the windows was real. They were close to the heart of it, modern buildings of steel and concrete, twenty to thirty stories with taller ones visible behind them to the—west? It was the west if it was in the early afternoon, and it felt like an autumn afternoon, or a late spring afternoon. Cool, the sun just bright enough to gently warm the fur. The only thing to spoil it was an insistent, prickly sting to the air, a touch of desert dust and a rank stink of octane exhaust that flared wide in his sinuses. Miles even thought he could see it, a translucent haze thicker than fog that seemed to dissolve the high corners of the more distant buildings. It was unpleasant, but at least different from the aseptic, sealed flatness of the prison—

The prison. He turned and there was the prison, thirty stories of blank concrete rearing up, pocked with scabs of thin slitted windows that had been sealed over from the inside. A sign over the door: Terscala Metropolitan Correctional Center.

Terscala. Some stupid part of Miles that had still hoped Sally had pushed close to the east coast died.

The Lady and he were standing before the prison in a triangular yard of cement. It was fenced from the street by a wall of two-meter tall iron bars topped with coils of gleaming razorwire. The walkways were spotted with benches, dusty slabs that had not recently been used to look at untended beds of dry dirt and twisted flowers dead of thirst. Some sort of aircar was parked in the far end of the lot, at the corner of the fence.

The two streets he could see were strangely lonely. Across the empty pavement a black bus rattled, idling around an unseen, growling octane engine. A line of workers looked like they had recently come out of it, marching in unison two abreast down the sidewalk, identical gray jumpsuits and identically blank faces, at least on the ones that weren't grimacing as they passed through the gray billowing from the bus's tailpipe.

Miles had just spotted the wire cage walling off the bus's controls from the seats behind, quickly glanced at the lengths of chain fastening the workers ankle to ankle, when his own lead was tugged. "Heel," the Lady ordered, and he fell in behind her as she walked to the aircar. It had to be an aircar, an aerodynamic teardrop without wings two meters tall at its highest point, resting on four braced struts ready to retract into the fuselage. A blunted nose, a spread of black-tinted viewports and a pair of underslung plasma-cannons marked the cockpit.

The Lady's tail swatted him in the face as she stepped up a fold-out stair into the hatch to the cabin. He followed mutely. Through a narrower hatch to the cockpit he could see a black-uniformed soldier sitting at the control stick. The back was barren, stainless steel, two sets of low lockers that could serve as benches leading back to a rear hatch, cargo netting slung on the ceiling, entangling the shoulder-armor of a sleeping swatbot.

"Command center," the Lady ordered bursquely, the pilot priming the engines as she sat down in a leather-padded, rear facing seat mounted to the wall of the cabin, beside the hatch to the cockpit. Officer's perch, from which to address the grunts.

The exterior hatch sealed behind them. Miles felt the pressure shift in his ears.

"That's right," the Lady said, "no windows. You'll get a chance to see later. Now sit."

Miles looked at the benches, measured the length of chain connecting his limbs to the handle in the Lady's fingers. Then he spread his tails and sat on the floor by her feet.

There wasn't enough shielding to keep the heavy antigrav generators from turning his stomach as they powered up. He gave a whine, closing his eyes.

Her fingers stroking his ears helped a little.

Miles's mind was beginning to shut down under the constant stimuli.

He was half submerged in the act of heeling behind the Lady, step after step down the black tiled floor, feeling the gentle back and forth tug of the lead on his wrists. There were broad, sun-flared windows along the exterior walls; he didn't look out them. High in some downtown tower. Command Center. There were workers here, polishing floors and laying heavy data transmission and power cables through the ceiling, but most of the people they passed were uniformed soldiers, mobian and robot. Swatbots stood ready beside doors and the elevators; squat tracked maintenance bots followed the workers, giving them tools and orders.

Sometimes people glanced at him, but no one stared.

The Lady turned abruptly and Miles stopped short, chains clinking. A white marble doorway, flanked by a swatbot. A short line formed behind the portal, a muscular lop-eared rabbit with Lieutenant's bars at the front barking out what sounded like an identification number to the swatbot. As the Lady walked toward the door the swatbot roughly pushed the rabbit from her path with an open hand-actuator. The soldiers behind him quickly stepped aside, snapping to attention and saluting as the Lady, unconcerned, pulled Miles in after her, past a small sign reading OFFICERS' MESS.

Inside, Miles froze. Everything pure white, floor and wall hangings and tablecloths, chairs in stainless steel and white leather, workers—waiters, their white outfits pale imitations of the uniforms on the soldiers that filled the tables with a quiet clatter of silverware on plates.

A wave of unreality as more neurons shorted out. I'm having a nightmare—

The Lady didn't break stride as she jerked him past a splayed-eared, white-uniformed mouse at a welcome desk and walked to a flash of color at a table in the middle of the room, a short, bald human in a green jumpsuit who ignored a plate of salad (green vegetables! Miles's nose screamed, the scent of vinegar and oil almost painful, saliva filling his muzzled mouth, food!) to pore over a minicomp, tapping its screen with a stylus. He looked up as they approached, gave a grin that quickly turned smug. "Glad you could make it, Renee. I know you're busy with the rally tonight."

"We both are, Snively," the Lady replied, her tone very familiar.

It took a moment for the memory to slot: Robotnik's nephew. Another moment and Miles realized the human wasn't afraid of the Lady. Another and he realized Snively was the only human he had seen anywhere in the city.

A servile chipmunk scampered up to the table, staring nervously down at a handheld computer. "Welcome, Great Lady," he coughed nervously, handling a paper menu but too timid to offer it. "There are several specials today. A confit of—"

"You will bring me a beef steak, rare. Steamed green beans. Iced tea. And feed and water my fox."

"Yes, La—Great Lady," the waiter stammered, furiously typing at his handcomp as he shrank away.

"Beans are scarce," Snively said. "He'll have to take them off someone else's plate."

Miles stared at him as he stood up and stared right back. A human. The human smelled like a human. "I recognize him," Snively said.

"He has distinguishing features," the Lady replied. Miles went stiff as he felt her fingers unbuckling his muzzle.

Snively stiffened too. "He bites?"

"Not when I tell him to," the Lady said, cupping the muzzle as she gently drew it off his snout, laid it on the table. "He's tame enough."

The human came closer, with his scent. Miles drew his snout away, swallowing and working his jaws. "Seems skittish," Snively mused, taking the fox's head in his hand and opening his left eye wider with a thumb on his forehead.

"It's a big day for him," the Lady said, sitting at the table and watching them with interest. "Obey him, Miles."

Miles stayed still as the human looked in his eyes, tapped his nose. Pinched his ear—

"Don't." The Lady's voice was suddenly strained. "He's conditioned to—"

"Sorry," Snively muttered, unflustered by Miles's yelp or the sudden tears in his eyes. Miles struggled not to test his shackles as the human prodded him. He looked up as the human held aloft a finger, only realizing that his visual tracking was being tested when he had already finished. "I'll let you speak, if you want," Snively said.

Miles drew a surprised breath. Opened his mouth. Worked his lips slightly.

"Are you hungry?" Snively asked.

Food. Miles's eyes widened. He sniffed, looked away, eyes wide. Flicked his ears. Looked down at his feet, mouth open for words that weren't there.

"Hmm. Be quiet then." Snively snapped his fingers sharply. "Down. Rest."

He dropped quickly to his knees, lead pooling between them, and sat on his heels, bending the sandals away from his soles. Once he was down he lifted his gaze again. The tablecloths did not reach the floor, and he was in a forest of feet and chair legs, a bizarre perspective that made him feel small.

The Lady crossed her boots at the ankle. "Well?" Miles heard her ask.

Snively was sitting back across from her. "The technical term for it is 'learned helplessness.' The training program avoids it. You haven't been rewarding him consistently, have you, Renee?"

"I always reward him for obedience," Miles's fur prickled at the note of frustration in her voice. "Always. Sometimes for no reason. I feel like I'm being too lax. Like he's . . . turning me into . . . ."

"Renee." Ting, fork on glass. "You are the robian. He is your animal."

Yes, Miles thought, just before as the Lady said, "Yes."

"That confusion, his panic at nothing. It's not caused by being soft. It's caused by inconsistent reinforcement—"

Miles sighed, turning his ears from the conversation. Snively was just repeating what he'd said to Renee before; he'd heard fragments of it echoed from her lips many times. He looked around the dining room instead and found everyone looking at him.

Everyone. Soldiers at every table stealing glances at him, some of them staring openly at him over thin lips, hard set jaws, upturned, chewing snouts.

Envious.

Miles closed his eyes as tight as he could. He should hate them, hate them for wanting what was being done to him, but he couldn't. He wanted this to stop. He wanted to go home.

He wanted to go back to his cell.

Miles chewed dumbly, not tasting. The waiter had brought a bowl of kibble.

Above, they were speaking about him. He didn't listen.

He was watching the mouse at the front of the restaurant. He didn't know why. He wasn't thinking. He was chewing.

The mouse looked at him a lot. Or over him. Short glances, in between looking down at some minicomp tied into a restaurant system, hidden by the raised lip of the tiny welcome desk. Not like the staring soldiers. Lower caste, peeking at one of her future masters.

Miles liked her. She was pretty. Young.

He kept looking at her as she peeked and found his eyes. She swallowed nervously and looked back down at the desk.

Miles slowly lowered his snout into the fishy stink of the kibble, grabbed a handful and stuffed his cheeks with it. He looked back up, chewing, and watched the mouse as she quickly put a gun back down behind the lip of the desk.

Miles stopped chewing.

He knew he'd seen a gun. The mouse had put her fingers around the butt of a gas-propellant pistol, gingerly, like it was hot. She looked flustered, uncomfortable. There were guns everywhere in the room; all the soldiers had sidearms. The Lady had a sidearm; the workbelt of Snively's suit carried a fat holster. The hostess had no business with a sidearm, any more than did any of the slaves in gray jumpsuits on the street.

The mouse looked over again, locking eyes with him nervously.

She was a partisan. She was going to kill someone—

She was going to try to kill someone.

Everyone in this room was a trained soldier. If she was going to turn that gun on Snively, then the Lady would kill her the moment her enhanced hearing heard the trigger mechanism being pulled. She'd see her through a security camera the moment she lifted it off the desk.

If she tried to kill the Lady, then Miles would be punished.

Miles kept looking at the mouse, watching her peek back over to see that yes, he was looking at her, seeing her trying to gather her meager nerve. He could already feel his ears laying fruitlessly flat, feel the Lady slapping him in front of the room, kicking him, dragging him whining by his ear back to the aircar so she could torture him properly back in the prison, while all those warriors watched him, wished they could be in his place so they could be hit and spit on and obey her.

He was going to be tortured so the mouse could die before getting off a shot.

No. The mouse turned away from him to look at the blank white wall behind her. He would've killed the Lady himself, if anybody could. The Lady knew that much: there are warriors and there are not-warriors, and the mouse was not a warrior. If Miles had that gun he would kill the Lady, Snively and five more before his own brains were blown out, because he wouldn't stand there simpering and playing with his weapon until even some chained fox cowed by his mistress's feet could see it. The mouse was begging to get shot.

Leave the gun where it is, he thought. Drop it in a trash can later.

The mouse fought a stupid, cowardly urge to look at him again, as though that would make him stop watching. She fixed her eyes on the open door to the hallway outside. She slowly put her hand back beneath the raised lip of the desk.

Leave me out of this. He swallowed his mouth of half-masticated kibble, the sour taste lingering on his tongue.

He saw her wrist move—

No!

The thought itself seemed to jolt the mouse, as though she felt the clench of his jaw in her hairless tail.

"Miles," the Lady said. "Miles?"

Miles realized that he was growling.

Fuck you, he thought at the mouse, still growling, pulling his lips back over his incisors. I'm not going to be tortured for you. Miles slipped his feet out of the sandals, planted his toes and palms on the cool floor. He realized he'd just ensured the mouse's death, didn't care. He'd kill her himself, shackled and chained as he was, before he'd let her torture him.

"Miles—"

The mouse filled his vision, combat instincts narrowing his focus. Suddenly she recoiled as the Lady's chair fell to the floor, a snap-fastener giving way as she pulled her plasma pistol. "Mouse! Put your hands on your head! On your knees!"

Miles didn't consciously recognize it until afterwards, but it was a sound: among the falling glasses and rattling chairs, a second snap, just like the one on the Lady's holster.

Before he was on his feet his shoulder slammed into the edge of the table, liquid splashing wildly, Snively throwing up his hands against a blast of coffee. Without thought Miles's eyes picked out the dog among the other soldiers, the one with hand at his hip, the gun coming up. Miles ran, leapt, the gun exploding hot by his ear, then tumbled down, fighting—

Miles fought.

Straddling the dog, knees on the dog's arms, using the shackles at his wrists to crush the dog's windpipe with his chains. His incisors in the dog's facefur, between his wide, swelling, reddening eyes. Blood pounding in Miles's temples, stink of canine fear in his nose, snapping cartilage and gurgling breath at his ears.

"Miles."

Miles spread his jaws and screamed his rage into the dog's face.

The Lady's hand on his scalpfur. "Miles, down."

The chain against the dog's neck went as slack as Miles's spine and tails. He closed his eyes as the dog spastically coughed flecks of spittle and blood into his facefur. The Lady's arms dragging him off. He followed weakly, legs seeking purchase on the floor and failing to find it, tails flopping up underneath his legs as she gently dragged him on his back.

"If you kill him, he can't be interrogated," she said reasonably.

Miles heard Snively give a disapproving grunt, still breathing heavily. "He might have been shooting at the mouse."

"We'll find out. That's what interrogation is for."

The Lady released Miles and he lay on his back, limp, breathing, floating in the sweet aftershock of spent adrenaline. The combat focus gone, attention softened to a haze that drifted through his own body. Like having been beaten, but without the pain. He let himself sink down into it, falling and falling through thoughts and—

Miles's ears twitched at a sudden clink close to his ear, and he opened his heavy eyes. He'd almost fallen asleep. Really asleep, asleep deep and dreamless, not just lying down with his eyes closed.

The Lady was kneeling over him, upside-down in his vision. He followed her arm down to—

Centimeters from his nose, her plate. Wedges already cut from the steak, exposing the deep wet pink inside. He could smell salt and spice, he could taste them on the back of his tongue.

"You've been a very good fox," the Lady said.

Miles closed his eyes and whined, pressing his legs and tails together. He bathed in the scent, breathing deep, sliding his tongue between his teeth.

"It's for you. You've been very good. It's okay, you can ea—"

Rolling over, grabbing the meat in his bare hands, sinking his teeth into it, soft and textured on his tongue, the blood pooling warm and spiced on his salivary glands. He held it there and then he was eating, eating like fighting, chewing, snap of the beans, the bite of pepper, the tastes chasing each other and flowing into one another. Licking the plate. Licking his hands.

Back on his side, licking his teeth, his belly full. Closing his eyes to lick and lick.

"Are you sleepy?" Her hand rubbing his ears back, pulling his fur. Pulling him back and down. He briefly recalled that every eye in the place was watching him like this, his snoutfur sticky with meat juice, shackled wrists limp on his chest, being petted. Envying him.

Fuck you, he thought.

"You can sleep, if you want, Miles. You've been a—"

He sank deeper under her hand, beneath his own thoughts, and slept.

**Terscala, 13 Ventose 3237**

Miles grunted again, feeling his stomach clench and liquids slide inside him. His throat burned, the taste of belch after belch sticking acrid in his muzzled mouth. Lying on his back on the benches in the back of the aircar, he didn't know whether any shift in his belly was a cramp, a banked turn, or the invisible, slithering hand of the antigrav field caressing his guts.

The Lady's hand on his belly was different, firm. The insistent rubbing of her palm on his shirt offered something to focus on other than the pain. Her other hand held his unresisting legs on her lap as she sat beside him, his lead coiled around her wrist to keep his arms at his sides.

"You've forgotten how to eat meat," she said. Sonorous, soothing tones that accompanied the press of her palm, gentle. "Your stomach has forgotten. But it will remember. You'll have the chance to learn again."

Miles rolled his head to the side and whined, slapping his tails soundlessly against the steel. I don't want to.

"I bet you can still taste it," the Lady said, rubbing the heel of her hand just under his sternum. "Ruler chow is even better than warrior chow, isn't it?"

It's bad for me, he thought. It felt like an acid soup curdling and dissolving his intestines. Ruler chow is poison.

"You'll feel better before the rally. I want you to watch it. It will be good for you to see." Her petting stopped, hand still on his front. "You were beautiful today, Miles."

A gurgle, deep in his larynx.

"You are beautiful when you fight, my warrior." A sadness in her voice that wormed its way into his folded ears like antigrav waves, turned his balance and his stomach. "Where does my warrior hide, hmm? Where does he hide when the fox will not fight?"

You tricked me, Miles thought. It's all you ever do. Twist me. Trick me. Poison me.

"I'll find you," she said quietly, a tired voice, a voice that lied. "I'll find you, my warrior."

A choked whine behind the muzzle, his eyes stinging behind their lids. I hate you so much.

She rubbed again. "Shh."

Kain Blackwood 2011

## \*Chapter 22\*: Mobotropolis, 30 Germinal 3237

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**Royal Palace, Mobotropolis, 30 Germinal 3237**

Bunnie Rabbot waited. There were books—a coffee table book with pictures of the Palace, both rebuilt and old, both under Robotnik and under the Queen, a pair of simple centrist political books that had been on the bestseller lists. Copies of the day's Clarion, Times, Corukas Tribune and the High Demon Zeitung, both Mobisch and Vorlandisch versions. But she didn't want to read any of those.

After the Royal Guard scanned and poked her to their satisfaction, though, there wasn't much else to do. She considered listening to the radio on a little on her internal receiver, but decided against it.

On the walls were oil paintings. A nature scene, morning light in a forest through ghostly fog. Still life in a rural shack, veggies waiting for the knife in the glow of a brick bread-oven, tall grass outside the window—

The first one was from Knothole. It had taken Bunnie's eyes a moment to grab it. An old treat for the freedom fighters, a view of the world above as they planned in their windowless cave.

She looked at it for a minute, sitting on the couch. Then she had nothing but her thoughts until the raccoon guard that sat at the desk glanced at his computer and nodded. "You can go in now, Miss Rabbit."

"Thanks, sugar," she said as she got to her feet. "Nice of her to leave that picture in here for you. Must be tough sitting here all day without any windows."

The raccoon stared, confused, and then noticed the pictures, seemingly for the first time. Bunnie walked past him and opened the door.

Sally was behind her desk. She stood up before the door was closed, the city spread out behind her with all its blackened scars and avulsions. "I won't let you do it," Sally said. "I forbid it."

"Sally, you can't stop me. It ain't—"

"Oh my gods," the squirrel grimaced, recoiling back toward the broad windows. Staring at Bunnie's limbs. "How could you?"

"I wanted to, Sally. If I'm going to be in the infantry I might as well do—"

"You are the reason this war started. What was done to you. I spent millions to understand and fix it. And now you—who did you even get to do it?"

Bunnie flexed her fingers of her left hand into a fist, instinctively. Ever since she'd regained her armor she'd been playing with it, like picking at a scab. She'd forgotten how uncomfortable it was—she didn't really remember the sudden change from bare fur to armor when Snively had operated on her originally. Probably he had made her like it, with all those words of his. "It wasn't hard, Sally. The docs never removed the mounts in the first place. Really I didn't need a doc, just an engineer."

"You didn't have a doctor do that?"

"I did! But it didn't take more money than I got from my stipend to do it."

Sally planted her hands on her desk, hair tumbling down as she lowered her head. Her shoulders rose and fell with a long sigh.

"I did it because I wanted to, Sally," Bunnie said. "If I'm going to be on the line, I oughta be able to throw everything I got at 'Botnik. For my squadmates, if nothing else."

"You don't know that they'll put you on the line."

Bunnie planted her bulbous arm against her hip. "Sally. Seriously? I'd ask for it. I watch the news like anyone. They're slaves over there. Honest to gods slaves workin' in chains in those factories."

She looked up, tossing her hair back. "I can give the orders. You'll do something safe."

"You're going to have me loading transports? When I can give an assault bot a nice ol' slap on the back with this?" She hooked her fingers tight, like they did when she snapped cable and peeled armor.

"You'll take it off!" Sally shouted. "I'm your Queen!"

"Sally—"

"I'll issue an Edict of Attainder—I don't need an edict! Private! You want to be a soldier, then you'll follow my orders! You'll report to—" She spun to a computer on her desk, grabbed a mouse. "Who the fuck were those doctors . . . ."

"Sally."

The mouse cable pulled loose with snap so loud metal might have broken as Sally threw it into the wall. She began to pace, but as soon as she reached her chair she stopped, plopped down in it. "Oh, Bunnie."

There were chairs on Bunnie's side of the desk, too. She grabbed one and carried it to Sally's side, sat. "I didn't think of it 'til they passed the draft, Sally. If people have to be ordered onto the line then—"

"It's worse than we've let on," Sally said quietly, her eyes on an empty spot on her desk. "We have had to fall back at points along the line, like the Clarion says. I authorized the leak myself. But the troops we're coming up against, the way Robotnik's integrating his infantry with his robot armor, it's—" She blinked, raised her head and looked at Bunnie, as though suddenly remembering that Bunnie was some hairdresser that she hadn't spoken to in ages and could say anything to anyone. "Lachels isn't sending enough bodies," she said, diverting to message. "I had to."

"I know. You wouldn't do anything that—"

"I shouldn't have had to," she said bitterly, turning her eyes back down. "They know what Robotnik's like. And he's gotten worse. He knows he's gotten worse, or he wouldn't have stopped his propaganda broadcasts."

"Sally—"

"They're cowards," Sally hissed, deep in some private logic of memories and classified secrets. "I should have grabbed them off the streets, like that weasel said . . . ."

Bunnie grabbed Sally's arm just above her hand with her right hand, squeezed the fur. Sally didn't break her fixed stare, but she did grow quiet, chest silently heaving with angry breaths.

"You love your people, Sally. You love us, I know that. People are just . . . They're tired of fighting. Everyone loves freedom, Sally, but they like their families too. They want to live some before the die."

"Robotnik's troops don't," Sally said. Her stare at the table was still half-inward, but had turned more thoughtful, lips open just slightly as she nervously nibbled the inside of her cheek for lack of a nut. Something about her manner was natural to her, making her look like the struggling squirrel who accumulated strays and friends deep in the forest and rather than the mobian of iron who always declaimed from the trivids. It was also deeply, deeply unsettling . . . .

With a nervous, tightening twist of her guts, Bunnie realized that Sally was frightened.

"You got me, Sally-girl," Bunnie said.

She wanted to reassure but didn't seem to; Sally grimaced as though sick, turned her face away, tugged her arm until Bunnie released it, letting the chair swing until Bunnie could only see a crown of red hair above its back. "I don't want you in the war," Sally said.

"If everyone's gotta fight, I'm gonna give Robotnik good, too. I had a good few years away from it all, and even if my family were alive I wouldn't much want to talk to 'em. Hell, I'm surprised my number ain't come up in the lott'rey."

"I'm not."

Something about Sally's tone was so quietly nasty that Bunnie got it, even though she wouldn't have thought of it otherwise. "Sally, you didn't—I wouldn't have wanted you to—"

"Don't say a word to anyone," Sally said flatly from behind the chair. "Only two people have to know. The man who operates the random number generator and his commanding officer, because the first wouldn't do it until his CO gave him a direct order and the second wouldn't give it unless I gave him one personally. Either one of them could call a reporter and have the city in a riot by nightfall."

"I won't say nothing," Bunnie said, still shocked. Sally did not acknowledge her reply. "And I know . . . I know you meant well. It was sweet of you. I just . . . I don't . . . ."

Sally still didn't move.

"How's Antoine?" Bunnie asked.

"You're right," Sally croaked. "Go to the front. You're overdue."

"That ain't important right now," Bunnie said. "I ain't the only one in this room who's fighting."

"You've had time off," Sally replied, ignoring her. "You don't have any friends or family. No one would miss you. Get on the line."

"Gah, you're like a rooster starin' at a chalk line. I'm talking about you. Are you sleeping any? You seem—" And then Bunnie tightened her snout, lifted her ears as she realized what Sally had just said. "You watch your mouth, Sally-girl. You ain't some Majesty to me. I seen you back when you were just a forest-varmint like the rest of us."

Sally's head tilted momentarily toward the door. "Leave me."

"You don't need to be alone. You gotta spend some time with your family. Take a . . . . take a vacation." The chair shook as Sally snorted at that, an ugly wet laugh. "I'm serious. Leave the war to your generals for a week. Get together with Antoine and—"

"I don't know where Tails is," Sally said suddenly, still turned away. She didn't move, and neither did Bunnie, paralyzed. "He wasn't with the bodies in Ironlock. I don't know where he is. I couldn't send an extraction team for him if I wanted to."

These were the hardships of war. After a while, you didn't think about them—tried not to. Bunnie tried not to think about Rotor, too much. Sally was a good friend, Sonic—had seemed like a good friend, at first. Antoine was nice, but Bunnie didn't know him well; he was hard to know. The Postalitas children were cute. She visited them once, in Corukas, as far behind the lines as they could get.

Tails.

Tails was harder, because he was alive, maybe. You couldn't just get on with your life, because he was waiting, somewhere. Probably not treated too badly, if they knew who he was. Probably. Or maybe . . . or not. You'd find out once the war ended.

Presuming that the war ended.

"Sally, tell that ol' stick-in-the-mud you got working your desk you ain't got no appointments tonight. Get Antoine here. Fly him here. I know you can—"

"No." Finally, Sally turned aback around, but the limp fall of her arms was tired, not relaxed, and the dull face she wore was a mask. "I need to meet with General Simmons. The Lakolska have decided they may be able to make some money providing us with some next-gen ramjet fighters, not just VTOLs. In the desert that could—"

"You need to take a break."

Sally blinked her eyes, sat up, pulling her chair slightly away as Bunnie reached out her hand. "No. The situation at the lines is worse than it's been in years. You're right to join the front. Your nation needs you."

"Sally—" Bunnie held her breath a moment before she took the plunge. "You look awful. I just gotta say it, if none of your Generals and High Hoo-Has will tell you. Or if your husband don't have enough sense to. You need—"

"To win the war," Sally interrupted, standing, pushing her chair back into her desk. "I need to win the war."

"You need your family, Sally-girl!"

"You want to see my family?" Sally stomped to the far wall, and Bunnie saw them: portraits, all of them, lined along the wall, each of them in the same royal blue, the same crown. "That's my family, Bunnie, right there! My father and his father and his father and his father all the way back to King Anton! They won our freedom. They are this nation. I owe them everything."

"Sally, they're all dead," Bunnie said.

"GET OUT!" Sally roared, flattening Bunnie's ears. The door opened, the receptionist-guard coming in and sweeping the corners with a pistol before leveling it automatically and inevitably at Bunnie's head. "GET OUT OF HERE!" Sally went to her desk and started throwing things, paperweights, staplers, the keyboard. "GO TO THE FRONT! DIE! GET OUT!"

Sergeant Menzies closed the door behind Bunnie and then went to attention, his raccoon face a mask as he stared out at the city. "Majesty, do you need—"

"GET OUT!"

He got out.

**Terscala, 14 Ventose 3237**

The Lady closed the door behind him. The bolts fired, and Miles was locked in. She took one of his hands and pressed a key into his fingers. "Unshackle yourself," she said.

She walked on and left him as he stared at the door. It was made of wood. Sturdy and retrofitted with a military grade electronic lock eight times the size of the knob that originally belonged to it, red indicator diodes glowing silently.

Quietly, he began to unlock the cuffs on his wrists, turning to the room as he did so. The Lady's chambers were utilitarian—less than utilitarian, almost barren. A belly-high counter marked out the boundaries of a large, uncluttered kitchen, spotless tile and stainless steel knives the only things in view—she mostly ate food prepared by others elsewhere, Miles guessed. A sofa of steel frame and thin leather cushions that looked like it had never been sat in, two chairs opposite, like something in a catalogue. And nothing else: no trivid projector, no pictures, no calendars, no bookshelves, just bare blank white wall and windows of what was undoubtedly reinforced shockglass, offering a dim view of the browned-out city.

"It's past midnight, fox." The Lady stood in a short hallway that led back to other room, unbuttoning her jacket. "I'm too tired to take you back to your cell this evening. You will sleep here. I think you can get some sleep, yes?"

She didn't wait for his answer, disappearing through a door to another room as she took off her jacket. A clock, Miles realized, she thought he'd been looking for a clock. But she didn't need one. She needed almost nothing outside of herself. Her eyes probably layered the blank walls with maps, displays of strategic information. Art.

He closed his eyes against the white and kept unshackling himself.

She was right, of course. He was very tired. The rally had gone on very long: all twelve of the Robian Lords and Ladies speaking to a stadium of uniformed shock troops as the sun sank behind the banks of floodlights. Bright shafts of spotlights appearing one after another as the sky above darkened to black, until the stage built at the center of the tackleball field was encaged in a glowing fortress of light for the Robians and their rows of collared animal servants. Amplified words echoing into the silent city, until a promise or command turned the silent, attentive troops into a roaring ocean.

Near the end, when Lord Robotnik was speaking, Miles's longing to sleep had become a passion. The lights, the roars, kept him helplessly awake. Kneeling out of line beside the Lady Renee of Pine Martens with eyes closed, head bowed and swimming. The only creature out of place in the palace of light, like a stubborn smudge of filth on a panel of stained glass. He could feel all those eyes on him, watching him ruin the perfection. And her next to him, knowing that he was bending those eyes. Knowing that she was disappointing her Empress because of him.

Sometimes he would feel her gently scratch along the base of his ears. Lying to him. Hiding the hatred he was earning.

Miles licked his teeth as he slid the muzzle from his snout, then winced as he saw the Lady returned, muscular body and smartly brushed fur accentuated rather than hidden in a tight white undershirt, shorts and the collar that never left her neck. He closed his eyes and lowered his snout. Couldn't bear to look at her.

Without a word she took the chains from his hands. Her fingers rubbed the line of his snout smoothed back over his forehead.

"I never wanted you to suffer like this," she said. "Not this long. Perhaps I misjudged you. Or myself."

Miles's breath shivered slightly in his nose. His shoulders rose and slumped.

"If I'm not strong enough to make you mine, I'll release you."

She hugged his unresisting body gently, rubbed her snout against the fur beneath his right ear.

"There will be no warning," she said. "There will be no pain. You do not need to fear it, or work for or against it. But don't despair. This won't last forever."

A moment after her arms released him he looked up to see her walking away. "Sleep on the couch," she said, not turning around. "The bathroom is at the end of the hall. Be good."

He continued to look at low draped tail until she disappeared into her bedroom. The lights silently deactivated, leaving him in darkness.

Miles couldn't sleep. The leather felt cold against his fur. The room was perfectly climate controlled, but still his ears and tails were hot, his palms clammy. He breathed too quickly, felt his heart pulsing behind his sternum. The dim glow of the city through the windows seemed like a hallucination in the depths of a cave.

Death was coming.

The Lady wouldn't lie to him about that. About anything. She would beat him and twist him but she never lied to him—told him something that she believed was a lie. She was mad, but truthful. She was going to kill him, soon.

Finally.

He thought it would feel better than this.

He'd expected there would be some kind of relief. Even if it wasn't immediate, at least a lessening, a gentle fade, the beginning of a slow draw-down to nothing. Not this inescapable fatigue, this horrible, sickening fever. Half-dreaming, memory and imagination mixing queasily. The Lady's hand on his snout. The mild disgust on Snively's face, fingers squeezing his cheek. Face down in a padded floor that stunk of the worst in himself. Tired and aching, kneeling, looking up at the Empress—

Miles closed his eyes and remembered the Empress standing tall before her creator and her Robian lords and ladies and their servants. Bathed in light, armored carapace gleaming, amplified voice sounding and resounding in the great bowl of the stadium. Crying victory. Promising it and commanding it, casting a spell on her mobian horde. A sorceress binding the soldiers to her and her servants, calling forth the shouts, the roars, the cheers.

It would have been so beautiful, if she weren't evil.

The Empress had once been a kind of monstrous child, and in a way she still was, making the end of everything out of ideas so simple and pure and right that it made Miles ache. Mobians finally united after so long, fearless and invulnerable. The entire world theirs, safe and strong forever.

All they had to do was obey.

Not that being a slave to robots would be hard for Miles. By now obedience was far deeper than second nature to him. It was the rest of the world that was too much. The streets of this city, of every city, filled with silent, marching slaves and building and maintaining their masters. All his race just animals to be used. And humans just a memory—

That should bother him more than it did. Maybe it was that he'd once heard a special word for it—genocide—that was so comically abstruse, like something some bespectacled professor of literature would roll on his tongue. Maybe it was the endlessly cynical and patronizing way that Lord Robotnik and his nephew were obviously considered and exception without anyone so much as having to mention it. Maybe it was the way that the command center had seemed so busy and full, even with no more than one human in it. He'd never had many human friends—not any, really.

Maybe he just liked mobians more than humans.

Unlike Sally—

Miles rolled his head to the side, pressed his snout and his bared teeth into the hide cushion. He felt like laughing when he remembered how he'd felt guilty about hoping she would rescue him. Soldiers were captured and they had to endure, had to be strong for Sally while she hadn't thought of him at all, for years, because as soon as one soldier was dead or gone she could just get her human friends to pay for more cannon fodder. His real mother had an excuse, she was dead. Even his dad with his belt and his fist had worried about him, cared about him more than Sally.

Even the Lady cared more about him. Ruling one-twelfth of a nation with a far tighter grip than Sally she saw him every week and worried about him when she wasn't with him. Fretted over him like a mother with problem child.

In her sick, mad way, she loved him.

He pushed himself up onto his side, cradling an empty, sick feeling in his chest, feeling cool air seep into the fur at the base of his tails. They tossed once, tweaking a muscle memory of nervous propellering that died out, ended with a limp flop against the side of the couch. His nose was filled with the scent of sweat on leather, stink of warm fur.

Suddenly he thought he could vomit, and he tried to but he hadn't eaten dinner and his stomach was empty. He coughed, felt the queasiness recede with disappointment. His own breathing felt like an effort.

The Lady's chambers had no clock, but he imagined it. Tick. Tick. Tick.

Something had to happen. He squeezed his eyes and ached for something. Something else, some other end. But there was no escape in the city, in his body, in his mind. Invisible walls were woven into the very fabric of space to keep him from anything that mattered, anything of worth.

He wanted to die fighting. Trying to do something, something he believed in, and there was nothing he believed in and nobody he loved, and the only woman in the world who loved him was going to kill him, and there was nothing he could do but submit to it, following the path set by those invisible walls.

And she didn't even want to, that was the worst part; the Lady didn't want to kill him. She was proud and it would cut her deep, crack her pristine Robian self-confidence to lose her fox slave. Knowing that he was something she couldn't have. That he'd beaten her.

Miles didn't want to beat her, anymore. He didn't want to hurt the Lady. He didn't want to hurt anyone; that was the point. If he couldn't kill, why would he want to hurt her? Why couldn't she see that, that it didn't matter if she stopped beating him, scratched his ears and rubbed his tail, gave him a steak or outright begged him—

And he realized with certainty that was the next step; that was the next step down. She would start asking him to obey her, and then trying to bribe him into obeying her, and finally she would beg. Secretly. It would be a humiliation and a crime for a Robian to beg a slave to obey her, but she would do it and lie to her Empress after she begged him not to force her to kill him. Miles would have to listen to her grovel, again, and again.

And he would sit quietly and force her to kill him. Because he had to, because this disgusting horror was written deep in the world, deep into his bones.

It wasn't fair.

Miles wetly coughed an ugly, tuneless laugh through his lips, and he was crying.

It wasn't fair that the Lady was insane. Renee was strong and smart and ruthless and brave and beautiful and insane, and just because of that he couldn't love her back and there was nothing he could do. He couldn't help her. He couldn't help himself. He couldn't help anyone. He couldn't do anything. He was a prisoner in his own body, his own mind, looking at the horror he was creating and becoming like it was something else and he couldn't do one single—

He opened his eyes wide, going still.

When he finally took a deep lungful of breath, the exhalation was like a fever breaking, his arms and legs and tails going limp.

Miles suddenly felt himself hollow, somehow saw into himself from outside himself, saw what the Lady saw. The bone and sinew as gears and belts, the furious back and forth switching of the synapses of his overclocked brain that even as he watched slowed into blissful, cooling stillness.

A fox is a machine, the Lady had told him, and he had listened, but she hadn't shown him. He had felt the gears she had set to grinding in him with her tinkering but hadn't understood the pain for what it was, his programming frenetically writing and overwriting and rewriting itself but never grasping itself, never finding the insight that was the only possible way to escape.

Which was that there was no such thing as escape.

This sweating, panting creature of fur and meat and bone had been programmed from birth by mother and foster mother and warden and Robian, and it could not pick which program was strongest; it was the program. There was only the fox.

Miles breathed deep, closed his eyes, and waited in the cool darkness to see what the fox would do.

In about an hour, he got up and silently padded through the dimness into the kitchen.

The knife block and the handles were made of carbon fiber that was neither warm nor cold against his palm. The first he pulled was a stainless steel paring knife, easily concealed, good for close-quarters combat. Then a butcher knife, a long smooth blade for meat.

The third knife was the one. A long bread knife, the edge serrated into two decimeters of smiling teeth.

This one would hurt the most.

## \*Chapter 23\*: Aleton, 21 Prarial 3237

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**Aleton, South Suburbs, 21 Prarial 3237**

Sonic and the skunk driving the car—name was Charlie—both laid their ears back at the sudden blast. Unmistakable, none of the roll of thunder, not even a flash from the muted shell. The four-by-four was running without lights up four lanes of Starlit blacktop. They were getting close to the downtown, the lights of the taller downtown towers glowing above the false horizon of the blacked-out local buildings. Sometimes Mobotropolis half-vanished behind a massive plume of smoke, sometimes blinked out as a transmission line took some hit, overloading the grid until the army engineers compensated and the towers flashed back into existence.

Hiking through the tundra on foot after the drive train of the snowcrawler shattered, sleeping off frostbite and hypothermia with survivalists in the frigid pines at the farthest southern reach of the great forest, backpacking the deserted game trails and overgrown, untended firebreaks until he finally made it to the squatter's camps. An exhausting week of predator-and-prey with some sort of deep-recon snatch-and-retrieve squad of weird, off-model swatbots and mobians so wrapped in camo and gear that he'd thought they were off-model swatbots themselves. Eating grass and bark to stop the squeezing pangs of his stomach.

Somehow, he'd never dreamed that the thing to keep him from reaching Sally would be Robotnik getting to her first.

Another bang, and thunder this time—a brick building collapsing, close. Behind them. "Oh fuck," the skunk said, setting the word off from all the other muttered fucks with a childish, terrified emphasis. "Fuck. Fuck fuck. Fuck."

Sonic felt the octane engine throttle down and made a fist. "Fuck you. Keep driving." It was bad enough as it was with nothing but starlight and other cars speeding wildly out of the darkness, toward and past them, abandoning the city. He couldn't get Charlie to push it more than fifty klicks and hour.

"Fuuuuuuuck," the skunk whined. The engine growled in the dark like a frightened predator. Sonic grabbed the hand crank and rolled down the window, wondering whether it was safety glass. "I can't do this," Charlie muttered in the dark, head lowered so that his eyes just peeked above his knuckles on the wheel. "I can't."

"We have to," Sonic said, groping a hand out and squeezing the shoulder of skunk's leather jacket. He'd given Charlie the rest of the cash he had for the lift up into town, but what was pulling him north were his children defending the city. He thought they'd desert if he showed up and they could escape back to the forest, where he'd spent his own post-military life growing mushrooms of the edible and psychedelic variety. Sonic didn't buy it, but there weren't many people out of uniform willing to do anything other than head south or west as fast as they could. Sonic had told him his ex-wife was in the city. It had seemed to tug at his heartstrings a little.

Then again, Sonic thought, so did the whine of that cheap shell overhead. They both flinched in anticipation and had just begun to lift their ears again when the bang came through the window like a punch. Charlie jerked the wheel and Sonic pulled it back, the truck shivering as its wheels fought for grip on the pavement.

"They're dead," the skunk said.

"No. You can't think that." Right on cue the downtown electricity cut out again. You stay out of this! Sonic thought.

"They're dead. My children are dead. They're taking the city apart."

"Shut up," Sonic spat. "Drive faster."

"They're all dead." Sonic heard a wet sniff, and the skunk's voice starting to break. "I let them die."

"Not yet you haven't. And you're not going to." Maybe forty miles away from the city center. At least less than a hundred. He slid his hand over and squeezed the skunk's knuckles tight around the wheel. He'd kept going north through guns and starvation and through several inches of steel when it was necessary and he wasn't about to let some graying polecat stop him when he was like twenty miles away and he didn't have any more time—

"I can't." Sonic squeezed the skunk's hand to what had to be the point of pain, but the engine still tuned down. "I can't. They're dead. I can't." The wheel started to tug for a turn from north.

Sonic reached down to his waistband with his free hand and pulled his pistol, lifting it high to make sure that Charlie could see at least the shadow of it in the rearview mirror, and pressed it into the hair on the back of his skull. "Yes you can."

Distant thunder rolled over the sound of the engine dying back to an idle. He could feel the change in acceleration, more and more of the truck's rolling borrowing from momentum.

"You can get out and walk," Sonic said, "but I am taking this car because you may not love your kids, but I—"

Tumbling, vision gone in white behind his eyelids, feeling the pebbles of safety glass peppering his face until his head hit fiberglass and pavement hard enough that not even his quills could keep him awake.

Coming to, in horror, his eye bisected by a sliver of glass—

No, that was the skunk's.

Sonic recoiled in disgust, unthinkingly forcing his quills through the disintegrating remnants of the passenger's window, he kicked out, faint error messages flooding in from all over his body, but the real pain blocked out by nanite-supplemented adrenaline. Scent of explosive and asphalt in his nose, untangling his ankle from the seatbelt—no, his backpack. He lifted the strap up to his hand with his foot and crawled out of the window in tinkling glass and something wet, stumbling up almost to a run before he hit an invisible brick wall forehead-first.

Hissing in pain, licking the inside of his teeth to make sure the tip of his tongue was still there, Sonic felt his way along the wall, vision still filled with white haze and motes of sparkling green. His fingers found a corner and he smelled piss and garbage.

Another bang. His quills flared. The wall shivered against his palm.

The corner was a gap, a narrow gangway between two brick buildings. He moved down it until he felt more than saw he was out of view from the street. Took a moment to breathe and regretted it as all the messages held back by the nanites came flooding in. Defensive cuts in his face and arms, wrenched ankle and hyperextended knee, deep fiberglass cuts in his chest. Sonic braced his hands and ass against the walls to take the weight from them, felt the closeness of the bricks, and wondered whether it was a good idea to put himself between two fragile walls that he could run through with a running start—

BANG.

The walls shook, and held, but Sonic was already on his ass, knees bent and head between them, quills to the sky.

He waited.

Sonic woke up with his skin cold, his quills and fur thick with a thin layer of dew. His knees were pressed to his lowered chin, and his back ached. Without opening his eyes he rocked forward and retched between his shoes, bubbles collapsing in his empty belly. He breathed deep the thick smell of ripe garbage and coughed again, opening his eyes to focus on the scent of the patina of oil in the pebbles under his ass and soles.

It had been a shallow sleep of fear and quills and clenched teeth. Dreams full of loud noises, colliding masses, tremendous falls and catastrophes, always returning to the alley in moments of wakefulness. Even if he didn't have nanites to help him feel it out, he would have felt stretched thin. Whatever chemicals needed to be manufactured during the night, he didn't have nearly enough of them. He blinked his dry eyes, fought away the urge to rub the itch.

The walls seemed closer than he remembered. He wormed his way upright, bricks scratching his chest and grinding to dust against his quills. Bones popped deep in his neck as he rolled his head on his shoulders, muscles stiff and sluggish. But the bleeding had stopped, his cutoff jeans were intact, and the sneakers he had traded his boots for in Mogsdon weren't soaked.

All systems within acceptable limits. He picked up his backpack—big synthetic thing with lots of extra pockets and lots of cuts from trees and rocks that his old canvas bag would have shrugged off. Sliding sideways, he quietly slid his way out onto the street.

It was like the forest after a storm. Everything that broke easily was on the ground: heavier, dead branches, broken panes of glass, clumps of mortar and crumbled brick from the corners of buildings, twisted steel railings and concrete from balconies along the sides of buildings like dead leaves. Sonic almost expected to see smoke still rising out of the shattered crater in the asphalt beside the overturned pickup, but of course it wasn't.

He didn't look inside the truck.

The dawn-blue sky didn't have a sun yet, but the road itself pointed him with the way north. He sniffed the air, cool but carrying the burn and shit stink of urban combat. The buildings were still dark, the streetlights unlit. To the north, the columns of smoke were stark against the sky, thick enough that he couldn't see which of the towers were still scraping the sky.

Sonic started hoofing it north.

His ears stayed perked, hairs prickling. Sometimes he thought he could hear a growl of an octane engine, but nothing close enough to be sure. He didn't hear explosions, but twice a deep, faint tremor shot through the pavement beneath his feet, something deep and heavy. Generally, the streets were empty, a few cars still parked, one an abandoned wreck in an intersection with a crumpled front end, one looking fine in the middle of the street, but out of hydrogen and the batteries drained. Squinting his eyes, he could see VTOLs swirling through the towers like flies on a rotten fruit, looping around the towers, making tight turns that made him think they had to have antigrav drives supplementing the blade lift—or maybe one of those spacepod things that had brought the hit team to the forest, those whining, whooshing—

His ears caught the whine, pulling back so hard against his skull that they hurt. He sprinted forward, waking some pains in his calves, and rolled down behind a sedan and found, with a very unpleasant surprise, that he must have left his pistol back in the four-by-four.

It took presence of mind to keep quills flat when frightened, but he'd long since learned the trick. He resisted the urge to look over the hood until the thing had passed, and he was right: one of those military aircars Robotnik had built, painted a darkened teal for camouflage against a smoggy sky. It was buzzing low along the street, no rear or side-facing guns. Maybe it was trying to flush insurgent cells, though it wouldn't do a good job without some more barrels bristling out of it.

But it did, Sonic thought as it lifted off into a tight banked turn toward his position, seem like it must have some kind of rear-facing cameras.

He spotted an alley and cut down it, but they'd just pull overhead. Each door he came to he gave a yank and a shoulder, until he remembered to brace his feet, put his hand to the door and put his mind to it—must have taken forever for Bunnie to get used to this—and ripped the cylinder out of the steel housing. Inside he kept running through a row of cardboard boxes on shelves, dodging out through a door into bright white pillboxes on shelves, a pharmacy, leaping the counter . . . .

Sonic slowed to a walk and then a stop, panting, as the weirdness became too much. In the shadows were a long line of supermarket checkouts, gleaming paper ads propped along the half-empty shelves still boasting specials on unrationed goods. He closed his eyes, tried to fight off the sense that he was dreaming, that Sally couldn't lose like this, that he must be mad.

Without his eyes open and without momentum he didn't even try to dodge when he heard the safety being clicked off. "Turn around," a voice said, and Sonic did, hand still reaching instinctively for his missing gun, to see a fox soldier with the butt of an assault rifle in his shoulder, head cocked to sight at near point-blank range, very professional. "Three steps back," he said in a crisp tenor. "On your knees." And then without a change in pitch or any movement: "Sonic."

The fox was bright-furred, dressed in jet black combat fatigues with no concessions to camouflage except the road dust and scuffs he had picked up on sleeves and legs. Three red chevrons on his shoulder, some kind of rank. He had two tails.

Sonic's mind saw that and kept working, but he couldn't reach the conclusion. Two tails each with the white tip that made foxes look like they painted with them, one hugging his right pant leg, the other lifted high to his left hip to balance the rifle. The fox's black belt was heavy with grenades, pouches, and a bundle of plastic zip-ties the sort the police used in riots. One shoulder was marked with the golden symbol of Mobius in a hard steel gray, and he belonged to FIRST PATROL, THIRD URBAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCE. He had some sort of red award above his vest pocket, which was stitched MILES FOX, and he had some kind of collar on his neck, and his face was older, his cheek fringe wider, and his hair was buzzed tight to his scalpfur, and his eyes were yellow, yellow like sunflowers in the height of summer.

Sonic still had the question in his voice when he said "Tails?" and then again when the fox lowered his gun, but when he was shrugging off his backpack and he said again, "Tails," when Tails had squeezed his arms against his flattened quills in a hug Sonic had begun to the shake the uncertainty. Sonic's fingers grabbed for Tails's fur and no he was in uniform so he reached up and grabbed the fur of his neckscruff, held it tight, pulled even to the point of pain.

The fox's arms were strong, and they shivered with strength on his shoulders. "Sonic."

"Tails!" Sonic said again as he held the beaming fox out to arm's length by the shoulders, part of him thinking, man, that was a touch mushy. "Look at you! Uniform and everything! Sergeant Miles!"

Tails's mouth slipped instantly into that mischievous grin and Sonic realized with a painful shock how proud he was of him. The clever, confused, sometimes-brash little kit had grown into . . .

Into everything he'd never been able to be.

"What's this?" Sonic laughed as he flicked his finger against the metal on Tails' neck. "Gonna bark for me, little pup? Some kind of ID tag?"

"Something like that," he smiled. "I wear it proudly."

"It looks good on you! But we don't got time to catch up. I know we're behind Robotnik's lines, where are our targets? Even from out here I could see that Sally's taking a pounding downtow—Gods," he said, his face falling. "Tails, what happened to your—your tails?"

"Sergeant!" someone cried.

Sonic turned his head to the right toward the far end of the row of checkout lanes, where two mobians were training guns on him. Behind them a third, a lioness in similar fatigues, was weighed down by a ridiculous, almost cruel collection of black-housed electronic equipment strapped around her chest, arm and ankles, two radio transmitters poking up over her shoulders like insect antennae. With a grunt she lifted her left fist at him and a targeting laser blinked to life, painting his chest.

"Tails, wha—" Sonic stopped, because Tails had moved quickly back and leveled his rifle at Sonic's head.

"Slowly take three steps back," he said. "Lie face down with your hands at your sides, palms up. Flatten your quills."

Sonic stood there, watching Tails and not able to understand, as two more things walked up out of the aisles. One, a swatbot like the one he had seen in the forest, that quickly stamped to a halt and lifted his right arm's plasma cannon at him, zeroing in precisely on the tech-soldier's spotting laser.

Two, just the front of a line of mobians that had been following it. Broken winter fur and light spring dress, the shocked look that people get when people with guns order them to do things. The first two people in the line were females, their hands bound behind their back with zip ties.

"Tails," Sonic said slowly, pausing after each word, trying to keep his eyes from looking down at the zip ties on Tails's belt, even though he knew they were down there. His combat sense was coming back to him; he caught another soldier now in his peripheral vision, to his left. "What are you doing to these people, Tails."

"Collecting them," Tails replied along the rifle stock. "They tried to hide."

"Collecting them for what?"

"Work." Tails giggled. "I wish I could have earned a posting to the Empress's main force downtown, but as the Queen always says, the wealth of Mobius is in its people."

Adrenaline was flooding Sonic's shoulders and thighs, but he couldn't move. He felt his lips curling against waves of disgust, watching Tails's face and struggling to find words that could somehow keep Tails talking but stop him from speaking the words that would explain Empress and crystallize the suspicions turning in his mind. "Do I have to work?" Sonic asked.

"No," Tails replied, still with that perfect calm and happy assurance that Sonic now realized was insane. "Milady will want you for greater things."

"Put down the gun," he pleaded.

"No. Three steps back, face-down—"

"You don't think," Sonic growled, knotting his hands into fists, "that I'm going to do that, do you, Tails?"

The fox slowly lowered his gun, saftied it and dropped it. The grin on his face as it clattered to the tiles beside him was one of genuine happiness. "No, Sonic. It will be a long time before you obey Milady's orders. But she'll teach you. And she says I can help." He ground his boots and slid his left foot forward, lifting his arms to a fighting stance. Sonic's mind went back to Knuckle's Gym. The lift of the left arm suggested traditional fox wardancing.

"Keep your guns trained on him," Tails shouted to his squad, not breaking eye contact. "Kill him if he tries to run." He winked at Sonic. "He runs fast," he added.

"Tails," Sonic warned, going up on his toes, feeling loose, "don't make me hurt you—"

Tails cut him off by darting forward with a long, sharp leap from a dead start and driving the bladed fingers of his right hard into Sonic's windpipe. He choked hard; but swung his fist forward in a counterpunch against a follow-up from the left forearm, which failed to materialize as Tails swung to Sonic's left, insinuated his right leg behind Sonic's left and pushed back, knocking him onto his quills. Sonic lifted his legs to toss himself back to his feet but Tails gave up his wardancing and leapt astride Sonic's belly, dropping down for an Ostian kickboxing TKO, pinning his quills harmlessly against the floor and raining elbow-shots against his skull, knocking him back into dizziness, further down, down into sleep—

With a snarl Sonic drove his skull forward and felt a break in one of the things pummeling him, a loud cry. He drove his right up as hard as he could, squinting his eyes open in time to catch only a quick snatch of Tails' face snout in agony as Sonic's knuckles drove into his cheek. As he kicked Tails off of him the first burst of gunfire high as though they were afraid to actually shoot him. Or afraid to shoot Tails, he thought, diving forward between the fox and the rifle, grabbing it and using his friend for cover as he unloaded wildly, holding it by the pistol grip. One round caught the beagle in the face, the vole going down hard as a .336 tore her knee apart. He heard the last soldier fleeing behind him and he grabbed the barrel to put a good ten rounds into the swatbot's face, shattering the red band that was its eye. Then he gathered up Tails, felt him wriggling and wrapped his arm firmly under the fox's snout. "Turn it off," he told the lioness, very displeased by the way the bot was still tracking him with its firing arm.

The lioness was terrified, her target-painting arm shivering, aim low under the weight of her gear. "I—I can't deactivate Master." She swallowed. "Not without permission or unless its continued operation is threatened by—"

"Target the—"

Sonic cinched his arm tight under Tails's snout. "Shut up," he hissed, retraining the rifle loosely on the swatbot's . . . slave. "Power it down. Or I'll kill him," wrenching Tails' head again and wincing at the pain he must have caused a moment later.

That scared her. Insanely, Tails was still trying to gurgle at her as she lifted her forearm before her face and started keying on a pad. "Please forgive me," she whimpered, and Sonic realized she was talking to Tails. "Please tell the Lady, I have to. I had no choice. Please."

The swatbot dropped its arms, heat sinks in its back hissing a last hot gasp from its capacitors. "Now get out," Sonic barked. "Out!"

She ran—or trudged, plastic and metal clanking. You could think she was a bot herself, running out into the parking lot.

The heel of Tails's boot swung up right between Sonic's legs.

"Fuck!" Sonic shouted in agony, throwing Tails hard to the floor and sitting on top of him, pressing his shoulders firmly to the tile. "Your arm is broken!" he said. "Stop fighting!"

Angry tears were in the fox's eyes. "I didn't believe it. She told me to believe it and I disobeyed her. You have the blessing. You're a Robian. It's not fair—"

Sonic slapped him hard across the cheek. Silence, and in it Sonic's stomach turned. For a moment the fox was Tails again, and Sonic had broken him.

"What are you doing?" The question was like a plea. He grabbed the fox's white cheek fringe, held him still and stared at him as though he could somehow see into his brain through his eyes. "You're not a traitor. You'd never kill Sally—"

"No," Tails growled. "She's to wear a collar." He didn't seem to like the idea. "The Empress thinks she deserves to have animals under her heel. Maybe even become one of her Robians."

Although all the words were Mobian, it was a foreign language. But Sonic thought he might understand enough. It terrified him. "Sally, Tails, Sally Acorn. Your . . . . she raised you—"

"She used us, Sonic!" he shouted. "We fought her battles for nothing but lies, until we were all used up. And you know what happens when we aren't of use to her any more. I still remember what she didto you, Sonic."

"What she did to me?"

"Drove you away. Denied you the place that you'd earned. You should have been King, and she made you beg for human scraps."

"Tails, I thought I'd killed her. I almost did. Because—" Sonic swallowed, opened his mouth wide, wide enough to spit out a terrible, rancid knot of filth that had been festering in his belly forever, putrid and bitter and—

". . . . Because she wouldn't fuck me," Sonic said. "There a word for a person like that."

"Warrior," Tails said fiercely.

Sonic punched him in the eye, hard, then muttered oh shit, oh shit, putting his fingers to the insensate fox's white throat, which still pulsed; he was breathing. He hadn't killed him, but he was out deep. Right under Tails's collarbone Sonic found more scars, like the ones on his tails, and it was too much. He sat back on Tails's thighs, looking around at this dumb store like there was someone who could tell him what the fuck they'd been doing to his best friend while he was off dicking around in the desert and feeling sorry for himself up north.

The prisoners were looking at him. They didn't move fast, but the first two had shuffled farther out of the dark aisles, bringing two more rows of two behind them. One of them was a child.

"Hey." Sonic got to his feet. "We need to get out of here, now." He vaulted one of the checkout belts and stopped short as the prisoner closest to him tried to back away into the people behind her. Maybe thirties, a long skirt that didn't move or shake, because she didn't move at all. "Oh, shit, here's your problem," Sonic said, squatting down to look closely at a plastic cuff around her ankle, an insulated cable through a grommet linking her to a cuff on the ankle of the kid behind her. "Do you know how these come off?" he asked. "How did they put them on?" He yanked a quill, ignoring the pain, got up and used it to snap the zip-tie at her wrists. Her striped arms fell limp to her sides. "Hello."

She looked at him blankly, fear in her eyes.

"Ding-dong." He waved his hand in front of her. "Sonic Hedgehog here. I have an exciting new offer from Acorn Corporation, not being a slave for the rest of your life."

No reaction.

"No money down? Free trial period?"

She had the fear of the gods in her.

Sonic threw his quill angrily to the floor. "Any takers?" he shouted, looking down the dark aisle. Near the back of the line people shuffled, but no one spoke. He felt dizzy. Everyone had gone mad. "Does anyone want help?"

"Help me, Sonic . . . ."

Tails.

Fuck these people, Sonic thought, turning and running back through the checkout. Tails had wriggled himself up against a cushion of polystyrene bags of potato chips (GENEROUSLY RATIONED, the display said). His busted arm was hanging limp and open beside him; his ears were flat and his eyes were closed tight. Sonic dropped to his knees, grabbed the ungloved hand of the arm he hadn't broken, squeezed it tight and sobbed once as he saw more scarred, furless skin in curling tendrils on his wrists. Gods, underneath that uniform . . . . "Tails, who did this to you?"

"Milady."

"Who?"

The fox muttered rapidly, with a singsong inflection. "Lady Renee of pine martens she's a Robian and I'm her fox and she rules me and her robots rule me," breath, "and I have to be loyal to her and obey her and love her and whatever she says I say Yes Lady," breath "and if I'm good and rule her animals well and fight bravely then one day I can be a robot too and—"

Sonic wrapped his fingers around Tails' snout, forced him to stop that. "You're not a slave, Tails." He let go. "We're free mobians," he said. "We can do anything we want."

"Yes, Sir." Tails whined, staring blankly forward.

Don't think about it. Don't think or you'll go mad. Get Tails out of here; help him later. "Tails, we need to get these people out of here. They barely listen to me. I need you to help me—"

"Nononononono," Tails hissed, his snout pressing to his chest and shoulders cringing in automatic, trained submission. "I can't."

"Tails—"

"She's going to punish me," the fox whined, head shivering. "She's going to hurt me, Sonic."

Sonic put his nose to the fox's, smelling the sharp blood leaking from it. Reached his fingers to the back of his neck, scruffing him gently. "She's never going to hurt you again, Tails. I promise you I will die before I let her do anything to you."

Tails still shivered. But when he struggled, slowly, to speak again, he stuttered, "fi-fuh-fic—fix—set my arm." He swallowed, opened his eyes to Sonic's. "Please."

Sonic tore open his backpack, but he didn't have what he'd need. He ran to the pharmacy, grabbed enough to do a quick job. Stretch bandages, a bottle of aspirin—he needed Tails to be awake as long as he could manage. As he pushed the break into place beneath the flesh Tails wailed loud enough to wake the dead, but Sonic got the sticky bandages in place and grabbed Tails' good arm. "Can you get up?" he asked, offering a slow, gentle tug.

"Yes," Tails replied, easily rolling forward to his knees and getting to his feet without using his arms and without any sign of discomfort. He blinked the tears from his eyes, turned to the outside windows and dropped worshipfully to one knee.

Feeling cold, Sonic turned. On the sidewalk outside stood a line of four swatbots, heavy cannons bolted onto their shoulders for combat duty. The teardrop air-pod that had delivered them was all the way across the parking lot, too far to make much noise landing. And before all of them, just as tall, was one tank of a male bear. A uniform like Tails's, black and red, but flashier: bright crimson epaulettes, trim around the wrists that seemed irregular, made to the bear's own whim, and an officer's sidearm. His fat neck bore an equally fat steel collar. His brown brow tensed in a thought, and one of the swatbots stepped forward and smashed the plate-glass, permitting him to step heavily through.

Robian. Sonic was getting a feel for these assholes.

Tails snorted in mirth, blood dripping from busted nose over his upper lip. "You think that's the worst I've ever been hurt?" he asked.

Sonic wanted to throw up. "That guy can hear can hear everything you whisper through that collar, can't he?" he asked.

"Milady can," Tails replied.

"Bad as reading your mind," Sonic sighed, remembering the desert. "I can't stand it."

"You'll learn," Tails replied, then snapped everything but his broken arm to attention. "Lord Anton, I found the hedgehog and I stalled him while Milady alerted you. Milady has a claim to him."

"The Empress can settle all claims to the fish once it has been reeled in," the bear replied in a polished bass, boots crunching glass as he slowly circled Sonic—trying to distract him from the swatbots entering through the broken window. If Sonic had a radio right now, he could tune to a very detailed discussion about how to take him alive.

"Surrender, Sonic," Tails said, pain in his voice, but a pain he had accepted. It was a voice of smug resignation. "Even if you've been blessed by the roboticizer you haven't learned the Empress's discipline and you're not a true Robian. You fight like a slave who's forgotten his place. Lord Anton is as strong as you and as fast as you and you are not his match. He will break you, maybe beyond repair."

"So?" Sonic asked, triangulating his position between bots furred and armored, sliding closer to his backpack.

"You're my friend, Sonic," Tails replied, a terrible echo from years ago. "I want to fight alongside you. Kneel."

Sonic's limbs shivered in anticipation as his toe brushed one of the straps of his backpack. Not enough, not enough blood sugar, not enough fuel in his cells and his belly. But Tails had nearly beaten him, and the bear Robian facing him was way higher on the slave totem pole.

He had only one choice.

"This guy," Sonic corrected Tails, "is not as fast as me."

Then he spread his feet wide, dropped down slapping one hand to the floor as the other shot into his bag and grabbed one of the two rings. The bear Robian flinched, then stared at it, fists still held ready, as Sonic twirled it on his fingers before slapping it home into his fist, hissing in pain at the sting of the needles stabbing home through his glove into the heel of his hand, turning his fist to stone.

Nothing happened.

No. It was slower than he remembered, he could anticipate it now—maybe this was how it felt the second time you used a drug, everything slower, more discrete—feelig the glow of heat around his body start in his hand, his arm, his chest, his everywhere, a stifling blanket of heat around him like a glow. He had to get out of it, get away from himself, ears like hot coals, and he began to swim. The air rushed over him, cooled him, such a relief as he ran onto the bear, vertical steps on belly, on chest, kicking his sneaker into the hollow of his jaw, bruising the bone and tearing the tissue, mashing the tongue to a pulp against the hard roof of the mouth. The scream distorted like a whale call through the deep as he planted his other foot on the bear's face and pulled with his toe and the bear lord's nose crunched up between his eyes and into his augmented brain as his other foot tore through his jaw, ripping his mouth loose in a explosion of blood and hot bone.

Run, now. He was too hot, needed to get atop the rush. He climbed it. His toe hit the ground. He rode it.

He became a bullet. A dancing bullet.

The swatbots were firing now at some inaudible SOS broadcast from the bear. He leapt and kicked off one of their faces as rockets fired in hot unpleasant streamers of convection on either side of him, heard something slamming through the plate glass window as his feet found the ground and he needed more speed he took more, aisles blurring by, the world spinning and a wall turning to powder around him, cinderblocks exploding under the wave of force he carried in the air around him like a second body, flying into dust and darkness. Warehouse, dark and scents of fruit. He found his feet again and ran screaming out of the heat, the world streaking in the corners of his vision, only the line in front of him stretching out to infinity like the sight of some periscope gun as he knocked flapping steel doors off their hinges, leapt over a table laden with strawberries and bananas and cantaloupes and he was back in the front of the store, two of the dumb swatbots still standing together on a line leading back to a steel support at a corner of the front windows.

Aim periscope. Fire torpedo.

The punishing shock of his balled body burrowing into their chests with raw force, splintered ceramic flying, stinging corrosive of burst capacitors, their arms waving like some multi-limbed god as he pushed the guts of the first into the second and kicked its head off with a snap of cable and shearing skeleton, rolling down to the ground next to a hot boiling wound of concrete where the last bot had shot plasma. Kicked slightly away, out of its aim, rolled under a pair of rockets fired from its shoulders and ripped a leg out of its housing as the warheads detonated where he had been a second before, eliminating the wreckage. It was toppling but Sonic didn't give it time to go down, punched it and ripped it and headbutted it like a man, cartwheels of kicks and punches that drew trails of heat around him like the ribbon following a gymnast until the disintegrating hulk's key power conduit was severed by its own armor and Sonic was melting in the furnace of his own metabolism.

The bear. Holding his face together with one hand as he leveled a plasma pistol with the other.

Sonic turned and emerged from his battle trailing lines of heat like demons trying to drag him to a hell of fire. He could not think. The rush was too long. He was terrified. They had brainwashed his best friend. His brain was melting. They would make everything a prison. He was ripping himself apart. Nothing would ever be good again.

He leapt into the air, wrapping his free hand around the empty, bubbling ring of golden fire. In a long, slow, overhand chop he came down and his arms came down and the unbreakable diamondglass came down into the robian's nanoreinforced skull above his clutching fingers and the skull throbbed as the pressure wave passed through it down to the neck and the pressurized brain within shocked and rebounded and boiled and the bear was already reformatted and gone milliseconds before the rebounding wave synchronized with the ongoing pressure and his head erupted in a halo of blood that burst from ears and nose and then from the crumpling bone.

Sonic landed on spread feet and one hand, lifting his quills against the hot rain.

The crash came.

His legs went first as his tendons began to eat themselves, cells lysing furiously as death instructions ravaged the tissue. He was on his knees when Tails began to beat him with his good arm and with his broken arm, wild punches of sheer fury, his blows like flicks of a finger against the agony Sonic's body was already inflicting upon itself. Through the pain he grabbed the fox and pulled him down and pushed his shuddering arm against the fox's carotid, willing himself to hold Tails still and steady. To his augmented muscles it was a gentle thing, like lulling a baby to sleep.

Sonic gasped and choked the lullaby into his ear. "Whenever you can," he gasped. "Whenever you can leave them, Tails. I'll be in the forest, waiting."

Tails slipped from his grasp, collapsed limp to the floor, unconscious.

Sonic slumped down beside him. His limbs twitched as his peripheral nervous system suffered local hypoglycemic seizures not consistent with normal mobian biology.

When he opened his eyes he felt thin as a burnt wire. The tiger stood over him, and the rest of the slave-train behind her. "We'll do anything you say," she said.

"Get me to the health-food aisle," Sonic croaked.

**Terscala, 14 Ventose 3237**

Lady Renee woke through the processes of her diurnal biological metabolic rhythms. Before sleeping, she had reshaped a part of her mind and left it awake to monitor motion sensors and cameras in her bedchamber while her primary systems went into alpha-theta-delta maintenance cycles. If anyone had come into her bedroom, the subsystem would have triggered sensory channels that would pull her out of sleep in under a second.

If anyone had come into her bedroom, it would have been Miles coming to kill her. He would not have come within two steps of her body before she rose and struck him. But she was no longer confident that he could be brought to heel. He no longer hated the punishments and beatings, but he didn't even like them; that could be dealt with. It was as though he was sliding out of the world, seeking the aftermath of his death obliquely, growing translucent like a ghost. This would have been a good death for him, a knowing death in combat against overwhelming odds. A brave death. One that would let him leave existence with what pride he still had.

She had woken up normally. He had not come for her.

Sighing in sorrow she rolled over, hugged the pillow to her face. Renee briefly considered returning to sleep, but it didn't matter. If Miles had not found the courage to assassinate her by now, he would not. She had squeezed all the fight from him, wrung him like a wet dishtowel. She would have to put him down like a sick repen, a bullet to the back of his empty head. Even if she slept, it would find her, a dream of the naked hallway, his slumped shoulders before her, her hand silently lifting the gun . . . .

She rose, did her stretches, then knelt and performed her obeisance and meditation before the tremendous dataspace that was her Empress's netpresence. Yawning, she took her white silk bathrobe from its peg by her door, wrapped it around her shoulders and tied the sash about her waist. She opened the door and leapt back on instinct, landing almost a meter away on her toes, fists raised defensively.

Miles knelt on the floor just outside the door, still dressed in the black shirt and shorts she had put on him the day before. His arms rested with palms up on his thighs, tails curled aside his naked feet. His eyes were empty. On the floor beside him was a long serrated knife.

"Miles?"

The word called the machine into motion. His hand gripped the knife by its blade and held it out and up, offering the handle to her. A moment's caution and she stepped forward, took it. Long before he had wanted it, he had been trained to tell her what he felt and thought without his mouth, with his body and his face, so she was not surprised when he sank to his hands and knees, lowered his snout and kissed her furred foot.

"Back up," Renee said, feeling the security of command in her voice again, "on your knees."

Miles knelt up and lifted his snout, offering his neck, face still blank. His chest rose and fell, eyes fixed on the tie of her robe.

She traced his tendons with the back of the blade, teasing the hollow of his throat with the point. "Generous fox."

Hmmnh. From his throat, a moment's whine of acknowledgement.

"I don't want your life. It is already mine." The knife went away. "I want you. Your loyalty and your obedience and your love."

Hmmnh.

"You must give these to me."

A faint nod of his head, a wobble in the gyros spinning in him that did not otherwise reflect in his features. Hmmnh.

"You have no choice, do you fox. Give these to me."

Hmmmmnh. A deeper breath, swelling his chest.

"Stay."

The word stilled him. He stayed as she left him. She returned, her steps soft on carpet, the clinking of metal.

The collar hung from her finger, metal segments distinct and glinting in the light.

Hmmmnh. The fox shook as he sniffed, spastically, then stopped, eyes forward.

"Just like a swatbot, so calm and patient. Very ambitious." Renee reached down to rub his headfur. "Good fox.

"But you are not a swatbot, are you fox? You are a different sort of machine. You are an animal. Your emotions are not bad for you, not anymore. They are integral to your programming. I use them to control you."

Sniff. Hmmnh. Sniffsniff. Sniff.

"You may not fight your emotions. I forbid it. You cannot fight them. You must surrender to them."

The tears started in his hot eyes. The mechanisms grinding in Miles gave way. The machine in him spun smoothly into motion. He whined, a long whine now, a whine of shame.

"You will surrender now."

His arms lifted and wrapped them around her legs and pulled his face to her knees and he wept into her robe, tears of gratitude rolling down his cheeks. He had been such a bad fox, he had been senselessly cruel and vicious and spiteful to the only person who loved him, and she had been so endlessly kind and patient with him and he had tried to poison her and make her weak and sick and wretched like himself when all she wanted was to make him strong. He owed her everything. He owed her everything that he was and more.

Her hand grabbed his neckscruff. "Enough."

Forgiveness. He fell silent.

"Lift your head."

Miles did so, feeling the metal links dangling against his spine.

Kain Blackwood 2011

## \*Chapter 24\*: Great Forest, 7 Thermidor 3237

**Great Forest, 7 Thermidor 3237**

"Majesty." The mongoose ranger tugged at her shoulder and Sally stepped forward, pulling the combat jacket she was wearing over her vest out of the fingers. Continuing to walk, to trudge, her limbs hard as rocks from three days of combat and flight, the popped blisters on her soles raw against her boots. "Majesty," the ranger said again, the strain in her voice equal parts strained command, helpless need.

Sally ignored her. And as she did she felt the panic start, saw it spread in the corners of her eyes, passing from mobian to mobian, pandemic among the fifty or so soldiers she'd brought with her.

She kept her eyes forward. Panic, then. Time for you to panic. Robots and psychopaths are stalking the streets of your cities. Broadcasting madness on ever channel. The government is destroyed. Your queen can't do anything about it.

"Sally!" Bunnie shouted somewhere, and her voice dropped out of hearing as someone warned her to keep quiet. Sally closed her eyes for a moment, treasured the darkness a moment before instinct made her eyes slide open on the trees, the dirt, the sun filtering down on her as though nothing had happened.

"Sally." Antoine's voice was calm, the hand that squeezed her shoulder delicate as firm as he could make it.

"Yes," she said. After a moment she kept walking into the forest.

"The scouts, Majesty." It was the ranger again, scampering to keep at her side. "Contact. People ahead. About a hundred meters."

"Friendlies?" Antoine asked quietly.

"We don't know," she replied, the fear in her heavy breaths. "No radio or transponder signals from them. Sergeant Rabbit can't raise anything using her Robian handshakes, but they might be using new codes. We could try to get the radios working again—"

They could try to get the VTOLs working again, too, if they turned around and went two kilometers back to the crash site. But the VTOLs they had fled the capital in were still smoking from the SAM hits. Robotnik would be all over them in hours, minutes. They could try to get the shortwave radios working again and Mobian troops were probably still listening along whatever front they could re-establish in the west. But Robotnik would be listening for anything near the capital, ready to triangulate. And what he wasn't listening to he was jamming, or filling with the harsh saw-wave roar of encrypted robot commands and his Empress's speeches. Explaining the new world. Robot rule. Death to Humans. Glory and honor and duty, duty, duty. Duty. Slavery with stolen words.

Or maybe that's always what that word had been for. Maybe the Robians were just better with it than her.

"Majesty!"

The mongoose's voice was loud enough that all eyes were on her as she stepped in front of Sally, put her hands to her shoulders to stop her. Sally didn't fight, stood wavering on her aching legs. "We have to stop," the ranger whispered. "We're going to run right into them."

"Hmm." Sally grunted. She blinked. Blinked again. She wanted to sleep. "I'll go talk to them," she said.

"Majesty—"

"Get out of my way," she said, pushing her aside, trudging over the cracking leaves. The mongoose didn't stop her. No one stopped her.

Their flight from the city, once it was clear that they were hopelessly behind Robotnik's lines, had been dictated by dodging their VTOLs and missiles, juking whenever they got painted by SAM radar. Luck had put them down near Knothole, pure bad luck. Everyone had a pretty good idea where Knothole was now, with several guesses as to its precise location on the nets very accurate. Its existence was public knowledge, now, a bit of the legend, the place from which the Queen had grown and struck.

Some Queen.

Odds were that the contacts were Robian troops, waiting for her as she fled back to her roots. They would shoot her through the head. Or they would take her. Bring her back to the city, put her on trial, make her confess her sins to the world, make her ask for her execution. Or maybe the machines would strip her of everything that she was, make her another broken mobian in some anonymous factory, a cog in the assembly line on which she manufactured her masters.

Good.

The last of her people receded behind her as she walked alone, but she could still feel the clinging need they still had for her, even now, after she had so obviously nothing to cling to. She hated them for it. If there was someone to save them, it wasn't her.

"Sally." She pressed her eyes tight, flattened her ears against the sound of Antoine's boots keeping step behind her. "You must not do this. Stop."

"Go back," she whispered.

She could hear Robotnik's troops, now, as her feet remembered the old trail to the stump. Lots of voices. It sounded like a regular camp waiting for her. Full squads of troops would be ready to tackle her. She began to anticipate the blows, being toppled, being crushed.

A voice cut above the others, shouting.

"We can't stay here." An echo of sound in the other voices, that the first tamped down. "We can't. I ain't smart, and if I thought to come here, so will everyone else. I don't know how long we got. We gotta go deeper into the forest, way deeper."

Sally could see them now. Civilian clothes, too much for summer; refugee dress. Torn plastic shopping bags by their shoes, overstuffed backpacks sloughed off shoulders. Tired and hungry, gloves and fur stained with dirt and scuffed by bark. As she passed them she heard whispers, saw heads turn. They drew back, saying nothing, giving her free approach to the entrance to Knothole.

"We gotta grab all the stuff we can. Food, fuel, anything we can use to survive." He stood atop the false-stump entryway, his back to her as he slowly shuffled a circuit, speaking to all the mobians circled around him. "Okay. Anyone who can is going to have to carry or pull. I know you're tired. But unless you're carrying a baby or got bones busted, you gotta give it a go. . . . And I need to talk to anyone who's done this before. Any forest squatters, people who lived in Mudhole or Tinn's Station?"

Sonic turned in her direction, body seeming very animated by contrast to his soul-weary face. He did not match her memory. His arms were stained with ink and his belly with knife and bulletscars. Even his voice was wrong, somehow less brittle with age, less sharp and nasal. "Any people who like camping?" he asked, coughing a laugh into the silence of the crowd, and then he stopped because he saw her and his mouth shrank to a tiny, frightened press of lips and his green eyes went wide, irises tight, and his quills all pressed tight flat.

The moment stretched. Sally felt Antoine's fingers find hers, squeeze her limp ones. The thumps of Bunnie's foot actuators stomping quickly toward her—

"I have," Sally began, her dry throat choking her faint voice into a cough. She straightened, filled her chest with air. "We have three squads of crack infantry," she continued, raising her voice and then lifting it still further to project over a gust in the leaves. "Some of us have wilderness experience. We can help. But he's right, we all need to work together. We have to, if we're going to fight back."

"That's right," Sonic seconded, finally managing to rip his eyes from her to keep turning, talking to all the refugees. She could see him swallow the knot in his throat. "The more the merrier."

He didn't have all the attention he had before, some of the refugees were staring at her, the soldiers, Bunnie—

"Are you alright?" Antoine whispered, snout turned close by her cheek.

"I'm alright," Sally replied quietly. She said it automatically, but a moment later when she momentarily unlocked her knees to see if she would fall down, she didn't. Her head was light, but not dizzy.

Her jaw had begun to ache, very slightly. It did that, sometimes.

"I don't think he'd do anything in front of these people," he said.

"No," Sally agreed quietly.

"I'll tell Bunnie to stay close to you. In case."

"That's good," she said, still staring at Sonic. He was alive. Aside from a pair of brown hiking boots that had replaced his sneakers, he dressed the same. And he looked the same. The tattoos and the scars could be make-up, and the rest of him was the same. Maybe the stress had gotten to her body more, but he didn't look in his mid-twenties. He looked just like he had at eighteen. Just like he had when—

Bunnie's hand slapped cold and heavy on her shoulder. "I'll take care of him," she said flatly.

It took a moment for Sally to realize that this was what she sounded like long ago in the forest, every time her grandmother had told her about another troublemaker. "No," she said.

"What do you mean, no—"

"Not in front of everybody."

Bunnie gave a soft growl, resting her lopsided arms akimbo. Sally realized that she actually had not thought of that. "I'll get him alone."

"I'll get him alone," Sally said.

"After what he—"

"After what he did," Sally said. "I'll get him alone." She turned to look Bunnie in the face, sliding her hands into the pockets of her jacket as she did so. Pulling them back to remind Bunnie of what she had already seen her put to use again and again in the skyscrapers and sewers of occupied Mobotropolis, the pistol-holster on her right hip. "I'll take care of it.'

Sonic was right. They didn't have long. They'd have to move by nightfall.

Rotor had known Knothole's stockpiles best, but Sally still remembered them better than Sonic.

She and Antoine had set up people-trains to move the MREs and war materiel up the stairs. On the surface Sonic and Bunnie worked to set up sledges and get things ready to carry, talked with the rangers about how to move so many people while still being able to cover their trail.

After a while, things were running well. There was an hour or two before they'd have to hit their trail. Bunnie mentioned that Sally wanted to talk to him. Alone.

She watched him come down the bank of the stream. When they were kids he would play a little hop-skip game with himself, getting on top of tree roots beyond the water's edge, planting a toe on a rock before jumping back to the bank. Today he came up slow among the trunks, hands on the bark as he wound slowly through them. Sally was resting in the crotch of a large branch that felt less alive than it used to, but could still take her weight. She let her left leg dangle, kept her right leg along the branch with her knee crooked, her back to the trunk.

Sonic didn't look up at her. He knew where she'd be. They'd met here before. He walked under her, sat heavily on the raised bank of the brook, his feet just resting in the water. His head low, forearms on his spread knees, studying his reflection.

"I know you got something to say to me," he said.

"Yeah."

"I got something to tell you first."

She slid her hand down to her hip, thinking that it was going to be some lifeless apology, but it wasn't. It was a story.

It was a very long story.

"I've got some stuff someone who knows computers could take a look at," he was saying after what felt like hours, though the sun had yet to set. "Maybe Bunnie, or one of your soldiers if you got any tech people. Some things from Chuck's place in Iceland. Robotnik won't know about them, unless Snively and Mandy—" He paused. ". . . the Empress found something somewhere else. If we're lucky, they might—"

"Antoine," Sally said.

Sonic looked up, craning his head way back before he decided to turn around and sit facing her. "I got the paperwork," he said with a shrug. "It's official."

"Why can't he kill robots, like you and Bunnie?"

"Has he ever tried?" Sonic said. "I met some strong people who don't like fighting when I was up north. Just because he's strong doesn't make him like fighting. I don't think his dad ever—"

"He did," Sally said with a wince. "He did try once. You didn't see it—way back in that ambush in the south suburbs, when you were locked up in that bodybag. Pushed Amanda around for a moment or two."

"Oh."

"His leg was so slow to give way. It must have hurt so damn much."

Her jaw ached.

Sonic brushed his hands back over his head, grabbed a sheaf of quills in both hands as he stared back down at the water.

Sally listened to the babble of the stream, lay her left hand on her right knee. She slowly drew her sidearm and laid it across her wrist, sighting down at the back of his skull.

"Did he look happy?" she asked after a moment.

Sonic didn't look up and didn't ask who. "I don't know if you'd call it happy."

"Did he smile?"

"He smiled." Sonic sighed. "It wasn't nice to look at. He didn't sound like himself. He talked funny. Crazy."

"I know. It's all over the radio." Sonic felt sick as without having heard Tails she mimicked him perfectly: "I'm proud to serve my Robian Lord. Robots are better than people. He's made me a warrior and—"

"Stop!"

Sally stopped. After a moment, he let go of his ears, the sting slowly fading.

"Did he look . . . well?" she asked. "Healthy?"

"Aside from the scars, I guess," Sonic said bitterly.

"Scars?"

"Blade scars, all over his tails. Maybe his arms and legs, too. I couldn't tell, he was wearing clothes. It was like one of those full-tail tattoos you see, but not ink—"

He stopped, turned and looked. Sally was sobbing silently on her perch.

Nice one, Sonic. Good to see that you're still a dumbass—

Gods, she was holding a gun.

"Sally, stop!"

"I could have saved him." Sonic stood up and felt his panic stop swelling and just throb quietly as she put the gun and the hands down hard in her lap, away from her face, letting her right leg fall down and sitting astride the branch. "A prisoner exchange, a commando raid, anything, I could have had him back any time I wanted."

"I know if you could have you would have. There must have been reasons—"

"To hell with reasons. I'm sick of them. I have reasons for everything I do and they never do me a gram of good." Sally wasn't crying anymore, but she looked so tired it was almost worse, her features sagging down like running wax. "I did it all wrong. I should've thrown Lupe away earlier. We could have divided Mobotropolis." Her eyes were still open, but she wasn't seeing anything; her voice was crawling toward mania. "I could've rolled over for the Lakolska. With more foreign troops I could've—"

"Sally, stop."

"All I had to do was lift my little finger. But I didn't want to."

"You did."

She snarled at him. "You don't know what I was thinking—"

"You couldn—"

"I could have!" Sally screamed. "It's my fault!"

"What about me?" Sonic shouted back, slapping his chest. "I'm the one that hooked him on guns, Sally! He was a genius and he loved building things, but he liked me too much!" He walked to the base of the tree, sat down hard, his quills scraping bark. "He hugged me, Sally. He thought I was going to be so proud of him."

"No," she said quietly after a moment. "He was fine in the Army Rangers. I saw him . . . five, six years ago. He was . . . normal. He was himself."

"Hell, I don't know." Sonic said, working a rut in the mud with the heel of his boot. "Maybe if Rotor had lived. Tails loved learning stuff from him. Maybe if I hadn't—"

He froze, toes curling painfully inside his boots, quills itching. He swallowed. ". . . maybe if I hadn't left . . . ."

"I guess neither of us was a very good parent," Sally said.

The stream babbled quietly.

"What are we going to do?" Sally asked.

"Fight." He looked up at her. "Right, Majesty?"

She was watching the reddening flare of the sun through the leaves. "Titles don't mean anything out here, Sonic. Civilization belongs to Robotnik. This is the stone age. We aren't a kingdom. We're a tribe."

"Well someone's got to run this mess." he replied. "Right, Chief? . . . . Chieftan . . . ess? Chieftess?"

"How about you?"

He smiled wryly at the joke. And then he didn't, because Sally wasn't joking.

"You're better than you were, Sonic," she said, blinking her squinted eyes wider as she looked down at him. "I heard you. Thinking clearly, prioritizing. You got those people out of the city without a gun. You see the way they look at you? You're their leader, Sonic."

"I have no idea what I'm doing," he corrected.

The smile on her cheeks was infectious. "Get used to it."

Sonic couldn't believe the sentence that came out of his mouth: "C'mon Sally, this is serious. We need you."

"Why?" She lifted her leg back up onto the branch, closed her eyes and felt the sunset on her face. "Someone desperately needs ruling? Go to the city. The robots are the ruling experts."

"We need you."

She sniffed suspiciously and growled. "You badly need a squirrel, huh? Qualifications: Abandoned her child. Ruined her kingdom. Used to be pretty."

"You're still pretty," Sonic said, and then he realized what he'd said and put his hands to his face, turning away. "I'm sorry."

He heard her leap down from the tree with a thud and when she screamed it was almost in his ear. "You don't say that to me!" Her fists battered at his flattened quills, slammed the butt of her pistol into him, and he heard her voice catch with frustration in her throat because he was a robot supermobian and she couldn't hurt him. "You don't have any right to say that to me!"

"I know. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." He stood and retreated up the bank. "I'm sorry."

"Get back here."

"No—" He fled, leaping from stone to stone along the bank.

"Get back here! You look me in this face!"

Sonic felt his toe catch a root and he stumbled, rolled, hit his head against a hard stone. Opened his eyes and he was on his side, Sally coming closer—"Get back!" he shouted, pressing himself to the base of the tree and throwing up a hand. "Stay away from me!"

"What!" she roared, holding her gun on him as her boots splashed to a halt beside him. "You think I'm going to hurt you?"

He pushed his cheek into dirt. "No," he squeaked.

". . . I'm not as fragile as all that, Sonic," she said after a moment. "I've seen three sacks of the capital, more than a decade of war and I'm alive and . . . well enough." She snorted. "You haven't hurt me like I have. Get up."

He shook his head. "No."

"Get up." Her hand snatched his arm and he shouted and she leaned back, bracing against a stone, his shoulder joint burning hot as it kept the ball in the socket. "I'm not afraid of you."

"Don't." Sonic got to his feet so she wouldn't hurt herself, and she kept pulling and he bumped into her and stepped back but he was only a handspan from her face. The face he had—"Sally—"

"You shut your mouth, Sonic Hedgehog."

He shut his mouth.

"We are going to help these people. You and me and Antoine and Bunnie. We are going to get them to safety. And then we are going to help them fight back against Robotnik until all his robots are bolts and scrap." She swallowed. "And we are going to get Tails back. We are going to free him. Does that sound good to you?"

"Okay," Sonic said stupidly.

Sally slid her right arm around his neck, still holding her gun. "Now," she said, "you're going to kiss me."

He pulled back, limply raised his quills against her arm. "No—"

Something very cruel in her smile. "Still pretty, huh?"

He stammered, eyes closed. "Antoine."

She shook her head, close enough for her nose to brush his. "I don't care."

"You're married—"

"We're in the forest. That means nothing." A second arm over the first, holding him. "I saw you and I felt alive for the first time in days. Years. I want you, Sonic. I'm tired of not having the things I want. Kiss me."

He couldn't. "I—"

"Kiss me."

He didn't deserve this. "I—"

"Oh for gods' sake," Sally hissed, and she kissed him hard.

**Terscala, 14 Ventose 3237**

Miles slid his shirt on, ran his fingers back through his cheek fringe, then smiled at the sight of himself in the bathroom mirror. His Lady had permitted him to wash, the stainless steel links of his collar untouched by the water, gleaming. His fur was brushed, his headfur recently trimmed tight. His eyes were a little red without sleep, and his muscles had lost a little bit of their strength from months of slacking in the gym, but he was a fox near to full health. Most importantly he knew his mind was finally clear, thoughts that ran in plain, strong lines from command to action. He wondered if a Swatbot's processors permitted it this feeling once it had been given maintenance, cleaned, oiled: the readiness, all systems primed, waiting to be set to motion.

"Miles, come."

"Yes, My Lady," he called, feeling a twinge of pleasure as he walked out into the hallway, realizing how long he had been wanting to speak those words. Dizzying privileges had been granted to him. He could speak. He could could eat warrior's food and, soon, wear a warrior's clothing. He could command any mobian not wearing a collar and require it to obey.

She was in her bedroom, straightening her combat fatigues, looking out at the imperial city from her window, but her eyes had the distance of a Robian diving deep in dataspace. "Go to the kitchen and make coffee," she said.

"Yes, My Lady." Miles turned and strode to the kitchenette, puzzling at the sound of his voice. He had not spoken in a long time, and every word felt strange in his mouth. He sounded wrong to himself, and was tempted to abuse his privilege, speak to himself until it felt normal. But that would be wrong.

He opened the high cupboards, feeling for a can or bag, sniffing for the bitter scent. Everything seemed different to him, now. Once he could interact with His Lady's chambers to enforce her will, the rooms were not austere, merely functional, simple. Here: was a soft paper bag, military-stenciled COFFEE. Beside the bag was a hand grinder, tall like a pepper mill, a smooth brass cylinder. He took two bare slick handfuls of beans and poured them clinking from his palm into the hollow belly of the grinder. Replacing the cap and the handle, he tucked his tails against his legs and leaned against the counter, bracing the bottom of the grinder against his navel. He closed his eyes, cracked the first of the beans in the burr with a sharp jerk, and sank into the pleasing, hypnotic motion of the grinding, enjoying the slow burn as it built in his elbow and his belly. The scent grew stronger; very strong, very bitter coffee. It would burn on the tongue. If he threw it into her eye she would be distracted and—

Miles froze, clenching his teeth, the sudden silence of the grinder deafening him. No. NO.

It was like an open door behind him, something that he couldn't see but could feel, leading back to the way he had used to be. It was still there, waiting in his mind, waiting to come back out. No. The whine he trapped in his throat hurt. Bad fox. He opened his mouth to call out to His Lady, call to her to help him, managed only a strangled croak. That space behind him, yawning, pulling at him. Bad fox. Bad—

The apartment's door slammed close and Miles's eyes shot open. Standing in the carpeted living space outside the kitchenette was a vixen in a white cotton blouse, skirt and gloves. Cheap white slippers covered her feet. Her flame hair was not cut to fur like a warrior's, but was dealt with quickly, combed straight back. Her mouth was open, her eyes startled—she seemed a little surprised to see a male fox in the kitchen with tears pouring down his cheeks.

Miles' fingers were frozen on the handle. The moment stretched. He opened his mouth, his head groping for words . . .

"What are you doing here?" he demanded angrily.

A shiver passed through the vixen's shoulders. Her lips worked, hesitating as she grabbed one gloved hand in another. "I—I clean the flats." He could see her swallow, and she blinked her eyes down from his own, first to his neck, then to his toes. "I grind coffee, Sir."

"Today," he said, "you do not grind coffee."

"No, Sir."

"You do other things," Miles said. His voice had found a proper tone now, easier on the tongue. Clean, precise, tinged with a controlled amusement.

"I wash the kitchen floor." The vixen was looking at her own toes, now, squeezing her shoulders forward. There was just a slight flavor of tears in the pitch of her voice. "I put away clutter. If the Lady is—"

"Wash the floor." His Lady's voice, Miles realized; he had borrowed it. Her words, the words that had nourished his ears for so many months.

Fabric brushed carpet as the vixen's heels pressed silently together. "Yes, Sir."

She went to the door, where she had left a bucket. Miles ignored her, finishing His Lady's coffee as the vixen filled the bucket from the kitchen sink, knelt down and made suds. He watched her idly as he finished grinding, tracking the sway of her tail as it lifted the hem of her flimsy little skirt.

When the coffee was boiling up for the fourth time he turned the heat off and then froze, hearing His Lady pad into the kitchen, smelled her furscent muted behind the smooth odors of damp and shampoo. Her hand rested between his ears and he melted.

A giggle. "Good fox."

"Thank you, My Lady," Miles said, voice trembling.

"Pour." Miles obeyed carefully, marshalling his attention on the cups as his lady scratched at the ticklish fur behind his right ear.

"Now." She drank her coffee down to the muddy grounds, while the cleaning vixen studied on continuing to wash around the feet of the Robian Lady, looking like she didn't quite have the courage for washing. Renee kept her eyes on Miles. "You have something you wish to say, fox?"

He swallowed, wanting to look down, but unable to take his eyes from hers. "Yes, My Lady."

"Say Milady, fox, it's quicker. Something you wish to beg?"

"Yes Milady."

"You may beg."

"Please don't let me disobey you," he said, voice cracking as his eyes closed.

She rubbed down over his ears. "I won't."

"I don't want to be what I was," Miles sobbed. "Don't let me. Hurt me. Punish me—"

"Shh. Trust me."

"I trust you, Milady."

"Yes, you do, because I have taught you to. And because you trust me there are better ways for you to be taught now, more gentle ways, deeper ways. Drugs. Hypnosis." Renee traced her index finger down the bridge of her fox's snout, smiling as his eyes automatically crossed to track it. "You've learned to think like a robot. But your programming can be much, much more thorough."

He closed his eyes in a long blink, refocusing on her face. "Thank you, Milady."

"Anything else to beg?" she asked. "We have a long day ahead. Animals new to my collar have much to learn of the Empire. Economics, warfare, politics. You'll be spending the next month immersed in the handling of work animals in one of my factories, so if there is something you that will help you serve me, speak now."

"I want to kill a mobian for you, Milady," Miles replied.

They both looked over at a slosh of the washwater in the vixen's bucket. She edged further from them, shoulders tight under her blouse, and squeezed her sponge into her bucket, finishing up.

Renee looked back at Miles, her brows raised.

"It's important to me, Milady," Miles replied, his ears folded. "I disobeyed—I must have for months—"

"You disobeyed many commands."

"It's the one I held back from. I want to prove that I can." A shivering breath passed through his chest, and he looked at her feet. "I want to know that I can."

"Good fox."

"I can be patient, Milady. I know you must have been hard-pressed to find so many animals deserving death, and I don't want to—"

Miles stopped, looking back up as His Lady snickered. "If there is one thing that the Empire does not lack, Miles, it is cowardly, hungry animals not fit for the lowest work. The ones I brought you were mostly from my factories. I will make use of your patience, but you won't have to wait long. The first screwup I see not worth the protein to keep it alive—"

Thump.

The Lady and her fox both turned their snouts to the vixen. An uncontrollable shiver of fear continued to tremble up and down her spine, in and out of her arms, her fingers, which had bobbled the bucket. It sat by her feet, the flow of murky suds inundating her slippers, the carpet, in successive waves.

Miles kept his eyes steady on the vixen's backside and turned his snout to his Lady, nuzzling softly the shoulder of her uniform.

"Don't let her leave the room," the Lady ordered.

Miles took two steps before his prey's feet even left the ground.

End of Part Three

Kain Blackwood 2011

Thanks very much for reading part three! Special thanks to Kain Blackwood at the FUS forums for doing a great job beta-reading, without him the story would be totally unreadable. Thanks also to all my commenter; feedback means a lot.

"Search and Destroy," Iggy Pop & The Stooges

I'm a street-walking cheetah with a heart full of napalm

I'm the runaway son of the nuclear a-bomb

I am the world's forgotten boy

The one who searches and destroys

Honey gotta help me please

Somebody gotta save my soul

Baby detonate for me

Look out honey, cause I'm using technology

Ain't got time to make no apology

Solar radiation in the dead of night

Love in the middle of a firefight

Honey gotta strike me blind

Somebody gotta save my soul

Baby penetrate my mind

And I'm the world's forgotten boy

The one who's searching, searching to destroy

And honey I'm the world's forgotten boy

The one who's searching only to destroy